1.2 Joseph Beuys, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965. Performed at Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf.

Ultimately, this piece was about thought and communication, about the ritual and magic of storytelling, about the impossibility and necessity of explaining art.

Conclusion

I hope this chapter has provided you with a better understanding of what art history is and how it differs from other academic disciplines. As the great Yogi Berra put it, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll end up somewhere else." Now that you're more familiar with the (ever-changing) boundaries of the discipline, the next chapter will teach you how to practice two of art history's fundamental methods: formal analysis and contextual analysis.

Chapter 2

The fundamentals of interpretation: formal and contextual analysis

Looking isn't as easy as it looks
Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967), artist

In our culture, we are so constantly bombarded by visual images in television, movies, billboards, books, and magazines, that it's easy to develop habits of lazy looking. We're often on such visual overload that we don't take the time to examine images carefully and analyze what we're seeing. This chapter explains two basic art-historical methods, formal analysis and contextual analysis, that will help you look carefully and frame good questions as you interpret works of art.

Two sides of a coin: formal and contextual analysis

When first starting out in art history, it may be helpful to group the different approaches to interpreting works of art under the categories "formal analysis" and "contextual analysis." These two approaches are dependent on each other, and, in fact, it's hard to separate them out completely. Often, art-historical analysis requires us to do both at the same time.

Formal analysis includes those methods and questions that mostly concern the visual and physical aspects of the work of art. In formal analysis, you seek the answers to your questions in the work of art itself, usually without referring extensively to outside sources. You're exploring the visual effect of

the work of art on the viewer, what the artist is trying to accomplish through visual means.

In contrast, contextual analysis often requires you to go outside the work of art for your answers. What you're trying to do in contextual analysis is understand how a work of art expresses or shapes the experiences, ideas, and values of the individuals and groups that make, use, view, or own it. You might look at documents, other images, books from the period, the artist's writings, histories, etc., to develop a contextual analysis.

As you advance in the study of art history, it probably won't be useful for you to maintain the idea of formal analysis/contextual analysis as an interpretive framework. You'll learn to use theoretical models (psychoanalysis, feminism, semiotics, etc.) that approach the process of interpretation in specialized ways. But for now, thinking in terms of formal and contextual analysis may help you ask a full range of questions when you're interpreting works of art.

Everyday art history: looking at advertising

Although these terms may be unfamiliar, you already know the basics of formal and contextual analysis—you use them when you take the time to look closely at an advertisement. Responding to an advertisement engages many of the same processes as art-history analysis. You interpret a visual image (and often an accompanying text) to decipher its message and evaluate this message in context. The context is usually a targeted consumer group, people who exhibit certain desirable characteristics: the ad is trying to persuade these consumers to purchase a product or, in the case of public announcements, to inform them of something or persuade them to act in a particular way.

Let's take an example from a successful ad campaign for Dior handbags, which ran in fashion magazines in January 2000 (Figure 2.1). On a visual basis, the ad is sumptuous (a double-page color spread), elegant, and understated. The text is simple and confined to the lower part of the left page—no screaming headlines

2.1 Advertisement for Dior handbags, January 2000.

promoting sales and discounts here. A beautiful young woman on the right holds a handbag perched on the balustrade of a large building overlooking a park. She's elegantly dressed in an understated black sheath. The predominant colors in the ad are subdued whites, grays, and beiges, with the rich green swath of the park setting off the white bag. The handbag too is understated—a simple rectangle of smooth leather with rounded handles and geometric metal hinges.

The visual message is enhanced by contextual knowledge. New Yorkers will recognize the park as Manhattan's Central Park, which is ringed by expensive apartment buildings and several major cultural institutions. The setting signals refinement, luxury, and good taste. As any reader of fashion magazines would know, the woman in the ad is the actress Gwyneth Paltrow (b. 1972), who is famous for her personal style. Considering that Dior is a luxury company that has suffered from a somewhat stodgy image, this ad reinvents the brand to appeal to hip young consumers who admire Paltrow and her style. Paltrow's dress and hair, and the handbag itself, are reminiscent of early sixties fashion, particularly as worn by the actress Audrey Hepburn (1929–1993), who was

herself celebrated for a great sense of personal style. The message here is: Dior's not outdated, it's retro cool.

Now, those of you who don't follow fashion and the Hollywood scene may be left unconvinced by all this, but you can take any advertisement and interpret its visual and contextual elements in a similar way. In the first paragraph, I analyzed the visual elements of the ad, focusing on design, color, and the interaction of image and text to decipher the ad's message. In the second paragraph, I pursued a contextual analysis, relying on outside knowledge to try to understand the ad. You may not stop to work through all the elements of interpretation systematically as you're browsing through a magazine, but the process of interpretation you do undertake is related in many ways to art-historical methods.

