WRITING ABOUT ART

Art is culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium.
—Richard L. Anderson

Art is the objectification of feeling.
—Suzanne K. Langer

If someone calls it art, it’s art.
—Donald Judd

Every so often a painter has to destroy painting. Cézanne did it and then Picasso did it again with Cubism. Then Pollock did it—he busted our idea of a picture all to hell. Then there could be a new pictures again.
—Willem de Koonig

Art for art’s sake.
—Anonymous translation of L’art pour l’art

What is art that it should have a sake?
—Samuel Butler

Isn’t it a man’s name?
—Andy Warhol, responding to the question, “What is art?”

WHAT IS ART?

Perhaps most nonspecialists would say that art consists of “Beautiful pictures and statues. Things like The Mona Lisa, The Thinker, and Monet’s paintings of his garden, and van Gogh’s The Starry Night. And Greek statues of naked gods.”

The first paragraph of a book on contemporary art, however, includes these sentences:

Ordinary viewers of today, hoping for coherence and beauty in their imaginative experiences, confront instead works of art declared to exist in
arrangements of bare texts and unremarkable photographs, in industrial fabrications revealing no evidence of the artist's hand, in mundane commercial products merely transferred from shopping mall to gallery, or in ephemeral and confrontational performances in which mainstream moral values are deliberately travestied.


Again, what is art? Perhaps we can say that art is anything that is said to be art by people who ought to know. Who are these people? They are the men and women who teach in art and art history departments, who write about art for newspapers and magazines and scholarly journals, who think of themselves as art collectors, who call themselves art dealers, and who run museums.

One of the most ardently discussed items at the Whitney Museum's 1997 Biennial was David Hammon's video of a can being kicked down the Bowery. At the Dia Center for the Arts in Chelsea, Tracey Moffatt's video of surfers in a parking lot changing into swimwear, shielded by towels, created excitement. At the New Museum, Mona Hatoum's videos of the inside of her body—she sends a microvideo through one bodily orifice or another to create a video self-portrait—still get lots of attention. The people who run art museums show these videos, and the people who visit the museums enjoy them, so presumably the videos are art. (For more on video art, see pages 131–33.) On September 10, 2007 some 1,700 people paid to see ten motorcyclists ride for seven minutes over plywood panels, leaving track-marks. (The performance was the idea of Aaron Young, a conceptual artist.) Later in 2007 Damien Hirst exhibited some thirty dead sheep, a dead shark, hundreds of sausages, and thousands of empty boxes with labels of medicines. According to the New York Times (December 23, 2007, Arts 39) Hirst said it was his "most mature work." Cai Guo-Qiang, who uses gunpowder explosions to produce burns on panels of paper, in 2008 was given a retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. And also in 2008 the comic-book artist R. Crumb was given an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

This idea that something—anything at all—is art if artists and the public (or a significant part of the public, the "art world") say it is art, is called the Institutional Theory of art. Philosophically speaking, in this view artworks do not possess properties (let's say "beauty" or "truth") that are independent of their historical and cultural situations; they are artworks because people in certain institutions that are called the art world (museums, universities, art galleries, auction houses, publishing houses, government bureaus, etc.) interpret them as artworks. (Compare Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of pornography: "I know it when I see it.") The fact that there is such a theory and that it has an impressive name
should not deter you from asking “Does this theory make sense?” and “Even if this theory helps us to see that X and Y are works of art, does the theory help us to know if X and Y are good or bad?”*

Of course, museum curators, museum-goers, art teachers, and all the rest change their ideas over time. Until fairly recently, say the latter part of the eighteenth century, the West did not sharply distinguish the Fine Arts (painting and sculpture) from what now are called the decorative arts (utilitarian objects such as dinnerware, furniture, and carpets). The painter and the sculptor, like the potter and the cabinetmaker and the weaver, were artisans. Furthermore, until two or three decades ago, such Native American objects as blankets, headdresses, beaded clothes, and horn spoons were regarded as artifacts, not art, and consequently they were found not in art museums but in ethnographic museums, and they were said to be “interesting” and “informative.” Today curators of art museums are eager to acquire and display such Native American objects, and these objects are said to be “beautiful” and “imaginative.” Similarly, although sculptures from sub-Saharan Africa have been found in art museums since the early twentieth century, other African works—for instance, textiles, pottery, baskets, and jewelry—did not move from ethnographic museums to art museums until about 1970.

Even today, however, the African objects most sought by art museums are ones that show no foreign influence. Objects showing European influence or objects made for the tourist trade are rarely considered art by those who run art museums. The museums (and the museum-goers) of tomorrow, however, may have a different idea about such objects. Maybe only our present cultural prejudice keeps most museum curators from regarding airport art or tourist art (contemporary objects made for tourists) as worth serious consideration. These curators argue that such objects do not embody indigenous values and are only responses to a foreign market. But are these curators merely perpetuating a colonialist (exploitive) relationship by refusing to recognize that colonized people can respond creatively to colonialization?**


After all, nobody dismisses a Western artist who borrows from another culture: Van Gogh derived ideas from Japanese prints, and Picasso from African sculpture. Why then do some Westerners dismiss as “degenerate” and “hybrid” those African or Aboriginal Australian artists who show an awareness of European and American culture?

In listening to people who talk about art, let’s not forget the opinions of the people who consider themselves artists. If someone with an established reputation as a painter says of a postcard she has just written, “This is a work of art,” well, we probably have to be very careful before we reply, “No, it isn’t.” In 1917, when the Society for Independent Artists
gave an exhibition in New York, Marcel Duchamp submitted for display a porcelain urinal, upended, titled *Fountain*, and signed “R. Mutt” (the urinal had been manufactured by Mott Works). The exhibition was supposed to be open to anyone who wished to exhibit in it, but the organizers rejected Duchamp's entry, saying in a press release that it was “a very useful object, but its place is not in an art exhibition.” The press release went on to say, “It is by no definition a work of art.” Today, however, it is illustrated in almost every history of art on the grounds that an artist of undoubted talent took an object and forced its viewers to consider it as an aesthetic object (something to be contemplated in an art museum) rather than as a functional one (something to be used for the disposal of men's urine). *Fountain* nicely illustrates the Institutional Theory (summarized on page 2), which claims that an object is a work of art if the art world (for instance someone who is widely regarded as an artist) says it is.

A common definition today is “Art is what artists do,” and they do a great many things that do not at all resemble Impressionist paintings. Listen to Claes Oldenburg, sculptor and designer of an environmental work, *The Store*, that exhibited works constructed from such untraditional materials as burlap and cardboard: “I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sits on its ass in a museum” (quoted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory: 1900–2000* [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003], 744).

But artists too may be uncertain about what is art. An exhibition catalog, *Jackson Pollock: Black and White* (1969), reports an interesting episode. Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, a painter herself, is quoted as saying, “In front of a very good painting...he asked me, ‘Is this a painting?’ Not is this a good painting, or a bad one, but a painting! The degree of doubt was unbelievable at times” (page 8). (For a photograph of Pollock at work, see page 341.)

