**How to analyse a work of art:**

**analyzing a work of art:** An analysis is separating into parts to understand the whole

**basic questions:** What is my first response to the work? Later you may modify or reject this response. When and where was the work made? What is the title? Does it help to illuminate the work?

**subject matter**: What is the subject matter? Who or what can be identified in the picture? What if anything is happening? Two pictures of the same subject matter can express different meanings. The subject matter can be transformed by the artist, infused with intellect and feeling, in how the work is related to **form**. Form includes such things as the size of the work, the kind of brush strokes in a painting, or the surface texture of a sculpture. To get at the meanings of a work we have to interpret the subject matter, the material and the form as well as the **socio-historic content** and if known the **artist's intentions**. Gender, age, political convictions and social values will, to some degree, determine the meaning of a work.

**figure painting**: If the picture is a figure painting, what is the relation of the viewer's (and the artist's) **gaze** to the figure(s)? If there is only one figure, is it related to the viewer by a **gaze** or a **gesture**? If the figure seems posed do you agree that the **posing** is a form of offering the self (perhaps provocatively) to the viewer?

**portrait:** How is the portrait not simply a representation of a face that reveals the inner character but also a **presentation** or **construction** created by the artist and the sitter? How much of the figure does the artist show, how much space does the artist cause the figure to occupy and what effects are thus gained? What do the **clothing, furnishing, accessories** and **facial expression** contribute to our sense of the figure's personality? What is the **setting**? Is the sitter portrayed in a studio setting or his, her own surroundings?

**landscape:** What is the relation between human beings and nature? Are the figures at ease in nature, dwarfed by it? What does the landscape say about the society for which it was created? How does the artist present a **"social construction"** of nature, nature as a hospitable place, or part of an endangered heritage or as a world we have lost or a place where a weary soul can find rest and nourishment?

**medium**: What does the medium contribute? If the work is an oil painting, is the paint put on evenly, or heavily, giving a rich appearance and applied so thickly that it stands out from the surface to catch the light? Or is it applied thinly, layers of translucent coloured oil glazes so that light passes through the layers producing a soft radiant effect?

**colour**: Is the colour imitative of appearances or expressive or both? How are the colours related - bold contrast or gradual transitions? What are the expressive qualities of the colours?

**light:** What is the effect of light in the picture? Does it produce sharp contrast, brightly illuminating some parts and throwing others into darkness or does it by means of gentle gradations unify most or all of the parts? Is the light theatrical or natural, disturbing or comforting? Is light used to create symbolic highlights?

**space**: Do the objects or figures share the space evenly or does one overpower another taking most of the space or light? What is the focus of the **composition**, i.e. the ordering of the parts into a whole by line, colour, and shape. Is it something grasped at an initial glance or only after close study? Is the composition symmetrical or diagonally recessive? Are the figures harmoniously related by a similar stance or shared action or are they opposed by diagonals thrusting at each other? Diagonals may suggest motion or animation or instability, horizontal lines tranquillity (like reclining figures), vertical lines a more vigorous stability.

**depth**: Does the artist convey depth, that is recession in space? If so, how? If not, why not? How is depth indicated, by overlapping, foreshortening, contour shading, hatching, shading or modelling, cast shadows? Is the perspective linear (parallel lines receding to give illusion of converging and meeting at a single point on the horizon)? Or does the work depend on aerial perspective for its effect, on scaled variations of colour, tone and form as perceived at different distances?

**shape, size**: What is the effect of the shape and size of the work? For example, a larger than life figure or portrait will be different from one 10 inches high.

**comparison**: The most important factor for comparison is time and place because it brings into focus various factors of style and form. Comparisons of artworks that are products of the same place but different times reveal patterns of conventions. When **conventions** change in some fundamental ways one period has ended and another begun. Comparison across these historical divides helps to highlight the periods giving them an identifiable character.

**conventions**: **subject matter**: persistent images, actions, and symbols in art works over time; **cultural conventions (social influences)**: persistent ideas, values, beliefs and interests that explain why something produced in a particular environment looks as it does; **formal and stylistic conventions**: standardized regularized visual devices which persist largely unchanged over a certain time and which accord with the beliefs or understandings of an artist in a particular time and place.