



Jan Vermeer, *A Lady Writing a Letter* 1665 - 1666.



Art historical scholarship is rooted in analytic and theoretical writing. In keeping with this foundation, we will begin a writing practice that makes mindful use of art historical methodologies and that builds a critical thinking muscle through the writing of essays that will convey important information and understandings as they apply to key works of art discussed in class, reading assignments, and other materials. You will be offered multiple assignments to choose from that will ask you to write visual analyses of specific works of art, or develop a critical response to readings on relevant works and art historical issues.

Marjorie Munsterberg's website, [writingaboutart.org](http://writingaboutart.org) and Laurie Schneider Adam's "Approaches to Art" from *Looking at Art* at, <http://www.theslideprojector.com/pdffiles/approachesart.pdf> are resources that should help you significantly with your writing assignments in this class.

### Essay Checklist

To earn full credit on writing assignments, essays should:

- Be 4 to 5 pages, double-spaced, 12 pt. font, and 1" margins on all sides;
- Identify works of art with artistic attribution, underlined or *italicized* titles, and dates (in that order), when possible;
- Attempt to address most questions from the essay prompt;
- Include two or more properly formatted Chicago Manual of Style footnote citations to credible, scholarly, college level materials. Please note: works of art should not be cited unless a point is being made concerning different versions or installations of the work.;
- Present a clear thesis and offer visual and/or scholarly evidence to support your claims; and
- Offer personal insights that demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the subject & reading materials.

Your instructor is always interested in proposals for subjects to write about. If the given writing prompts do not spark your interests, please feel free to propose alternative questions to consider at least one week before the assignment due date.

**Reading Reports**

Due throughout the semester  
 Each post may earn up to 5 participation points  
 Five posts required by May 10

Report on at least five assigned readings through posts on the class blog located on Blackboard. Posts may be made on required readings as well as optional readings posted on the class Assignments page.

Reading Reports should offer, in complete sentences and focused thought, three main points or “take aways” from the reading. Please avoid discussing how interesting the reading was - the goal is to demonstrate that you read the text. Rather, make a goal of formulating three general ideas learned while engaging with the text, and record them in your blog post. Challenge yourself to discuss points that have not been made in previous posts by other students.

**Visual Thinker Lecture Series Report**

Due within two weeks of attendance  
 25 points

Attend a lecture in the Visual Thinker Lecture Series, the Art History Symposium, or the Bensussen Lecture, and submit a VTLS Report on Blackboard within two weeks of the event. Please answer the questions on the Art Department’s VTLS form. Copy or photograph the form before submitting at the event. Submit your copy or photo via Blackboard.

**Infographic**

Due Tuesday, February 27  
 50 points

Conduct an iconographic analysis on a work of art made during the Renaissance. Identify at least five objects or subjects depicted in the work with iconographic meaning and discuss their connotative and denotative meanings. This explanation of meaning can be a few sentences, or a short paragraph. Keep in mind that your intention is to unpack the meaning of the work in a clear, concise graphic that helps the viewer understand the work. You may find James Hall’s *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* useful. In addition, sources like your textbook often provide interpretations of symbols used in works.

Next, create an infographic that combines an image of the entire work with the explanations of the iconographic meaning you have written. You may want to include smaller, magnified details of important parts of the work, or reference other works/concepts through images. Be sure to create an organized system that carefully connects visual with textual information and meaning.

Finally the infographic should include a summarization (at least two paragraphs) considering the work’s historical context, style, and artist. This summary can be used to introduce the work, to outline various interpretations, or set the stage for the work’s making. Importantly, the infographic should include at least two CMS footnote citations from different credible, scholarly sources.

Infographic Grading Rubric	
Identification and explanation of iconographic elements	out of 10 points
Summary text	out of 10 points
Research & CMS footnotes	out of 10 points
Use of graphic devices to connect image & meaning	out of 10 points
Unpacking meaning of the work	out of 10 points
	out of 50 points

**Visual Analysis 1**

Due Thursday, March 15

50 points

Respond to one of the following essay prompts for the first Visual Analysis assignment.

**Option 1**

Read Erwin Panofsky's *Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait*.

Choose an Early Renaissance painting and consider the artist's use of iconography, a.k.a. "disguised symbolism." Panofsky suggested a three step approach to developing an understanding of a work through its iconology: 1. Consider the practical - the general sense of the painting, where your eye is drawn, and what elements your eye returns to repeatedly; 2. Identify the objects and figures depicted in the painting, and decode their symbolic meaning by comparing them to other cultural sources (for example, paintings by the artist's contemporaries, or literary works); 3. Consider the system of symbols that the artist uses to convey meaning and what that system says about the culture that produced it. Use this three step approach to discuss the general sense of the painting, the painting's symbolic meaning, and what that system of meaning reflects about the culture (place and time period) in which the artist lived and worked. Identify at least five objects depicted in the painting and discuss the connotative and denotative meanings of those symbols. Are there other interpretations, perhaps even contrasting interpretations, of this same work? Does the work fit into a geographic and/or historical tradition, or is it unusual in its imagery? Why?