Sculptors, too, have produced highly innovative work, work that may seem not to qualify as art. Take, for instance, *earthworks* or *Earth Art* or *land art* (or more recently, *green art*), large sculptural forms made of earth and rocks. An example is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, created in 1970 (page 6). Smithson supervised the construction of a jetty—if a spiral can be regarded as a jetty—some 15 feet wide and 1,500 feet long, in Great Salt Lake, Utah. Because the water level rose, *Spiral Jetty* became submerged, though the work still survived—under water, in a film Smithson made during the construction of the jetty, and in photographs taken before the water level rose. Beginning in 1999 drought lowered the water level, and by the middle of 2003 *Spiral Jetty* again became visible. Is this combination of
mud, salt-encrusted rocks, and water art? Smithson said it was art, and the writers of books on recent art agree, since they all include photographs of *Spiral Jetty*. And if it is art, should we tamper with it? The black basalt rocks that once made a strong contrast with the pinkish surrounding water (the color of the water is due to bacteria and algae) now are white with the encrusted salt, so that the whole looks rather like a snowfield, very different from the work that Smithson created.

Let's look briefly at a work produced in 1972 by a student in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts and exhibited again at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1995. Two instructors and some twenty students in the class decided to take an abandoned house and turn it into a work of art, *Womanhouse*. Each participant took some part of the house—a room, a hallway, a closet—and transformed it in accord with her dreams and fantasies. The students were encouraged to make use of materials considered trivial and associated with women, such as dolls, cosmetics, sanitary napkins, and crocheted material. One student, Faith Wilding, constructed a crocheted rope web, thereby creating what she called (in 1972) *Web Room* or *Crocheted Environment* and (in the 1995 version) *Womb Room* (see page 7). Traditionally, a work
of art (say, a picture hanging on the wall or a statue standing on a pedestal) is set apart from the spectator and is an object to be looked at from a relatively detached point of view. But Womb Room is a different sort of thing. It is an installation—a construction or assemblage that takes over or transforms a space, indoors or outdoors, and that usually gives the viewer a sense of being not only a spectator but also a participant in the work. With its nontraditional material—who ever heard of making a work of art out of rope and pieces of crochet?—its unusual form, and its suggestions of the womb, a nest, and rudimentary architecture, Wilding’s installation would hardly have been regarded as art before, say, the mid-twentieth century.

We have been talking about the idea that something is a work of art if its creator—whether a person or a culture—says it is art. But some cultures do not want some of their objects to be thought of as art. For example, although curators of American art museums have exhibited Zuni war god figures (or Ahayu:da), the Zuni consider such figures to be embodiments of sacred forces, not aesthetic objects, and therefore unsuitable for exhibition. The proper place for these figures, the Zuni say, is in open-air hillside
shrines.* (A question: Can we call something art if its creator did not think of it as art?)

What sorts of things you will write about will depend partly on your instructor, partly on the assignment, partly on what the museums in your area call art, and partly on what you call art.

We can end these introductory remarks with a look at Mark Wallinger’s photograph of a racehorse whose name is A Real Work of Art. Wallinger has produced paintings and videos as well as photographs, so we can agree that he is an artist. Is this photograph of A Real Work of Art—a real horse—a work of art? This thoroughbred named A Real Work of Art is doubtless the product not only of nature but also of a good deal of human effort in breeding and training, but is he a work of art? A real work of art?

WHY WRITE ABOUT ART?

We write about art in order to clarify and to account for our responses to works that interest or excite or frustrate us. In putting words on paper we have to take a second and a third look at what is in front of us and at what is

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*See Steven Talbot, “Desecration and American Indian Religious Freedom,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 12:4 (1985): 1–8; T. J. Ferguson and B. Martza, “The Repatriation of Zuni Ahayu'la,” *Museum Anthropology* 14:2 (1990): 7–15. For additional discussions of the social, political, and ethical questions that face curators, see Moira Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (1996); *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, ed. Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler (1997). Some authors of books go so far as not to reproduce certain images in deference to the wishes of the community. Example: Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, in *Native North American Art* (1998), inform readers that a certain kind of Iroquois mask, representing forest spirits, is not illustrated because these masks “are intended only to be seen by knowledgeable people able to control these powers” (page 11). The heart of the issue perhaps may be put thus: Is it appropriate for one culture to take the sacred materials of another culture out of their context and to exhibit them as aesthetic objects to be enjoyed?
WHY WRITE ABOUT ART? 9

within us. Picasso said, “To know what you want to draw, you have to begin drawing”; similarly, writing is a way of finding what you want to write, a way of learning.

The last word is never said about complex thoughts and feelings—and works of art, as well as our responses to them, embody complex and even contradictory thoughts and feelings. Still, when we write about art we hope to make at least a little progress in the difficult but rewarding job of talking about and clarifying our responses. As Arthur C. Danto says in the introduction to *Embodied Meanings* (1994), a collection of essays about art:

Until one tries to write about it, the work of art remains a sort of aesthetic blur. . . . After seeing the work, write about it. You cannot be satisfied for very long in simply putting down what you felt. You have to go further. (14)

When we write, first of all we teach ourselves; by putting down words and by thinking about what we are writing we get to learn what our multiple responses—our likes, our dislikes, our uncertainties—add up to. When we write and review what we have written, each of us is something like a committee of one, trying to work out a statement that is acceptable to all of our selves. Second, we hope to interest our readers by communicating our mulled-over responses to material that is worth talking about.

But to respond sensitively to anything and then to communicate responses, we must possess

- some understanding of the thing and
- some skill at converting responses into words.

This book tries to help you deepen your understanding of art—what art does and the ways in which it does it—and the book also tries to help you convert your responses into words that will let your reader share your perceptions, your enthusiasms, and even your doubts. This sharing is, in effect, teaching. An essay on art is an attempt to help your reader to see the work as you see it.

**A RULE FOR WRITERS:**

You may think you are writing for the teacher, but this view is a misconception; when you write, you are the teacher.
THE IMAGINED READER AS THE WRITER’S COLLABORATOR

If you are not writing for the instructor, for whom are you writing? At first, when you take notes and even when you write your first draft, you are writing for yourself—you are trying to clarify your ideas, trying to know what you think—but when you begin to revise a draft you are also writing for an imagined reader, an imagined audience. All writers need to imagine some sort of audience: Writers of self-help books keep novices in mind, writers of articles for *Time* keep the general public in mind, writers of papers for legal journals keep lawyers in mind, and writers of papers for *The Art Bulletin* keep art historians in mind. An imagined audience in some degree determines what the writer will say—for instance, it determines the degree of technical language that may be used and the amount of background material that must be given. No principle of writing is more important than this one: When you are revising, keep your audience in mind.