Formal analysis

Formal analysis doesn't mean simply describing what you see in a work of art, although description is part of it. It means looking at the work of art to try to understand what the artist wants to convey visually. In a sense, there's no such thing as pure formal analysis, totally divorced from contextual analysis. This is because you, the viewer, do provide a kind of context. The way that you interpret things is based on who you are—a person living in your place and time with your education and experiences—and that inevitably shapes your interpretation.

There are certain basic characteristics of works of art that you will focus on in formal analysis, such as color, line, space and mass, and scale. Often, these visual or physical qualities of the work are most effectively discussed in terms of a sliding scale between pairs of opposite qualities, such as linearity vs. painterliness, flatness vs. three-dimensionality, or dark vs. light.

Color

The first, basic step to undertake in analyzing color is to identify the different hues (red, blue, green, etc.) that an artist uses and see whether she is using a particular range of colors (e.g., primary colors, secondary colors).

You would also look at the characteristics of each color used. If it appears to be a representation of the color in its most vivid form, as it is represented on the color chart, it is highly saturated. If the hue can hardly be distinguished, then it is of low saturation. Value is a term that describes the relative lightness of a color—whether it tends more toward white or more toward black.

Line

Although the concept of line may seem to belong most obviously to painting and graphic arts, it's also a useful term in thinking about three-dimensional media such as sculpture and architecture. In discussing two-dimensional media, art historians often talk about linearity vs. painterliness, distinguishing between works that emphasize line and linear contours as compared with those that emphasize the play of light and dark. You might ask whether the line is strong and continuous, or broken up into many small hatches or pieces. For a building or sculpture, ask whether there is a strong sense of silhouette (the outline of the exterior contours) or whether the outline is broken up so that the viewer has little sense of it.

Space and mass

The term "space" indicates whether an image conveys a sense of three-dimensional space. The term "mass" describes the space created by an artwork, indicating whether the artwork conveys a sense of substantial form—as if it had weight or volume. These are actual characteristics of sculpture, architecture, and installations, but projected or illusory characteristics of two-dimensional media such as painting, drawing, printmaking, and photography. The use of linear perspective or atmospheric perspective, for example, can establish a sense of spatial recession in a painting.

Scale

As part of a formal analysis, you'll want to consider scale, or relative size, both within the work and in relation to the viewer. Determine if there's a consistent scale

used within the work, or whether different scales are used to emphasize or deemphasize certain elements in the image. Figures of gods, for example, are sometimes represented larger than other figures to indicate their divinity. Consider whether the image is monumental, life-size, or miniature in relation to the viewer.

The term *composition* is used to describe how an artist puts together all these elements in the work of art. In a formal analysis, you will ask how these elements—line, color, space and mass, scale—contribute to the work's overall composition and its visual effect. Initially, you'll be trying to answer some very basic questions:

- What does the artist emphasize visually? What first attracts the viewer's attention?
- How does the artist emphasize this feature/these features visually? Through scale, line, color, etc?
- Is there an underlying rhythm, pattern, or geometric structure to the composition?
- Does the composition seem unified—do the elements appear iutegrated or separate and distinct from each other?
- How can the emotion or idea evoked by this piece be described? How is this achieved visually?
- What is the viewer's position in relation to the work? Is the composition large or small scale? Horizontal or vertieal in orieutation? How do these characteristics alrer the viewer's perception of the work?
- Is the work figurative or abstract?

Expanding on the basic questions about composition listed above, I'll provide here some specific questions you might ask in analyzing works of art in different media.

Two-dimensional works: painting, graphic arts, photography

A number of questions address the specific qualities of two-dimensional works—that is, works characterized by length and height, such as a painting, but of little depth (or three-dimensional form).

- How is color used? Are colors saturated? Where are the brightest colors? The darkest colors? Is there a wide range of colors or a narrow range of colors? Do the colors contrast or blend? Do the colors create a sense of calm or a sense of drama and excitement? Are they used to emphasize certain forms or elements in the work?
- Can you see the marks of the tools—pencil, brush, burin? Does the work seem highly finished or rough and unfinished? How do these qualities contribute to the overall effect of the work?
- Is there a strong contrast between areas of light and dark? Does this help to create the illusion of three-dimensional forms existing in space, or do the elements of the painting remain flat, emphasizing the picture plane?
- Does the artist try to create an illusion of depth, or does she use techniques to make the viewer aware of the pieture plane?
- How are forms defined—through linc or shading?
- Is there a sense of texture or a smooth surface?

