

## Visual Description

The simplest visual description uses ordinary words to convey what the writer sees. First he or she must look at the subject – slowly, carefully, and repeatedly, if possible – to identify the parts that make the whole. These parts must be sorted into the more and the less important, since no description can include everything, and assumptions must be separated from actual observations. It is easy to confuse what we see with what we think we see, or what we know is there. Then comes the difficult job of finding appropriate words. In effect, writing a visual description consists of two separate acts of translation. The first transforms a visual experience into a verbal one and the second turns a private experience into one that can be communicated to someone else.

Any writer takes some things for granted. It is crucial to understand what these things are and then consider them in terms of both the purpose of the description and the interests of the reader. For example, to describe the sky in a particular 17th-century Dutch landscape painting as cloudy indicates one aspect of the picture in a general way. It leaves entirely unexplained the specific elements that create the visual effect – like the shapes and colors of the clouds, the way they have been arranged, or how they suggest space. These qualities cannot be imagined by a reader who has not been given explicit details. In the same way, identifying something by artist, title, and date might be all a specialist needs to visualize the work. Anyone else, however, will need to be told much more.

Generally speaking, the best place to begin a visual description is with an explanation of the subject and the materials of the work. Together they provide enough information to orient any reader. In most cases, though, neither will be enough by itself. To say that a work of art shows a woman and a child, but not whether the representation is in two or three dimensions, makes it hard to form even the roughest mental image. If, however, the writer says that the work is a life-size sculpture of a woman and child, the reader can begin to imagine what it might look like. He or she also will know enough to have questions. A good written description will anticipate these questions and provide information in an order that answers them.

Additional observations can make the first sentence even more useful. Perhaps the artist is famous, and “a life-size sculpture of a woman and child by Henry Moore” would convey a great deal to the reader. Perhaps the subject is the Virgin Mary and Jesus, an identification filled with meaning for someone who is knowledgeable about Christianity. Maybe the sculptor is not known and the subject has not been identified. Then describing the relationship between the figures might be helpful. To say that the work is a life-size sculpture of a seated woman holding a small child on her lap gives the reader a beginning. Of course the introductory sentence cannot hold too much information. It must strike a balance between giving the reader a few vague generalities and trying to convey everything at once.

A traditional work of art is, first of all, a physical object. The material or materials used may not be possible to identify by just looking. Perhaps they look like something they are not, or the surface and texture have been obscured by layers of paint. In cases like these, the correct identification can be brought to the attention of the reader, but not as part of what anyone can see. This is an instance of knowing being different from seeing. If information is based on an

external source, even a museum label, the source must be cited after it has been verified. Many mistakes get repeated as facts by people who did not bother to check them.

The size of a work is always crucial. The effect made on a viewer by an object that can be held in the hand, compared to a billboard that covers the side of a building, is so different as to make any similarities seem almost inconsequential. The first demands a very intimate relationship, with careful and close looking to see what is there. The other must be seen from a distance and may contain details that are too small to be comprehensible. Scale also influences the design of a work, since the same composition, colors, and methods of making rarely transfer effectively from a small format to a very large one, or vice versa. This is another reason why size must be considered in a visual description.

Color matters. Even if it is not part of the subject, it influences the way we look at a work. Bright colors catch our eye before dark ones do, and even subtle changes may matter a great deal. The sense of space created within an abstract painting by Wassily Kandinsky comes from the colors he chose as much as the shapes. Often the color of a work has changed over time. Some Greek sculptures, which we are accustomed to see as white marble, were painted with lifelike colors. Our expectations make reconstructions look startlingly incorrect.<sup>5</sup> The controversy that surrounded the cleaning of Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican was partly about technical matters, but also about the tremendous change it made to the colors. Those who accepted the results of the cleaning as historically correct had to revise their ideas about Michelangelo as an artist as well as about the history of 16th-century Italian art.<sup>6</sup>

The qualities listed above explain why a reproduction can never substitute for an original. A good copy will convey certain elements of the work, but it cannot convey them all. Even an excellent color photograph of an oil painting, a two-dimensional picture of a two-dimensional picture, will leave out more information than it gives. The same is even more true with reproductions of three-dimensional objects. A single image communicates only one point of view, and it cannot indicate size, shape, surface, or volume. These are the most essential visual qualities of sculpture.

Art historians usually do not write general visual descriptions, because they are intent upon making a specific argument or they are interested in a particular aspect of a work. One exception is James Cahill, whose analyses of Chinese paintings provide exceptionally complete accounts of what the pictures look like. Even without being interested in his scholarly purpose, any reader can appreciate his skill as a writer. Typically, he used ordinary words to make his readers understand size and brush stroke as well as subject and composition. His authorial voice is even and careful and always that of a historian, removed in time and place from the works in question. At the same time, however, he often described what he saw in terms of how it must have been made. In this way, he made a sense of artistic process seem like a vital part of the finished works.