Who is your audience, your actual or implied reader? In general (unless your instructor suggests otherwise) think of your audience as your classmates. If you keep your classmates in mind as your audience, you will not write, “Leonardo da Vinci, a famous Italian painter,” because such a remark offensively implies that the reader does not know Leonardo’s nationality or trade. You might, however, write, “Leonardo da Vinci, a Florentine by birth,” because it’s your hunch that your classmates do not know that Leonardo was born in Florence, as opposed to Rome or Venice. And you will write, “John Butler Yeats, the expatriate Irish painter who lived in New York,” because you are pretty sure that only specialists know about Yeats. Similarly, you will not explain that the Virgin Mary was the mother of Jesus—you can probably assume that your reader has at least this much knowledge of Christianity—but you probably will explain that St. Anne was the mother of Mary.

Further, assume that your reader may tend not to agree with you—that is, assume a somewhat skeptical reader. Why? Because with such an audience in mind, you will be prompted to support your assertions with evidence.

In short, if you imagine that your reader is looking over your shoulder when you are revising, your imagined audience becomes your collaborator, helping you to decide what you need to say—in particular helping you to decide

- how much background you need to give
- which terms you need to define
- what kinds of evidence you need to offer in order to convince the reader
- what degree of detail you need to go into.
If, for instance, you are offering a psychoanalytic interpretation, you can assume that your audience is familiar with the name Freud and with the Oedipus complex, but you probably cannot assume (unless you are addressing psychoanalysts) that your audience is familiar with the contemporary psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott and his concept of the pre-Oedipal mother–infant dyad as a source of creativity. If you are going to make use of Winnicott, you will have to identify him and briefly explain his ideas.

A successful essay, whether a one-page review of an art exhibition in *Time* or a twenty-page essay in *The Art Bulletin*, begins with where the readers are and then goes on to take the readers further. (See also “A Note on Technical Language,” pages 190–93.)

A Checklist: Imagining a Reader

- Do I have a sense of what the reader probably knows about the issue?
- Do I have a sense of what the reader probably thinks about the issue?
- Have I stated my thesis clearly and sufficiently early in the essay?
- How much common ground do we probably share?
- Have I, in the paper, tried to establish common ground and then moved on to advance my position?
- Have I supported my arguments with sufficient details?
- Have I used the appropriate language (for instance, defined terms that are likely to be unfamiliar)?
- Have I indicated why my readers should care about the issue and should accept or at least take seriously my views?
- Is the organization clear?
- Have I used transitions (“further more,” “on the other hand”) where they are needed?
- Have I presented myself as a person who is (a) fair, (b) informed, and (c) worth listening to?
THE FUNCTIONS OF CRITICAL WRITING

In everyday language the most common meaning of criticism is “finding fault” and to be critical is to be censorious. But a critic can see excellences as well as faults. Because we turn to criticism with the hope that the critic has seen something we have missed, the most valuable criticism is not that which shakes its finger at faults but that which calls our attention to interesting matters going on in the work of art. Critical writing, in short, educates the reader.

In the following statement W. H. Auden suggests that criticism is most useful when it calls our attention to things worth attending to. He is talking about works of literature, but we can easily adapt his words to the visual arts.

What is the function of a critic? So far as I am concerned, he can do me one or more of the following services:

1. Introduce me to authors or works of which I was hitherto unaware.
2. Convince me that I have undervalued an author or a work because I had not read them carefully enough.
3. Show me relations between works of different ages and cultures which I could never have seen for myself because I do not know enough and never shall.
4. Give a “reading” of a work which increases my understanding of it.
5. Throw light upon the process of artistic “Making.”
6. Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, ethics, religion, etc.


The emphasis on observing, showing, illuminating suggests that the chief function of critical writing is not very different from the common view of the function of literature or art. The novelist Joseph Conrad said that his aim was “before all, to make you see,” and the painter Ben Shahn said that in his paintings he wanted to get right the difference between the way a cheap coat and an expensive coat hung.

Take Auden’s second point, that a good critic can convince us—can gain our agreement by calling attention to evidence supporting a thesis—that we have undervalued a work. Although you probably can draw on your own experience for confirmation, an example may be useful. Rembrandt’s self-portrait with his wife (page 13), now in Dresden, strikes many viewers as one of his least attractive pictures: The gaiety seems forced, the presentation a bit coarse and silly. Paul Zucker, for example, in *Styles in Painting*, finds it “over-hearty,” and John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, says that “the painting as a whole remains an advertisement for the sitter’s good fortune, prestige, and
wealth. (In this case Rembrandt’s own.) And like all such advertisements it is heartless.” But some scholars have pointed out, first, that this picture may be a representation of the Prodigal Son, in Jesus’ parable, behaving riotously, and, second, that it may be a profound representation of one aspect of Rembrandt’s marriage. Here is Kenneth Clark on the subject:

The part of jolly toper was not in his nature, and I agree with the theory that this is not intended as a portrait group at all, but as a representation of the Prodigal Son wasting his inheritance. A tally-board, faintly discernible on the left, shows that the scene is taking place in an inn. Nowhere else has Rembrandt made himself look so deboshed, and Saskia is enduring her ordeal with complete detachment—even a certain hauteur. But beyond the ostensible subject, the picture may express some psychological need in Rembrandt to reveal his discovery that he and his wife were two very different characters, and if she was going to insist on her higher social status, he would discover within himself a certain convivial coarseness.

—Kenneth Clark, An Introduction to Rembrandt (1978), 73
After reading these words, we may find that the appeal of the picture grows—and any analysis that increases our enjoyment in a work surely serves a useful purpose. Clark’s argument, of course, is not airtight—one rarely can present an airtight argument when writing about art—but notice that Clark does more than merely express an opinion or report a feeling. In his effort to persuade us, he offers evidence (the tally-board and the observation that no other picture shows Rembrandt so “deboshed”), and the evidence is strong enough to make us take another look at the picture. After looking again, we may come to feel that we have undervalued the picture.

SOME WORDS ABOUT CRITICAL THINKING

The word critical commonly implies a negative, fault-finding spirit, and thinking can include mere daydreaming (“During Art History 101 I kept thinking about lunch”), but the term critical thinking suggests careful analysis. Critical comes from a Greek word, krinein, meaning “to separate,” “to choose”; it implies conscious, deliberate inquiry, and especially it implies a skeptical state of mind, but a skeptical state of mind is not a negative, self-satisfied, fault-finding state of mind. Quite the reverse; because critical thinkers wish to draw sound conclusions, they apply their skepticism to their own assumptions, to their own evidence, and indeed toward all aspects of their own thinking as well as toward that of others. When they read a draft, they read it with a skeptical mind, seeking to improve the thinking that has gone into it.

A SAMPLE CRITICAL ESSAY


Douglas Lee
Fine Arts 101
February 7, 2009

Whistler’s Japanese Mother

The painting commonly known as Whistler’s Mother (Figure 1) is full of surprises. First of all, its title—the title that Whistler gave it—is Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: The Artist’s Mother. Once we are aware of the title, we look at it in a way different from the way we look at it under the popular title, Whistler’s Mother. The word
“Arrangement” in Whistler’s title forces us to think about the work (at least for a while) as a composition, not as a picture of a particular mother, and certainly not as a picture of the idea of motherhood.