Let's explore some of these issues of color, surface, and composition in *Marilyn (Vanitas)* by Audrey Flack (b. 1931) (Figure 2.6). Flack used a mechanical airbrush, rather than a conventional bristle brush, to achieve remarkably intense colors and a smooth surface. She employs the full spectrum of primary and secondary colors here: yellow, orange, red, green, blue, and purple. Highly saturated colors predominate, although several hues are represented in multiple shades—the saturated red of the cloth in the foreground, for example, is set off by the different shades and hues of pink in the hourglass, rose, and makeup. There is little sense of depth, for the elements of the composition crowd up against the picture plane. Despite this, the elements are not flat; instead, they appear as fully modeled, three-dimensional forms, as if they might pop out of the picture plane. The smoothness of the airbrushed surface enhances these illusionistic effects.

Although this image first strikes the viewer as a random profusion of brightly colored objects, in fact the composition is tightly constructed in three bands. An

Wölfflin and formal analysis

In *Principles of Art History* (1915), the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) made a major contribution to systematizing formal analysis through his definition of paired, contrasting terms to describe works of art and to distinguish their stylistic aspects. He defined five basic pairs of characteristics, which he saw as characterizing the Renaissance vs. the Baroque: linear/painterly, plane/recession, closed form/open form, multiplicity/unity, absolute clarity/relative clarity.

Wölfflin uses the term *linear* to indicate works that emphasize outlines and that have a special kind of clarity in the spatial separation and relation of objects. *Painterly* form is more elusive—attention is withdrawn from the edges, outlines are de-emphasized, and form is developed primarily through the use of light and shade. Compare Kathe Kollwitz's self-portrait, with its strongly delineated forms, and Rembrandt's, in which few individual lines stand out against the areas of light and shade used to build the figure (Figures 2.2, 2.3).

Wölfflin's second concept is *planar vs. recession*. In a planar composition, as in a Classical relief sculpture, objects are represented parallel to the picture plane. The spatial recession is clear, achieved by a series of planes that are all parallel to the picture plane, as in much fifteenth-century Italian art. In contrast, a work characterized by recession is one in which the planes are not clearly articulated as separate parallel units. Spatial depth is created along diagonals and the frontal plane is not emphasized. The compositions of Japanese screen paintings are sometimes organized in this way.

Closed vs. open forms is Wölfflin's third major distinction. In a closed form, the depicted contents seem to stand in clear relation to the edge of the image, so that the viewer can establish her position in relation to the image via its edge and has a clear sense of her relationship to it. In an open form, there's no such clear spatial relationship either within the work or between the viewer and the work. The elements within the image are not oriented in relation to its edge or surface. The Palazzo Medici-Riccardi and the Robie House are a good illustration of closed and open forms, respectively (Figures 2.4, 2.5).

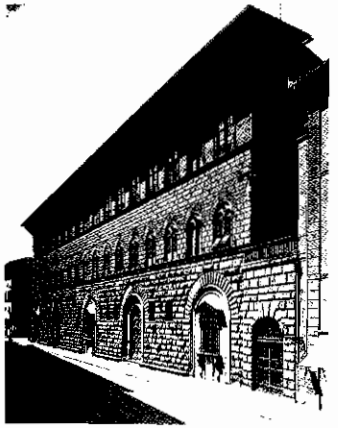
Multiplicity vs. unity contrasts works in which the individual parts appear as independent units (even though they are subordinate to a whole), with works that are perceived as a whole, in which the individual elements of the composition do not stand out. Compare the clear articulation of the stories and windows of Palazzo Medici-Riccardi by Michelozzo de Barolommeo (1396–1472) with Robie House by Frank Lloyd Wright, which impresses the viewer as one long horizontal flowing shape, in which the different stories of the house—even the interior and exterior spaces—are not easily distinguished (Figures 2.4, 2.5).

Wölfflin's final pair, *absolute vs. relative clarity* is closely related to the preceding pair. Absolute clarity refers to works with explicit and clearly articulated forms, and relative clarity refers to works with less explicit and less clearly articulated forms.

Although art historians don't necessarily use precisely these paired terms today, Wölfflin's comparative method still provides a useful model.