One passage by Cahill about a picture from the Ming period shows how he helped make his readers more attentive viewers. About the ink paintings in an album by the painter Wang Li (Private collection and Shanghai Museum, China), he wrote:

The surviving leaves [of *Scenes of Hua-shan*] exhibit a remarkable variety in theme and composition . . . . [O]ne may question whether the actual landscape offers any such powerfully overhanging formations of strangely twisted and pitted rock as the album does.

In one of the leaves, such a mass occupies almost the whole space of the picture, leaving only narrow ravines at the sides, in which travelers are visible on paths, climbing always upward. . . . He draws in heavy lines that taper at the ends and thicken where they bend; it is the interrelationships of these bent lines, together with sparse texture strokes and a limited use of ink wash, that define the shapes of the rocks and the hollows in and around them. Bushes and trees grow from crevices or on the tops of boulders and ridges. Presenting such a massive escarpment full face to the viewer . . . seems to endow the landscape with an unearthly inner life more than it portrays the effects of natural geological processes.<sup>7</sup>

These few sentences suggest the landscape elements in the picture, the way they are arranged, what kinds of strokes Wang Li used, and the effect of the work on the viewer.

Beginning with a description of the subject of the album as “powerfully overhanging formations of strangely twisted and pitted rock” gives the reader a vivid image to which each word has contributed. “Powerfully” suggests the way in which the rocks are “overhanging” and “formations” suggests the idea of shapes being created over time. This makes better sense after the next phrase, which describes the rocks as “strangely twisted and pitted.” All of those words allow “mass,” in the next sentence, to suggest a specific visual character. Similarly, “heavy lines that taper at the ends and thicken where they bend” is made up of words that occur in everyday language, but they combine to evoke how Wang Li’s brush must have moved to deposit the ink as it did. With the phrase “massive encarpment,” the final sentence reiterates the ideas of powerful formations and mass. Then it turns in the unexpected direction of the painted landscape having “an unearthly inner life,” which suggests an entirely different dimension from the last phrase, “the effects of natural geological processes.” Together, though, they convey a sense of wonder at how the picture presents its subject.

A Western oil painting offers very different qualities to describe from a Chinese ink painting. An exhibition review about Willem de Kooning's work by David Rosand conveys how dramatic the effect of paint and color can be:

Among the first colors to emerge from de Kooning’s monochrome palette of the late 1930s is a flesh pink. Modulated from near neutrality to cosmetic blowsiness, this hue never abandons its significance: throughout his work, it declares flesh. As de Kooning’s paint itself acquires an increased substance, which in turn inspires and provokes the aggressiveness of the brush, his visceral equation of impasto and flesh becomes more integral to his art. This phenomenology of paint is most obviously realized in the *Woman* series (from c. 1950 inwards). . . . The series marks a watershed in his career: the return to figuration allowed the artist to acknowledge overtly the physiognomic basis of his painterly style, its source in the gestures of the body. . . . Even as de Kooning moved to an imagery of abstract landscapes, individual strokes, gestures developed in the earlier figures, continue to carry by allusion and recollection their sense of flesh – just as the recurring pink proclaims flesh. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Like Cahill, Rosand saw the physical movements of the painter in the work he described, but they are “gestures of the body” rather than the hand. These gestures provide the “physiognomic basis” for de Kooning’s style, and create a direct connection between the figural subject and the presence of the artist. Color also is important, the crucial “flesh pink” changing from “near neutrality” to “cosmetic blowsiness.”

Rosand used the word “impasto” to refer to de Kooning’s paint. The term, which comes from the Italian word for dough, refers to accumulations of paint on the surface of a canvas, often textured so they catch the light. The technique first appeared in Venetian paintings made during the Renaissance, by Titian among others. Rembrandt van Rijn and Vincent Van Gogh are two other artists famous for manipulating oil paint in this way. By choosing this word, as well as describing the style as “painterly” (discussed in Stylistic Analysis), Rosand connected de Kooning to a specific tradition of Western painting.

References:

5. Marilyn Stokstad, *Art. A Brief History*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice-Hall, 2007), fig. 26, p. 16, illustrates one such reconstruction of the frieze of the Parthenon.
6. Stokstad, 349.
7. James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368-1580* (New York and Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1978), 6-7.
8. David Rosand, “Proclaiming Flesh,” *Times Literary Supplement* (17 February 1984), 167.