Whistler has done a good deal to prevent us from seeing the picture as an image of motherhood. The subject, of course, is a Caucasian woman (in fact, Whistler’s mother), but we do not see her with a child or with grandchildren, and we do not even see her engaged in some sort of action that might suggest motherhood, let’s say setting the table or hanging out the clothes to dry. Rather, she is alone, and motionless. She does not even look in our direction. Because we see her in profile, she seems somewhat aloof, taking no notice of others, hardly a quality we associate with motherliness.
Further, her black dress, appropriate enough for an older woman in the late nineteenth century, does not help to establish her as an individual with a warm or tender personality. If it says anything about her, it may say only that she is a widow. When we let our mind stray a bit, and we think of the brightly colored vibrant women depicted by some of Whistler’s contemporaries such as Renoir (1841–1919), van Gogh (1853–90), and Gauguin (1848–1903), we realize that we should take his title seriously, *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, and should look for a pattern rather than for an engaging personality.

By the time he painted *Arrangement in Grey and Black* Whistler had become deeply interested in Japanese prints. True, Japanese prints are colorful and their subject matter is often a beautiful young woman wearing an elaborately decorated kimono, whereas Whistler’s rather drab picture shows a plainly dressed older woman. One of the qualities, however, of Japanese prints that interested Whistler was the flatness of the colors; most early Japanese prints did not use shading, so the colors are unmodulated within any given area bounded by lines. Further, Japanese prints often did not use perspective, and they often did not include a background, so the figures are not set within a recognizable space; they exist in empty space. If there is in these prints a background, it usually is indicated with relatively few details, such as a picture on a wall or a bamboo blind (Figure 2), and the space seems very shallow. Whistler’s background here is not empty—clearly the woman is in a room, with two pictures hanging on the wall behind her, and a curtain hanging at the left—but the wall and the floor are relatively blank, as they are in the Japanese print. Furthermore, because the seated woman is close to the wall (as in Japanese prints) and we are close to her, Whistler does not convey a sense of depth or of a person who moves within a clearly defined setting. Rather than directing us to think about the loving actions of a particular mother, Whistler invites us to enjoy the pattern, for instance to contrast the curved lines that define the woman with the rectangles that constitute the pictures (again
compare Whistler’s painting with Figure 2), the drapery, and the footstool where the drapery touches the ground. In short, we are invited to see the picture as a design, an “arrangement.” Speaking of the first part of the title, *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, Whistler said, “Now, that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the picture?”

If we want to confirm the fact that the picture is a picture, a design rather than an evocation of motherliness, we can contrast it with an ugly postage stamp that the United States issued in 1934 (Figure 3). Whistler’s handsome painting is severely cropped at the bottom, the pictures on the wall are gone (probably Whistler put them there to help us to understand that this is a painting about the art of painting, not about the revelation of maternal character), and a vase with flowers replaces the drapery, doubtless in order to show that the woman in the painting likes pretty things, and maybe even that she has a green thumb. The post office’s heavy-handed message further demolishes Whistler’s picture: “U.S. postage/in memory/and in honor/of the mothers/of America/three cents.”

The common title, Whistler’s Mother, sounds as though the picture must be as American as apple pie, a close relative of Gilbert Stuart’s George Washington or maybe of Grant Wood’s American Gothic, but a careful look at this justly famous painting, coupled with an awareness of Whistler’s title and a familiarity with the fact that Whistler was much interested in Japanese prints, brings a viewer to see that this painting owes less to America or to motherhood than to Japan.

The Essay Analyzed

Douglas Lee’s essay includes evaluation, or judgment, as well as analysis of what is going on in the painting. As for evaluation, it is enough for
us to notice that Lee judges Whistler’s painting as worth talking about. (Newspaper and magazine criticism is largely concerned with evaluation—think, for instance, of film reviews, which exist chiefly to tell the viewer whether a film is worth seeing—but most academic criticism assumes the value of the works it discusses and it is chiefly analytic and interpretive. For a more detailed comment on evaluation, see pages 38–40, 223–27.) Although Lee explicitly praises the work (“handsome painting”), most of his evaluation is implicit in and subordinate to the **analysis** of what he sees. (For the moment we can define analysis as the systematic separation of the whole into its parts; the third chapter of this book is devoted to the topic.) Lee sees things and calls them to our attention as worthy of note, for instance:

- the flatness of the figure,
- its detachment from us because it is presented in profile,
- the lack of any action that suggests motherliness,
- the lack of any other figure that would help to confirm the woman’s motherliness.
- the shallowness of the space

It is clear that Lee values the picture but he does not worry about whether Whistler is a better artist than van Gogh or Grant Wood. He is content to help us to see what is going on in the picture.

Or at least Lee seems to be content to help us see. In fact, he is advancing a **thesis** (a central point, a main idea that will be supported by evidence—in short an argument). His argument is that the picture is not about motherliness but about the importance of design in art.

A good thesis is

- *not* the assertion of a mere undisputed fact (“Whistler’s mother was his model in this picture” or “Whistler was an American who lived chiefly in London”)
- *nor* is a good thesis a broad generalization that cannot interestingly be supported (“Whistler’s Mother is widely admired”).

Such statements are true, but they can hardly be argued. Normally a **thesis statement**

- names the topic (here, a particular painting) and
- makes an arguable assertion about it that the writer will support with details later in the essay.
This student’s thesis statement, appropriately in the first sentence, is

The painting commonly known as Whistler’s Mother (Figure 1) is full of surprises.

True, this statement is not specific, for instance, not nearly as specific as

Whistler’s Mother is indebted to Japanese prints,

or

Whistler’s Mother owes more to Japanese prints than it does to any traditional concept of motherhood

but it qualifies as a thesis sentence because it offers an arguable assertion, and the writer goes on to clarify it and to support it effectively. The essay is largely an effort to persuade us by offering an argument—a reasoned account, consisting of evidence offered in support of the thesis—that indeed the thesis is valid, that the picture is not as simple as it looks or as the common title suggests.

It is not enough for writers to see things and to report to readers what they have seen. Writers have to present their material in an orderly fashion, so that readers can take it in and can follow a developing argument. In short, writers must organize their material. Each paragraph must serve a purpose, and the sequence of paragraphs must serve the writer’s basic purpose—to communicate clearly.

• The opening paragraph asserts the thesis (the picture is “full of surprises”) and gives us some essential information (the original title and the suggestion that this title ought to help us to think about the picture). Notice that the thesis is introduced without a tedious announcement such as “In this paper I will demonstrate,” or “This paper seeks to prove that . . .”