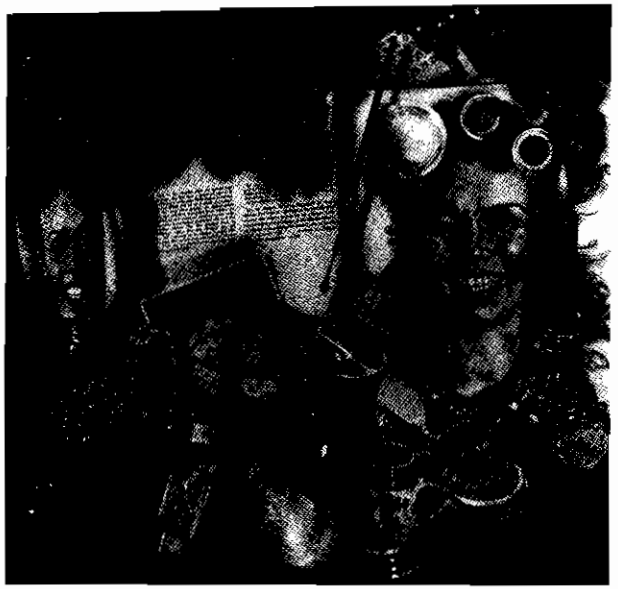
2.2 Käthe Kollwitz, *Self-Portrait*, 1921. Etching. National Museum of Women in the Arts.

2.3 Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, 1630. Pen and red chalk, bistre, wash. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



2.4 Michelozzo de Barolommeo, Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, begun 1444. Florence.

2.5 Frank Lloyd Wright, Robie House, 1907–09. Chicago.



2.6 Audrey Flack, *Marilyn (Vanitas)*, 1977. Oil over acrylic on canvas. University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tuscon.

A formal analysis wouldn't address the many provocative contextual questions raised by this image. In the tradition of European vanitas imagery, several elements in the painting refer to the passage of time (watch, calendar, hourglass, candle). The mirror, jewelry, and cosmetics allude to the particular ways that women fight the passage of time.

array of objects is set against a red cloth in the foreground; the middle register is occupied by the black-and-white pages of an open book and three sepia-toned photographs, their starkness relieved by the touches of color provided by a pink rose and pots of cosmetics; the upper register is occupied by the more muted presence of a purple cloth, green grapes, and buff-colored calendar, which frame and set off the objects below. The large size of the image, 8 feet (2.4 metres) square, means that this array of intensely colored, three-dimensional forms almost overwhelms the viewer. The composition creates an image that is rich and lustrous, yet somewhat threatening at the same time.

Now let's explore some of the distinctive visual effects achieved in printmaking. In *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) uses two techniques, etching and aquatint, to achieve both linear and tonal effects (Figure 2.7). The aquatint process, in which powdered resin is sprinkled on the plate before it is placed in an acid bath, produces grainy areas of tone. The etching process, in which the entire plate is coated with resin and lines are drawn in the resin with

2.7 Francisco de Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, no. 43 from *Los Caprichos*, 1796–8. Etching and aquatint. The Hispanic Society of America, New York.

needles, produces lines of various width. Goya uses these techniques to produce a visually dramatic and unsettling image full of contrasts of light and shade, tone and line. The aquatint background suggests a murky atmosphere. Bats—rendered with dense, inky black lines—emerge from the gloom. The sleeping figure slumps over his desk. His back and shoulders, delineated with nervous etched lines, seem to be bathed in a glaring light, created by leaving these areas of paper unprinted.

Sculpture

Sculpture can be either freestanding or relief, which means projecting from a surface like a wall or stone slab. There are a number of processes for making sculpture, including additive processes, in which the sculpture

is built up, or modeled, from material like clay; casting, in which molten metal is poured into a mold; or subtractive, like carved stone or wood, in which material is taken away to create an image. A range of basic questions will help you address three-dimensional forms:

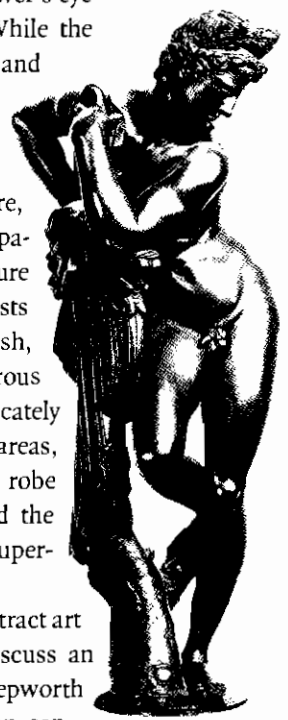
- What is the viewpoint suggested by the work? Does the seulpture visnally lead the viewer to move around it and view it from different angles, or does it seem to guide the viewer to one position?
- What materials are used? How do they eontribute to the work's form? Do the materials make open spaees within the sculpture possible, or do they require a more block-like form?
- Does the sculpture emphasize a seuse of volume, of three-dimensional form, or of flatness?
- Does the sculpture use the play of light over the surface to create a pattern of lights and shadows? Does this emphasize the three-dimensional form or flatness? Does it create a sense of drama or movement?
- If the surface of the sculpture is eolored, how does thar affect the viewer's perception of rhe work? Does color serve to emphasize certain features of the work? Does it make the work seem more or less three-dimensional?
- What is the texture of the surface? Is it smooth or rough, dull or shiny?

