

SPAN3349: Hispanic Cultures I
Ekphrastic Exercise
Due date: Monday, March 21st
Submission: PDF via Courseworks

Description:

For the purpose of this assignment, you will be asked to:

1. Visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art (on your own, with classmates or friends, or with family; your choice!)
2. Select an artwork from the Hispanic world (broadly speaking)
3. Spend a considerable amount of time looking at the work in person (between 1 and 3 hours). During this time, write down your evolving observations, as well as any questions and speculations that may arise from your observation. Avoid doing any preliminary research on the artwork.
4. Write an ekphrastic analysis of the artwork.

What is ekphrasis? Simply put, it is the act of putting words in the service of vision.¹ Ekphrasis refers to a careful and detailed description of an artwork for rhetorical purposes—in other words, we put the visual into words to persuade our reader. Ekphrasis, or formal analysis, is not only a foundational component of art history, but it is also a practice that will help you support your arguments *from* the artworks themselves. Art historian Jas Elsner has gone so far as to state that

Far from being a rigorous pursuit, art history – certainly since its founding fathers in the modern era, Vasari and Winckelmann, and undoubtedly in the surviving ancient sources who were their inspiration (Pliny, Vitruvius, Lucian, Philostratus, even Pausanias) – is nothing other than ekphrasis, or more precisely an extended argument built on ekphrasis. That is, it represents the tendentious application of rhetorical description to the work of art (or to several works or even to whole categories of art) for the purpose of making an argument of some kind to suit the author's prior intent.²

A successful formal analysis will pay close attention to the forms appearing in an artwork to support your ongoing argumentation. These forms are crucial, and yet often taken for granted—they provide the work its expression, message, or meaning. To aid in writing a formal analysis, you should think as if you were describing the work of art to someone who has never seen it before. When your reader finishes reading your analysis, they should have a complete mental picture of what the work looks like. Yet, the formal analysis is more than

¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 153.

² Jas Elsner, "Art History as Ekphrasis," *Art History* 33:1 (2010): 11.

just a description of the work. It should also include a **thesis statement** that reflects your conclusions about the work.

The thesis statement may, in general, answer questions like these: What do I think is the meaning of this work? What is the message that this work or artist sends to the viewer? What is this work all about? The thesis statement is an important element. It sets the tone for the entire paper, and sets it apart from being a merely descriptive paper. If you are unsure about what a thesis statement is or how to craft one, you are welcome to speak with me and/or consult the following document: [Finding Your Thesis Statement](#).

Format for the Paper: 700 – 1,000 words, 14 pt standard font, double spaced and with standard margins. Make sure you proofread your papers for adhering to the information listed above, as well as incorrect grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other errors. In addition, make sure your paper includes a thesis statement. Please include an image of the artwork with a full citation *at the beginning* of the paper. Your grade will reflect your ability to follow these guidelines.

In the first paragraph, the introduction, you will include:

- The name of the artist (if known), title (which *italicized every time you use the title in your paper*), date, and medium (if known)
- What you think is the subject
- A very brief description of the work
- Thesis statement

From that point, the rest of the formal analysis should include not only a description of the piece, but especially those details of the work that have led you to come to your thesis. Yet, your paper should not be a random flow of ideas about the work (i.e. stream of consciousness writing). Rather, your paper should have a sense of order, moving purposefully through your description with regard to specific elements (ex: one paragraph may deal with composition, another with a description of the figures, another with the background, another about line, etc.). Finally, in your conclusion (the final paragraph) you should end your paper with a restatement of your thesis and a synthesis of your argument.

For questions about the mechanics of writing, you may wish to speak with me, reach out to the Student Success Centre, or consult the following documents:

- [Understanding Key Words in Writing Assignments](#)
- [Writing Effective Paragraphs](#)
- [Punctuation Patterns](#)
- [Transitions: Signals for Your Readers](#)

Although it is important to remember that your interest here is strictly formal, a strong ekphrastic exercise will make connections to the concepts learned in class. You are welcome to paraphrase information from the readings (try to avoid direct quotations since I am most interested in what you *see* and *say*). Remember to cite your sources (please follow the Chicago Manual of Style footnote system).

Keep in mind that your analysis should not be just a mechanical, physical description. Please use descriptive language and adjectives to describe your work. Begin with a general description of the work, and then move on to the more specific elements. In addition, please refer to your syllabus concerning Columbia's policy on plagiarism. However, you are welcome to read and peer-review each other's papers but make sure that what you submit is *your* own work.

The information contained in this handout was adapted from <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/assignments-exams/>

For brief examples of formal analysis, please visit:

- <https://smarthistory.org/visual-analysis/>
- <https://smarthistory.org/art-historical-analysis/>
- <https://smarthistory.org/describing-sculpture/>

Some things you may wish to consider when writing a formal analysis
(in no particular order):

- **Always remember to back up your statements with your descriptions of the formal elements.**
- Record your first impression(s) of the artwork. What stands out? Is there a focal point (an area to which the artist wants your eye to be drawn)? If so, what formal elements led you to this conclusion? Your impressions can help you reach your thesis.
- What is the subject of the artwork?
- Composition: How are the parts of the work arranged? Is there a stable or unstable composition? Is it dynamic? Full of movement? Or is it static?
- Pose: If the work has figures, are the proportions believable? Realistic? Describe the pose(s). Is the figure active, calm, graceful, stiff, tense, or relaxed? Does the figure convey a mood? If there are several figures, how do they relate to each other (do they interact? not?)?
- Proportions: Does the whole or even individual parts of the figure(s) or natural objects in the work look natural? Why did you come to this conclusion?
- Line: Are the outlines (whether perceived or actual) smooth, fuzzy, clear? Are the main lines vertical, horizontal, diagonal, or curved, or a combination of any of these? Are the lines jagged and full of energy? Sketchy? Geometric? Curvilinear? Bold? Subtle?
- Space: If the artist conveys space, what type of space is used? What is the relation of the main figure to the space around it? Are the main figures entirely within the space (if the artwork is a painting), or are parts of the bodies cut off by the edge of the artwork? Is the setting illusionistic, as if one could enter the space of the painting, or is it flat and two-dimensional, a space that one could not possibly enter?
- Texture: If a sculpture, is the surface smooth and polished or rough? Are there several textures conveyed? Where and How? If a painting, is there any texture to the paint surface? Are the brushstrokes invisible? Brushy? Sketchy? Loose and flowing? Or tight and controlled? [Understandably, these questions may be impossible to answer without looking at the work *in person*].
- Light and Shadow: Are shadows visible? Where? Are there dark shadows, light shadows, or both? How do the shadows affect the work?
- Color: What type of colours are used in the work? Bright? Dull? Complimentary? Does the artist use colours to draw your attention to specific areas of the work? How? If a sculpture, examine the color(s) of the medium and how it affects the work.
- Mood: Do you sense an overall mood in the artwork? Perhaps several different moods? If so, describe them. How does the mood interpret how you view the work?

- Once you have spent some time analyzing your work, notice if your first impression of the work has changed, now that you have taken a closer look? How? If you came up with a thesis statement before doing this in-depth analysis, you may want to change it if your impression of the work has changed. Your thesis statement should reflect your view of the object.