• The second paragraph helps us to see the picture; it points out that by presenting the woman without other figures, and by presenting her in profile, Whistler diminishes her motherliness. The comparison with his contemporaries—strictly speaking a contrast rather than a comparison—helps us to see the distinctiveness of this painting.

• The third paragraph explains in large part why the picture looks the way it does: It is indebted to Japanese prints, which tend to emphasize flat designs rather than the illusion of depth, and for Whistler these works of art were chiefly “arrangements,” designs rather than revelations of character.

• The next-to-last paragraph introduces another comparison (again a contrast), this time to the postage stamp, which helps us to see even more clearly what Whistler’s painting is not.
• The final paragraph reinforces the thesis, not by the obvious device of saying “Thus we have seen,” or “In conclusion,” but by making explicit what until now has been implicit: “This painting owes less to America or to motherhood than to Japan.” Like most good concluding paragraphs, while recapitulating the main point it enlarges the vision, in this instance by including references to two other American painters.

A Note on Outlining

If Lee prepared an outline to help him draft the essay, it may have looked something like this or, rather, something like this after he arranged and rearranged it:

Begin with where reader is, “Whistler’s Mother,” then inform them of real title
   Significance of real title
Not maternal
   no children present
   no action suggesting motherliness
   profile: sort of cold, remote
Infl. of Japanese prints
   flat (uniform) colors
   little sense of depth; no perspective
   emphasis on pattern rather than on character
Contrast with U.S. stamp
   ridiculous flower pot to feminize her
Contrast with other American portraits, reaffirm Japanese influence

An outline—nothing elaborate, even just a few notations in a sequence that seems reasonable—can be a great help in drafting an essay. The very act of putting a few ideas down on paper will usually stimulate you to think of additional ideas, just as when you jot down “tuna fish” on a shopping list, you are reminded that you also need to pick up bread. Outlining, in short, is not merely a way of organizing ideas but is also a way of getting ideas.

If, however, you feel that you can’t make a preliminary outline for a draft, write a draft and then outline it. Why? An outline of your draft will let you easily examine your organization. That is, when in the course of reviewing your draft you brush aside the details and put down the chief point or basic idea of each paragraph, you will produce an outline that will help you to see if you have set forth your ideas in a reasonable sequence, a sequence that will help rather than confuse your readers. By studying this outline of your draft, you may find, for instance, that your third point would be better used as your first point. (Outlining is discussed in more detail on pages 42–43 and especially pages 57–58.)
A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Organize your essay so that your readers can easily follow the argument you use—the reasons you give—to support your thesis.

WHAT IS AN INTERPRETATION—AND ARE ALL INTERPRETATIONS EQUALLY VALID?

Interpretation and Interpretations

An interpretation sees the work of art as representing something, or expressing something, or doing something. In short, an interpretation tries to make sense of a work by setting forth its meaning, or, better, as the setting forth of one of the meanings of the work. This issue of meaning versus meanings deserves a brief explanation. Although some art historians still believe that a work of art has a single meaning—the meaning it had for the artist—most historians today hold that a work has several meanings:

- the meaning it had for the artist
- the meaning(s) it had for its first audience
- the meaning(s) it had for later audiences, and
- the meaning(s) it has for us today.

Michelangelo’s David (page 70), for instance, in sixteenth-century Florence seems to have “meant” freedom from tyranny—the Florentines twice drove out the Medici and established republics—but most of today’s viewers, unaware of the history of Florence, do not find this meaning in a sculpture of the youth who killed the giant Goliath.

Similarly, a portrait by Goya probably meant one thing to the artist, another to the sitter, yet another to the sitter’s descendants when they viewed it in their ancestral house, and it means something else to us when we view it in a museum. In fact, it probably meant several things to the artist as he worked on it. Picasso offers a relevant comment about changes in meaning:

A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While it is being done it changes as one’s thoughts change. And when it is finished, it still goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it. A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on us by our life from day to day. This is natural enough, as the picture lives only through the man who is looking at it.

—Conversation with Christian Zervos, 1935, reprinted in Picasso on Art, ed. Dore Ashton (1972), 8
Although viewers usually agree in identifying the subject matter of a work of art (the martyrdom of St. Catherine, a portrait of Napoleon, a bowl of apples), disputes about subject matter are not unknown. Earlier in the chapter, for example, we saw that one of Rembrandt’s paintings can be identified as *Self-Portrait with Saskia* or—a very different subject—as *The Prodigal Son*; similarly, later, in Chapter 11, we will see that Rembrandt’s painting of a man holding a knife has been variously identified as *The Butcher*, *The Assassin*, and *St. Bartholomew*. Of course, an interpretation usually goes further than identifying the subject. We have already seen that Kenneth Clark interprets the picture with Saskia not only as an illustration of the story of the Prodigal Son but also as Rembrandt’s expression of an insight into his relationship with his wife. Similarly, in Millet’s famous painting, *The Gleaners*, an interpretation may begin by saying that Millet’s picture shows poor women gleaning, and it may go on to argue that it shows (or asserts, or represents, or expresses) some sort of theme, such as the dignity of labor, or the oppression of the worker, or the bounty of nature, or whatever.

**Who Creates “Meaning”—Artist or Viewer?**

Artists themselves sometimes offer interpretations of their works. For instance, writing of his *Night Café* (1888, Yale University Art Gallery), van Gogh said in a letter (8 September 1888):

> The room is blood-red and dark yellow with a green table in the middle; there are four lemon-yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most disparate reds and greens . . . in the empty, dreary room. . . . I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, run mad, or commit a crime. So I have tried to express, as it were, the powers of darkness. . . .

Many viewers find this comment helpful, but what do we make of his comment (in a letter to Gauguin, in October 1888) that the picture of his bedroom expresses an “absolute restfulness” and (in a letter to his brother, Theo, in October 1888) that the “color is to . . . be suggestive here of *rest* or of sleep in general”? Probably most viewers find the heightened perspective and the bright red coverlet on the bed disturbing rather than restful. (In the letter to Gauguin, van Gogh himself speaks of the coverlet as blood-red.)

Does the artist’s intention limit the meaning of a work? (Earlier in this chapter we touched on intention: If Zuni creators of war god figures did not intend them to be works of art, are we not allowed to discuss these creations as works of art?) Surely one can argue that the creators of
artworks may not always be consciously aware of what they are including in the works. And in stating their views artists may even be consciously deceptive. Roy Lichtenstein told an interviewer, “I wouldn’t believe anything I tell you.”

Some modern critical theory holds that to accept the artist’s statement about what he or she intended is to give the artist’s intention an undeserved status. In this view, a work is created not by an isolated genius—the isolated genius is said to be a romantic invention—but by the political, economic, social, and religious ideas of a society that uses the author or artist as a conduit. Hence, we hear about “the social production of art.” Most obviously, artists such as Rembrandt, Rubens, and Titian (and in our own time, Andy Warhol, who presided over a site of production called The Factory) worked with circles of assistants and apprentices and provided objects that responded to the demands of the market.