Let's compare two sculptures (Figures 2.8, 2.9) to explore some of these issues. One is an Aztec stone figure depicting the goddess Coatlique, the other a bronze figure depicting Apollo by the Renaissance artist Giovanni da Bologna (1529–1608). Although both portray anthropomorphic figures of gods, they do so in very different ways. (Note that this analysis uses a basic piece of contextual information, the identification of each figure, as a starting point for a more insightful formal interpretation.)

Coatlique is a massive stone sculpture with a frontal orientation, showing bilateral symmetry along a vertical axis. The frontality demands that the viewer stand before the sculpture rather than walk around it or see it from multiple angles. The supernatural nature of Coatlique, the earth goddess, is indicated by the composition of the body. The head is formed of two rattlesnake heads and the feet have feline claws. She wears a human head pendant strung on a necklace of hands and hearts and a skirt of entwined snakes, further emphasizing her divinity and striking fear in the viewer.

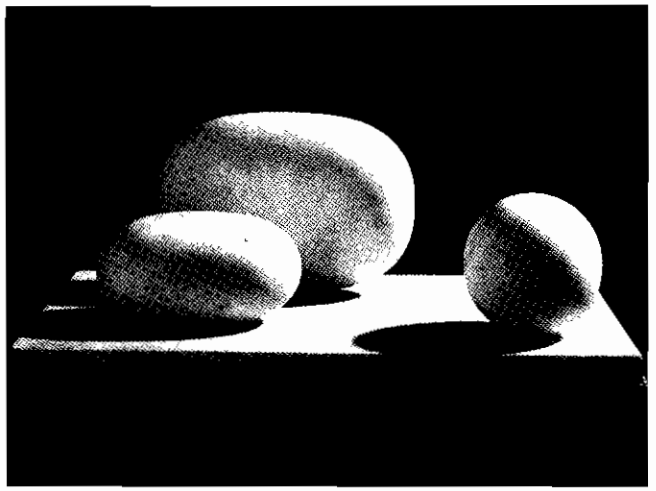
2.8 The mother goddess, Coatlique. Aztec, 15th century. Stone. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.

In contrast, the figure of Apollo appears godlike through the perfection of his human form. The graceful, rhythmic positioning of the Apollo's limbs, turn of the head, and twist of the torso lead the viewer's eye around the figure. While the Coatlique is solid and block-like, with few freely carved parts, the Apollo incorporates space within the figure, and the limbs are all separately articulated. The figure of the Apollo contrasts smooth stretches of flesh, characterized by a lustrous bronze surface, with intricately detailed and textured areas, such as the hair, the robe draped over the lyre, and the lyre itself. He appears supernaturally elegant, graceful, and energetic.



2.9 Giovanni da Bologna, Apollo, 1573–5. Bronze. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.
A mechanical device turned the Apollo in its niche sa viewers could see it from every angle.

Students beginning art history often find abstract art very challenging to interpret, so I'll briefly discuss an abstract work, the *Three Forms* by Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975) of 1935 (Figure 2.10). (Abstraction can occur in painting, drawing, sculpture, etc., so there's no particular significance to discussing abstraction here, under sculpture.) Abstraction is a style of representation in which the image does not directly represent observed reality. Abstract forms can either be purely geometric and non-figurative, or a reduction



2.10 Barbara Hepworth, Three Forms, 1935. Marble. Tate Gallery, London.

of observed forms into fundamental patterns or shapes. Hepworth's sculpture, for example, incorporates three marble elements of different shapes and sizes. One is spherical and spatially separate from the other two, which are oriented horizontally and rather elongated. These three elements can be seen as perfectly non-representational, a subtle meditation on the inter-relation of geometric forms in space. At the same time, they can be iuterpreted as a distilled landscape, or even a figure (the sphere) in a landscape. Abstraction often exists on a continuum—that is, artworks are often neither completely abstract nor completely figurative—so when analyzing abstract works, take the time you need to see their more subtle aspects.

Architecture

Architecture demands that the viewer take into account both the physical and visual experience of the building and the spaces it creates. In discussing architecture, you may want to talk about the plan (or layout) of a building; an elevation, the side of a building; or the section, an imaginary vertical slice through the building.