The idea that the creator of the work cannot comment definitively on it is especially associated with Roland Barthes (1915–1980), author of “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text* (1977), and with Michel Foucault (1926–1984), author of “What Is an Author?” in *The Foucault Reader* (1984). For instance, in “The Death of the Author” Barthes says. “The text [we can substitute “the work of art” for “the text”] is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (page 142). Similarly in “What Is an Author?” Foucault assumes that the concept of the author (we can say “the artist”) is the invention of a society fascinated by personality, an invention that impedes the free circulation of ideas. In Foucault’s view, the work does not belong to the alleged maker, who, to repeat, is a conduit for the ideas of the period. The artist is a team player; the work is the production of a society, not of an individual.

Further, it is sometimes argued, the work belongs—or ought to belong—to the perceivers, who of course interpret it variously, according to their historical, social, and psychological states. A proper history of art, in this view, examines works in the light of what they have meant over the years. Their past meanings are recognized as part of our present experience. Works of art, James Elkins argues in *Critical Theory* 22 (1996, page 591), have nothing to say except what we say to them. They do not speak for themselves; viewers speak for the works, i.e., viewers put meanings—depending on their experiences—into the works they look at. This position, called reception theory, holds that art is not a body of works but is, rather, an activity of perceivers making sense of images. A work does not have meaning “in itself”; it can mean something only to someone in a context. The meaning is not inherent in the work, but is in the spectator’s response. In this view, meaning is not in things that, so to speak, are behind the work, such as the artist’s intention and the patron’s demands; rather,
meaning is in front of the work, in the spectator’s response. What counts is, what kind of response did the work evoke?

To put the matter into almost comically oversimplified terms, in the eyes of a moralist a picture of a female nude may primarily be an obscene threat to decency, in the eyes of an aesthete it may be a beautiful life-enhancing work of art, and in the eyes of a cultural historian it may be an interesting document revealing the exploitation of women. In the witty formulation of the novelist Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Gates of Angels* (1990), “No two people see the external world in exactly the same way. To every separate person a thing is what he thinks it is—in other words, not a thing but a think” (page 49).

*A RULE FOR WRITERS:*

Because most artists have not told us of their intentions, and because even those artists (or patrons or agents) who have stated their intentions may not be fully reliable sources, and because we inevitably see things from our own points of view, *think twice before you attribute intention to the artist* in statements such as “The designers of the stained glass windows at Chartres were trying to show us . . . ,” or “Mary Cassatt in this print is aiming for . . . ,” or “In his most recent photographs Hiroshi Sugimoto seeks to convey. . . .”

If one agrees that the beholders make or create the meaning, one can easily dismiss the statements that artists make about the meaning of their work. For example, although Georgia O’Keeffe on several occasions insisted that her paintings of calla lilies and of cannas were not symbolic of human sexual organs, we can (some theorists hold) ignore her comments. If we see O’Keeffe’s lilies with their prominent stamens as phallic, and her cannas as vulval, that is their meaning—for us.

Much can be said on behalf of this idea—and much can be said (and in later pages will be said) against it. On its behalf one can say, first, that we can never reconstruct the artist’s intentions and sensations. Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*, or his portrait of his physician, can never mean for us what they meant for van Gogh. Second, the boundaries of the artwork, it is said, are not finite. The work is not simply something “out there,” made up of its own internal relationships, independent of a context (*decontextualized* is the term now used). Rather, the artwork is something whose internal relationships are supplemented by what is outside of it—in the case of van Gogh, by a context consisting of the artist’s personal responses to flowers and to people, and by
his responses to other pictures of flowers and people, and by our responses to all sorts of related paintings, and (to give still another example) by our understanding of van Gogh’s place in the history of art. Because we now know something of his life and something of the posthumous history of his paintings, we cannot experience his work in the same way or ways—in the same context—that its original audience experienced it.

**When We Look, Do We See a Masterpiece—or Ourselves?**

Writing an essay of any kind ought not to be an activity that you doggedly engage in to please an instructor; rather, it ought to be a stimulating, if taxing, activity that educates you and your reader. The job is twofold—seeing and saying—because these two activities are inseparable:

- If you don’t see clearly, you won’t say anything interesting and convincing.
- If you don’t write clearly, your reader won’t see what you have seen, and perhaps you haven’t seen it clearly either.

What you say, in short, is a device for helping the reader and yourself to see clearly.

But what do we see? It is now widely acknowledged that when we look, we are not looking objectively, looking with what has been called an\textit{innocent eye}. That is, we are not like the child who, uncorrupted by the ways of fawning courtiers, accurately saw that the emperor was wearing no clothes. Inevitably, we see from a particular point of view (even if we are not aware of it)—for instance, the view of an aging middle-class white male, or of a second-generation Chinese-American, or of a young Chicana feminist in the early years of the twenty-first century. Our interpretations of experience certainly feel like our own independent, rational responses, but, far from being objective, they are (it is widely believed) largely conditioned by who we are—and who we are depends partly on the cultures that have shaped us. The idea is ancient: St. Thomas Aquinas eight hundred years ago said, \textit{Whatever is received is received according to the nature of the recipient.} 

Most people would probably agree with the philosopher Nelson Goodman, who in \textit{The Languages of Art} (1968) says that what the eye sees \textit{“is regulated by need and prejudice. It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make”} (pages 7–8). Thus, in contrast to the view that the mind simply perceives (the position of the innocent eye), the \textit{constructionist view} holds that the eye is selective and creative. In Degas’s words, \textit{“One sees as one wishes to see.”} Some recent critics, influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss’s \textit{The Savage Mind} (1966), have pushed this idea even further: Perceiving and interpreting are, they say, a form of \textit{bricolage} (from the French \textit{bricole}, meaning \textit{“trifle”})—a form of spontaneously creating something new by assembling bits and pieces of whatever happens to be at hand or, in this case, whatever happens to be in the viewer’s mind.*

These ideas have engendered distrust of the traditional concepts of \textit{meaning}, \textit{genius}, and \textit{masterpiece}. The arguments, offered by scholars who belong to a school of thought called the \textit{New Historicism}, run along these lines: Works of art are not the unique embodiments of profound meanings set forth by individual geniuses; rather, works of art are the embodiments of the ideology (ways of understanding the world) of the age that produced them. To talk of genius is to fetishize the individual. Works of art, in this view, are produced not so much by exceptional individuals as by the \textit{“social energies”} of a period, which somehow find a conduit in a particular artist.** The old idea of a masterpiece—a work demonstrating a rare degree of skill, embodying a profound meaning, and exerting a universal appeal—thus is called into question. Theorists of the New Historicism argue that to believe

\*\textit{Art Journal} 67:1 (Spring 2008) is devoted to several artists who work in this manner.

in masterpieces is to believe, wrongly, that a work of art embodies an individual artist’s fixed, transcendent achievement, whereas in fact (they argue) the work originally embodied the politics of the artist’s age and it is now interpreted by the politics of the viewer’s age. (The word *masterpiece* is also sometimes regarded as objectionable because of its alleged sexist implications.) In any given period, art dealers, museum personnel, professors of art history, self-styled artists, collectors, etc., may speak of masterpieces, but all such talk is simply the talk of people associated with particular cultural institutions in a particular age, mistakenly thinking that they are describing objective, eternal values. (We have already looked at the “Institutional Theory of art,” on pages 2–3.)