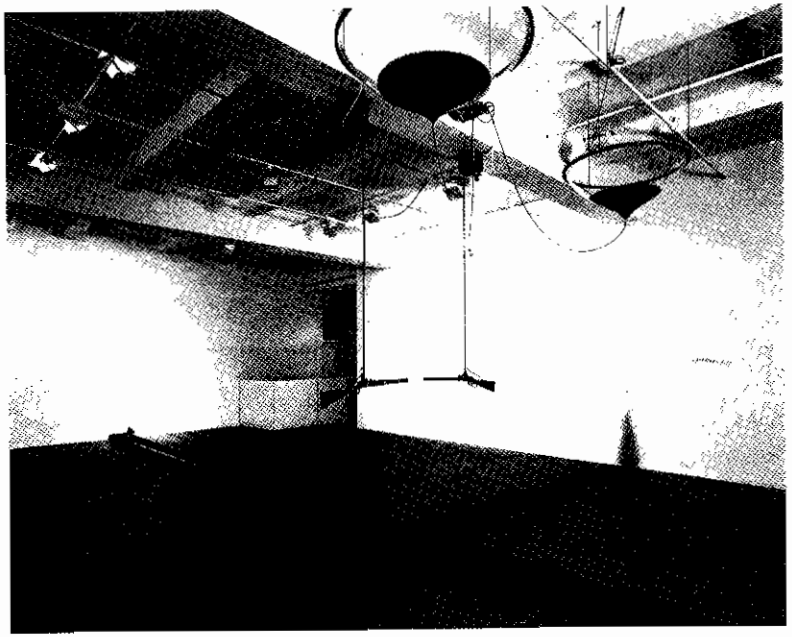
- What is the scale of the building in relation to humans?
- What parts of the bnilding seem to he emphasized? Is the system of design readily apparent? Does the building appear to be composed of geometric or more organic (soft and cnrving) forms?
- Does the building seem accessible to the viewer from the outside? How large and visible are doors and windows?
- Does the bnilding convey a sense of solidity or of the interplay of solids and negative spaces? Do the forms of the building use light and shadow to break up the sense of solidity? Is there a play of lighr and dark across the surface?
- How are ornaments used on the building? Do the ornaments enhance the viewer's awareness of three-dimensional form, or do they emphasize the building's surface?
- How does the building fit its environment? Does it seem to be distinct from or part of its surroundings? How does ir change the viewer's perception of those surroundings?
- Is the interior divided into rooms or is it one open space? How does rhe arrangement of interior spaces either help to move the viewer through the building, or hinder the viewer's movement through the building? Which spaces are readily accessible and which are remote or blocked off?
- Is there a range of large and small spaces within the building? More or less elaborare spaces? Which spaces are most accessible?

Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House provides an opportunity to consider some of these questions (see Figure 2.5). The house observes few of the standard conventions of Western architecture. It sits low and seems to hug the earth, an effect enhanced by the strong horizontal lines created by the stone and brick façade. The house does not provide easy access to the viewer—it's hard to see where the entrance is, and exterior and interior spaces seem to flow together. Even the different stories of the house flow together and are hard to distinguish from each other. The overhanging roof lines, and the use of recessed windows, light stonework, and dark brick create a pattern of light and dark elements across the façade, further undermining the viewer's sense of solid form.

Installation art

The kinds of formal questions you might ask about an installation focus on the visual and spatial elements of the work and the viewer's experience of it. The issues are similar to those confronted in sculpture and architecture:

- What sense of space is created by the installation? How does the artist work with the environment or surroundings? Is it an installation the viewer can enter and interact with, or does the viewer stay outside the space?
- What effects does the environment created by the installation have on the viewer? Does it come across as overwhelming—does it dwarf the viewer—or make the viewer feel large? How does the scale of the elements work?
- How do light, color, and texture affect this sense of space and the viewer's experience of the environment?



2.11 Rebecca Horn, *High Moon*, 1991. Installation. Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

According to Horn, her works don't actually have a strong narrative content: "I simply allow the consequences of whatever the machine is doing to meet with the particular reality or mood each person brings to it."

- Does the installation change over time (perhaps through the participation of viewers, or through the decay of materials it incorporates)?

Let's take as an example the installation *High Moon* by Rebecca Horn (b. 1944), which centers on two Winchester rifles that hang at chest height in a gallery space (Figure 2.11). As installed, the guns move around, aiming at people coming into the gallery and then finally at each other, at which point they shoot red liquid from two glass funnels. The liquid spills over the trough set on the floor and creates a bloody-looking pool under each gun. The stark symmetry of the installation contrasts with the irregular expansion of the red liquid across the floor. The steady, mechanical movement and firing of the guns present a strong contrast with the way that guns are usually fired, in passion and anger. Because the installation is so simple, composed of few elements and using little color, the visual and emotional impact of the red liquid is heightened. The viewer may feel agitated, threatened, or like a voyeur—the bloody pools suggest a crime just committed, but in the absence of a victim, it's hard to say precisely what happened.

Performance art

In performance art, the artist—or, more precisely, the artist's movements, gestures, and sounds, either alone or in dialogue with an audience—becomes the artwork. Although performance art is an integral part of the contemporary art scene, artists in the early twentieth century also engaged in it. Questions about performance are also relevant to the analysis of many other artworks, from an Italian church altarpiece to an African mask.

- Does the performance piece seem improvisational, or planned and rehearsed?
- How does the artist interact with the audience? Does the audience remain relatively uninvolved, or does the audience participate in the performance? Is the audience's reaction or participation guided by the artist, or is it an uncontrolled aspect of the performance?

- Is the space important to the performance? Has the artist altered the performance space in any way?
- How are words, music, and gestures used?
- What is the presentation of the artist's body? What clothing and/or aecessories does she wear?

In 1992, artists/scholars/activists Coco Fusco (b. 1960) and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (b. 1955) collaborated on a performance piece to critique the quincentennial celebration of Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean (Figure 2.12). They pretended to be the representatives of a recently-discovered native people put on display in various museums (as native peoples often have been displayed in the past). They created a set for the performance, a cage that they furnished carefully with both "indigenous" artifacts and desirable "modern" trade goods, such as a transistor radio. The artists dressed themselves in "indigenous" clothing made of skins, fiber, bones, and feathers. They interacted with viewers—speaking a nonsense language, posing for photographs, touching their hair or clothing—but the interaction was not scripted, and was usually initiated by the viewers. In these ways, Fusco and Gómez-Peña simultaneously played to, and challenged, viewers' dehumanizing stereotypes about native peoples.

2.12 Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey*, 1992.

Although this performance piece challenges the idea that museums offer universal culturol truths, to the artists' surprise many viewers took it at face value. Not seeing the irony or the social and historic commentary threaded through the performance, these viewers responded to the cultural authority of the museum and expected the exhibition to present them with the "truth." While some viewers reacted with outrage at what they perceived as a human rights violation, others were pleased to have an opportunity to interact with genuine natives. When viewers realized that these natives weren't "real," they were variously angry, puzzled, or embarrassed.

Textile and decorative arts

Textiles, ceramics, and utilitarian or decorative objects of all kinds can be analyzed in formal terms, just like painting, architecture, and sculpture:

- Is the function of the object immediately evident? How is the object designed to be functional? Are there aspects of the design that could hinder its functionality?
- How are materials used? Is there an emphasis on richness or variety of materials?
- Is there an emphasis on texture? How would this object feel to the touch?
- Is there an emphasis on simplicity or complexity of form and design? Are there figural and/or geometric elemcnts on the surface? Do the decorative elements, if any, make reference to the funetion of the piece?
- What is the role of eolor or line in shaping the viewer's perception of the work?
- For textiles specifically, what techniques have been used ro creare the cloth—felting, weaving, plaiting, quilting, appliqué, etc.? Is it a close weave or an open weave? Is the design simple or intricate? What yarns are used (cotton, linen, sheep's wool, llama wool, etc.)? Does the textile incorporate other materials, such as glass or wood beads, sequins, etc.?

A Ming-period porcelain flask will give us a chance to explore some of these issues (Figure 2.13). The figure of

the dragon appears dramatically in reserve—that is, in an unpainted area framed by the painted blue background. The body of the dragon wraps around the flask, emphasizing its elegant curve. The decoration on the neck shifts to a floral motif, distinguishing the different parts of the vessel. The painting technique shifts there, too—the flowers are not left in reserve, like the dragon, but are directly painted in blue on the surface. Although the shape is functional, the vessel is made of fine porcelain with an intricate design, and was probably decorative rather than actually used to contain drinks of any kind.

When you're engaged in this kind of formal analysis, remember that works of art change with the passage of time. Be sure that you're not ascribing visual or physical characteristics to the work that it didn't have at the time it was made. For example, the Parthenon—which we now see as an austere, white marble structure—was originally decorated with red, blue, and yellow paint, and polished bronze disks. The bright colors revealed when the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes were cleaned in

2.13 Flask, c. 1425–35. Porcelain, decorated in blue underglaze. Ming dynasty. Palace Museum, Beijing.

An important contextual issue to raise in discussing this flask would be the significance of the dragon motif. In China, dragons have long been associated with powerful forces of nature such as wind, thunder, and lightning. During the Han Dynasty, China's emperors adopted the dragon as an imperial symbol.

Reading captions for information

Artist's name

A caption usually gives you the artist's name first. If the artist's (or architect's) name isn't known, then it may say something like "artist unknown" or simply list nothing at all. An expression like "After Polykleitos" means that the work was executed by an unknown artist as a copy of an original by a known artist, in this case, Polykleitos. An expression like "in the manner/style of Rembrandt" indicates an unknown artist working in the style of a known artist. Similarly, "Circle of Rembrandt" or "School of Rembrandt" indicates an unknown artist who is thought to have worked closely with, or been a student of, a known artist.