According to this way of thinking, the *canon*—the body of artworks that supposedly have stood the test of time because of their inherent quality—is not in fact a body of work of inherently superior value but is largely a construction made for political reasons by a self-serving elite. Thus, eighteenth-century landscapes of country estates with ploughed fields or with grazing cattle, it is argued, are in effect propaganda on behalf of landowners, intended to suggest that the landowners are benevolent stewards of their property. Or to take an even more obvious case, we can think about a body of work that until recently was regularly excluded from the canon: The work of women artists has been scandalously neglected because patriarchal values have determined the canon. (For additional remarks about analyses that see art as material that does “cultural work,” see the discussion of cultural materialism on pages 245–47.)

The idea of a universal appeal—an appeal in a work that transcends the historical circumstances of its production—thus is said to be a myth created by a coterie (chiefly dead white males) that has succeeded in imposing its patriarchal tastes and values on the rest of the world. The claim that, say, ancient Greece produced masterpieces of universal appeal, with the implication that all people *should* feel uplifted or enlightened or moved by these works of genius, is, according to some writers, the propaganda of European colonialism. In this view, individualism—the idea underlying the cult of genius—is merely another bourgeois value.

But the matter need not be put so bluntly, so crudely. We can hardly doubt that our perceptions are influenced by who we are, but we need not therefore speak dismissively of our perceptions or of the objects in front of us. True, talk about “universal appeal” is a bit highfalutin, but some works of art have so deeply interested so many people over so many years that we should hesitate before we dismiss these objects as nothing but the expression of the values of a particular class. Further, we should recognize that the traditional canon consists of works by very different kinds of
artists. Botticelli, Poussin, Rembrandt, Vermeer, van Gogh, Cézanne, Munch, Klee, Pollock, and Rothko, for instance, do have something in common—they are all dead white males—but their works are amazingly different.

The Relevance of Context: The Effect of the Museum and the Picture Book

Chapter 7, “Writing a Review of an Exhibition,” offers suggestions about what to look for in preparing to write not about a particular work but about a curator’s choice and presentation of many works, but here we can glance at a few underlying issues.

We can look at ancient Greek sculptures or at Olmec sculptures in a museum—or at pictures of them in a book—but we cannot experience them as the Greeks or the Olmecs did in their social and religious contexts. (Indeed, most of the Greek sculptures that we see today are missing limbs or heads and have lost their original color, so we aren’t really looking at what the Greeks looked at.)

Historians may think that they can recreate the context—the requirements of the patrons, the studio conditions of the sculptors, the religious beliefs of the viewers, and the churches or temples in which the objects were situated—but inevitably the historians (or, rather, all of us) unwittingly project current attitudes into a constructed past. Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal, in “Semiotics and Art History,” Art Bulletin 73 (1991), 175, put it this way: “What we take to be positive knowledge is the product of interpretive choices. The art historian is always present in the construct she or he produces.” We cannot even become mid–twentieth-century Americans contemplating American paintings whose meaning in part was in their apparently revolutionary departure from European work. (Even those of the original viewers who are still living now see the works somewhat differently from the way they saw them in the 1950s.)

Meaning, the argument goes, is indeterminate. Further, one can add that when a museum decontextualizes the work or deprives it of its original context—for instance, by presenting on a white wall an African mask that once was worn by a costumed dancer in an open place, or by presenting in a vitrine with pinpoint lighting a Japanese tea bowl that had once passed from hand to hand in a humble teahouse—the museum thereby invites the perceivers to project their own conceptions onto the works that may seem to be independent and free-standing but that in fact were part of an ensemble (the mask was part of a costume, the tea bowl was part of an
arrangement of several tea utensils) used in a ritual context. The object—the African mask or the Japanese teabowl or whatever—is now, in the museum, removed from its original context and thus is decontextualized, or, more accurately, it is put into a new context, a context that has its own meaning and that influences the viewer’s interpretation of the object.

One can even argue that the museum makes invisible (“appropriates”) the social forces that created a culture. One might ask, what is Christian art—designed to inspire faith and to assist believers in their worship—doing in a museum rather than church? Speaking of Piero della Francesca’s The Baptism of Christ (mid-fifteenth century), which is in the National Gallery, London, the Archbishop of Westminster said (quoted in the New York Times, Nov 29, 2008, p. C2),

It is a mistake to treat it as a work of art—it is a work of faith and piety. It is an expression of the church’s life and a way into prayer. I will willingly offer Westminster Cathedral as the new home for this painting.

The idea that the museum erases the social forces that created the work is especially heard with reference to African art. Thus, an exhibition called Africa: The Art of a Continent, displayed in London in 1995 and in New York in 1997, evoked considerable criticism on the grounds that the title was a European construction that minimized or homogenized the art of what in fact are numerous independent cultures. After all, the people who created these objects did not think of themselves as “African,” nor, for that matter, did the people who carved ritual masks or who wove textiles think of themselves as artists. In short, it is the Western exhibitors who chose to call these objects “African art,” who, so to speak, transformed cult objects into cultural objects. In an anthropological museum the emphasis is on function, but in an art museum the emphasis is on form.*

An example: A well-intentioned liberal effort to present Chicano art in an art museum met with opposition from the radical Left, which said that the proposed exhibition was an attempt to depoliticize the Mexican-American works and to appropriate them into bourgeois culture. In other words, it was argued that by framing (so to speak) the works in a museum rather than in their storefront context, the works were drained of their political significance and were turned into art—mere aesthetic objects in a museum in a capitalistic society. The frame (the context) is not neutral; it is

*For information about the debate surrounding Africa: The Art of a Continent, see Elsbeth Court, “Africa on Display,” in Emma Barker, ed., Contemporary Cultures of Display (1999), 147–73.
What is an interpretation? not a meaningless container, but rather it becomes part of what it frames. (For further discussion of the museum as a frame, see page 115.)

This decontextualization or, to use a fairly new word, aestheticization has especially troubled some students of photography. Photographs that were intended to stir the viewer to social action, for instance, photographs of the homeless, become something else when they are displayed in a museum. What do they become? They become objects presented for our aesthetic enjoyment, and our interest shifts from the ostensible subject to the skill of the photographer. (For a student's comment along these lines with reference to Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, see page 124.)

Much of what has been said about “white box” (or “white cube”) museum displays—windowless rooms with uncluttered white walls—with their implication that museums are repositories of timeless values that transcend cultural boundaries, also can be said about the illustrations of art objects in books. Here works of art are presented (at least for the most part) in an aesthetic context, rather than in a social context of, say, economic and political forces. Indeed, we have already seen that some objects—Zuni war god figures—are sometimes taken out of their cultural context and then are presented (by a sort of benevolent colonialism, it is said) as possessing a new value: artistic merit. Some critics argue that to take a non-Western object out of its cultural context and to regard it as an independent work of art by discussing it in aesthetic terms is itself a Eurocentric (Western) colonial assault on the other culture, a denial of that culture’s unique identity.*

Conversely, it has been objected, when a book or a museum takes a single art object and surrounds it with abundant information about the cultural context, it demeans the object, reducing it to a mere cultural artifact—something lacking inherent value, something interesting only as part of a culture that is “the Other,” remote and ultimately unknowable. Fifty years ago it was common for art historians to call attention to the aesthetic properties within a work and for anthropologists to try to tell us “the meaning” of a work; today it is common for art historians to borrow ideas from a new breed of anthropologists, who tell us that we can never grasp the meaning of an object from another culture and that we can understand only what it means in *our* culture. That is, we study it to learn what economic forces caused us to wrest the work from its place of origin and what psychological forces cause us to display it on our walls. The battle between, on the one hand, providing a detailed context (and thus perhaps

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sugging that the work is alien, “Other”) and, on the other hand, decontextualizing (and thus slicing away meanings that the work possessed in its own culture, thereby implying it is part of our culture, or of a universal culture) is still going on.*

**Arguing an Interpretation: Supporting a Thesis**

Against the idea that works of art have no inherent core of meaning and that what viewers see depends on their class or gender or whatever, one can argue that competent artists shape their work so that their intentions or meanings are evident to competent viewers (perhaps after some historical research). Most people who write about art make this assumption, and indeed such a position strikes most people as being supported by common sense.

It should be mentioned, too, that even the most vigorous advocates of the idea that meaning is indeterminate do not believe that all discussions of art are equally significant. Rather, they usually agree that a discussion is offered against a background of ideas—shared by writer and reader—as to what constitutes an effective argument, an effective presentation of a thesis. (As we saw on page 13, Kenneth Clark’s thesis—or, because his thesis is tentative, we can call it a hypothesis—is that Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait with Saskia* “may express some psychological need in Rembrandt to reveal his discovery that he and his wife were two very different characters. This thesis, in effect, is that the work meant one thing to Rembrandt and it means another thing to the modern viewer.”) When good writers offer a thesis, they do so in an essay that is

- **plausible** (reasonable because the thesis is supported with *evidence*)
- **coherent** (because it is clearly and reasonably organized)
- **rhetorically effective** (for instance, the language is appropriate to the reader; technical terms are defined if the imagined audience does not consist of specialists)

*For online reviews of exhibitions, see CAA reviews <www.caareviews.org>.*

*A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Support your thesis—your point—with evidence. Assume that your readers are skeptical and show them that details support your interpretation.
This means that the writer cannot merely set down random expressions of feeling or even of unsupported opinions. To the contrary, the writer

- assumes a reasonable but skeptical reader and, therefore,
- tries to persuade the reader by *arguing* a case—by pointing to evidence that causes the reader to say, in effect, “Yes, I see just what you mean, and what you say makes sense.”

For many people, the verb *to argue* has unpleasant connotations; it suggests those nasty exchanges on televised debates. But to argue a case—and this is what your instructor expects you to do—is not to engage in a shouting match or to exchange insults; it is, again, to engage in self-criticism and to offer evidence in support of a thesis.

As readers, when do we say to ourselves, “Yes, this makes sense”? And what makes us believe that one interpretation is better than another? Probably the interpretations that make sense and that strike us as better than other interpretations are the ones that are more inclusive; they are more convincing because they account for more details of the work. The less sensible, less satisfactory, less persuasive interpretations of the supposed meaning(s) are less inclusive; they leave a reader pointing to some aspects of the work—to some parts of the whole—and saying, “Yes, but this explanation doesn’t take account of . . .” or “This explanation is in part contradicted by. . . .”

We’ll return to the problem of interpreting meaning when we consider the distinction between subject matter and content in Chapter 4 (pages 73–74).

**EXPRESSING OPINIONS: THE WRITER’S “I”**

The study of art is not a science, but neither is it the expression of random feelings loosely attached to works of art. You can—and must—come up with statements that seem true to the work itself, statements that almost seem self-evident (like Clark’s words about Rembrandt) when the reader of the essay turns to look again at the object.

Of course, works of art evoke emotions—not only nudes but also, for example, the sprawled corpse of a rabbit in a still life by Chardin, or even the jagged edges or curved lines in a nonobjective painting by Kandinsky. It is usually advisable, however, to reveal your feelings not by continually saying “I feel” and “this moves me,” but by pointing to evidence, by calling attention to qualities in the object that shape your feelings. Thus, if you are
writing about Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (see page 35), instead of saying, “My first feeling is one of violence and unrest,” it is better to call attention (as John Golding does in *Cubism*, page 47) to “the savagery of the two figures at the right-hand side of the painting, which is accentuated by the lack of expression in the faces of the other figures.” Golding cites this evidence in order to support his assertion that “the first impression made by the *Demoiselles* . . . is one of violence and unrest.”

A RULE FOR WRITERS:
If in an analysis you wish to make use of your feelings, you need to explain them, not merely describe them.

The point, then, is not to repress or to disguise one’s personal response but to account for it (usually by pointing to supporting evidence) and to suggest that the response is not eccentric and private. Golding can safely assume that his response is tied to the object and that we share his initial response because he cites evidence that compels us to feel as he does—or at least evidence that explains why we feel this way. Here, as in most effective criticism, we get what has been called “persuasive description.” It is persuasive largely because it points to evidence, but also because most of us have been taught—rightly or wrongly—to respect the authority of an apparently detached point of view.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:
When you use terms such as *forceful, moving, stirring,* or *vivid,* you probably are talking not about the work but about your response to it. If you hope to persuade your reader, you need to point to the evidence—the features in the work that cause you to respond in such a way.

Most readers probably would rather be alerted to the evidence in the work of art than be informed about the writer’s feelings, but to say that a writer should not keep repeating “I feel” is not to say that “I” cannot be used. Nothing is wrong with occasionally using “I.” Conversely, noticeable avoidances of “I”—such as “one sees that,” “the author,” “this writer,” “we,” and the like—may suggest sham modesty.
Finally, it must be admitted that the preceding paragraphs make it sound as if writing about art is a decorous business. In fact, it is often a loud, contentious business, filled with strong statements about the decline of culture, revolution, pornography (or a liberating sexuality), the destruction of the skyline, fraud, new ways of seeing, beauty. In 1846 Charles Baudelaire called for a criticism that was “partial, passionate, and political,” and much of what is written today fits this description. Examining the conflicting critical assumptions and methodologies will be part of your education, and if you find yourself puzzled, you will also find yourself stimulated. An energetic conversation about art has been going on for a long time, and it is now your turn to say something.