Title

The title of the work usually follows the artist's name. Sometimes the title is one given to the work by an artist, as in Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. Sometimes the title is a descriptive one, like *Portrait of a Lady*, that the artist didn't give to the work but that others have come to use as a convenience. The practice of giving titles to works of art hasn't been used in all time periods and cultures, so many works are named in this way. Sometimes the title of a work can refer to the patron or collector—for example, Velásquez's *Venus and Cupid* is also known as *The Rokeby Venus* after a famous collector who once owned it. Titles may also refer to the place where the work was found, like the *Venus de Milo*, or *Aphrodite of Melos*, which is named for the island where it was excavated.

Date

Sometimes the date for a work is very precise—as when it's signed and dated by the artist. Other times it is an approximate date determined by scholars. In this case, a range may be given (for example, "460–450 BC" or "9th–10th century AD") or the word "circa" may be used (circa is often abbreviated as "c."). BC means "before Christ" and is equivalent to BCE, "before the common era." AD means *anno domini* ("in the year of our Lord," or after the birth of Christ). It is equivalent to CE, or "common era."

Medium

A caption will usually also list the materials used in the work because photographs often don't give a full or accurate impression of materials.

Size

The measurements are important because they give you a sense of the work's scale. Size and scale are often hard to judge from photographs, especially in a textbook, which can picture a miniature portrait and a palace on the same page.

Period or culture

This tells you the work's original time period or culture (as in Edo Period, Japan). In art-history textbooks where the chapters are organized by period or culture, this reference may be omitted from the caption. Sometimes a caption includes more specific information about the date, such as a particular dynasty for Egyptian art.

Collection/location

This tells you where the work is now. For a building, this is usually the city or geographical location. For sculpture, painting, textiles, etc., this is often a museum or private collection.

the 1980s have radically altered our understanding of Michelangelo's work. A wooden mask from New Guinea may have originally borne decorations made of shells, feathers, leaves, or pigments. When you're not sure about changes over time in the work of art, you may want to consult outside sources rather than working purely from your visual experience.

Contextual analysis

When you undertake a contextual analysis, you're trying to understand the work of art in its cultural context. This can mean focusing on the work of art as it exists today, or on the work of art in its own time or at another point in history. You may look at the social, political, spiritual, and/or economic significance of the work.

People often talk about art "in" context, but that isn't a very satisfactory approach in some ways. It suggests that context (culture) is already all set without the work of art, as if the work of art has no effect on individuals or society. Of course, if it were true that visual images don't have any effect on people, then there wouldn't be any advertising on TV or in magazines!

To think of a work of art "as" social context means recognizing it as something that has an effect on people, on how they think and feel and act, and on larger social processes—how groups of people think and feel and act. Works of art and social context are often thought of as mutually constituting, that is, having an effect on each other: works of art are shaped by historical processes, which are in turn shaped by works of art in a continual interaction.

The following are some basic questions to ask in developing a contextual analysis. Not every question is applicable to every artwork. For example, if you don't know the artist's identity, for whatever reason, then there are a number of questions that you can't ask about the creation of the work.

One range of questions focuses on the people involved in the creation, use, and viewing of the artwork: the artist, patron, and viewers:

- Who were the patron, artist, viewers?
- What sorts of records did the artist leave about the creation of this work? Did the artist say anything about his/her intentions in creating the work? Were there other artists or workshop assistants involved?
- What were the patron's motives in sponsoring this work? To what extent did the patron participate in its creation? What does the contract for the work or correspondence about it reveal? Was the patron acting individually, or on behalf of an institution?
- Who was able to see the work? Under what circumstances? What was the response of contemporary viewers to this work?

Other questions for building a contextual analysis address the physical work of art, its location, and use:

- When was this work made?
- Where was it originally located?
- In what rituals was this work used or seen?
- Does the work make use of rare and costly materials? Does it use materials that have ritual or symbolic value? Are they new or innovative in some way?
- Are the artist's techniques new or innovative in some way? Was there any significance to the choice of techniques?

Still other contextually oriented questions address the larger social issues presented by the work of art:

- Is there a particular political, religious, or social context in which this work was created?
- What is the subject? Why would the artist, patron, or viewer of this culture be interested in a depiction of this subject?
- Was this a new or innovative subject, or a new treatment of a familiar subject? If so, what prompted the change? If not, what was the motivation for conservatism?
- What political/religious/social messages are being conveyed through the subject matter or artistic style of this work?
- Was this a new or innovative artistic style? If so, what prompted the change?

Let's see how some of these questions might be used to begin interpreting a work of art, taking as an example