**Option 2**

Read Jonathan Jones' *Divine Inspiration*.

During the Renaissance, and after, artists regularly painted self-portraits. Choose two artist self-portraits in any media to compare and contrast, and use a biographic approach, as demonstrated in Jones' article, to understand their meaning. When using biography as a method for interpreting meaning, consider the following: 1. What do the details of the artist's life reveal about the work?; 2. How did the important events of the artist's life influence their choice in subject matter, and the manner in which they expressed their subject?; What associations or themes do we identify in the work that may be associated with this personal context or the artist's biography?

Consider how the artists chose to represent themselves, and what larger meaning is conveyed about their profession through their representational choices. What does this sense of their artistic practice convey about the role that the artist and art plays in shaping culture, responding to philosophical and political concerns, and conveying a sense of a larger world view? Do the two artists agree, or contradict, each other's world view and the cultural significance of art?

**Option 3**

Compare the three of the four depictions of the Last Supper by Andrea del Castagno (1445 - 1450) Leonardo da Vinci (1495 - 1498), Jacopo Tintoretto (1592 - 1594) and Veronese (1573). How are the paintings similar, and how do they differ? Discuss each work in terms of its composition, use of color/light, and the use (or non-use) of gesture to convey meaning. Discuss elements in each work that reflect the period and place in which they were made. Describe how each artist interprets the story and strategically depicts a large number of figures with cohesion. Consider each artist's interpretation of the Biblical story, the everyday act of eating a meal, and how their work demonstrates the important concerns, ideals, or ambitions of their eras.

**Option 4**

Compare the sculptural depictions of David by Donatello (1430 - 1440), Michelangelo (1501 - 1504), and Bernini (1623 - 1624). How are the works similar, and how do they differ? Discuss elements in each work that reflect the period and place in which they were made. Describe the part of the story depicted in each work and how that artistic choice demonstrates the important concerns, ideals, or ambitions of the artist's era. How does each statue interact with viewers and the space it occupies? What circumstances or events influenced the artist's choices, and what did the artist wish to convey about this shared subject?

**Visual Analysis 2**

Due Thursday, April 12

50 points

Respond to one of the following essay prompts for the second Visual Analysis assignment.

**Option 1**

Use a feminist approach to compare and contrast a work by a female and a male artist working in the same artistic period. Consider who the artist assumes the viewer of the work to be, and from whom's perspective the action or story unfolds. Who is the main subject, and what significance does their gender play in understanding the meaning of the work? What subjects exhibit power in the work, and how is that power understood (for example, logical, rebellious, odd, or conforming)? Do all subjects depicted in the work exhibit agency (power, freedom of choice, action)? Is there a gender division in the display of authority and/or action as depicted? Consider whether the work reinforces or critically evaluates gender stereotypes? Finally, discuss how the works were received, and whether the two works were equally valued in their time.

**Option 2**

Nicolas Poussin's work exemplified what the French Academy considered to be "good" art just as academicians had formulated and prioritized artistic expression through the Hierarchy of Genres. Discuss Poussin's work relevant to arguments evaluating the merits of various forms of art (painting, sculpture, architecture) and their subjects (portraiture, landscape, genre, history) from the Renaissance through the 18th century. What position did Poussin's work take in the debate and how was it used by the French Academy to assert its goals for art making? Choose an exemplary work by Poussin to illustrate your observations and describe key ideas in the debate.

**Option 3**

Read the first chapter in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.

Consider Frans Hals' *Regentesses of the Old Men's Alms House* and *Regents of the Old Men's Alms House*, 1664 as they are discussed by Berger. Do you feel that the artist has presented his sitters in a favorable or unfavorable manner? Compare the work to Hals' earlier group portrait, *Officers of the Haarlem Militia Company of Saint Adrian*, 1627. How did the artist's approach and intention change in the later work? What would his motivation have been for portraying his subjects favorably or unfavorably? Discuss Berger's concept of "mystification" and the meaning that has traditionally been explained away in the portrait of the Regentesses. What problems does Berger identify with mystification, and how does he urge the viewer to respond ?

**Option 4**

Jacques-Louis David and Francisco de Goya present two very different images of warfare in *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784 and *Third of May 1808*, 1814. Compare and contrast each work. How do the works differ in approach, intention and style? How are they similar? Discuss how these differences and similarities relate to the artistic movements of Neoclassicism and Romanticism. What circumstances or events influenced the artist's choices, and what did the artist wish to convey about their subjects?

**Architectural Analysis or Timeline**

Due Thursday, April 26

50 points

Consider a work of architecture through a model or diagram, or consider a period of art history through a timeline.

**Architectural Analysis**

Design a diagram, or create a model, of an architectural structure from the Renaissance to the early modern period, making note of important architectural features and technology used to build the work. Be creative! A diagram doesn't have to be two-dimensional, or on 8 ½" X 11" paper, and a model does not have to be tangible. However, assignment responses that are not submitted on paper (such as a digital video) will require the submission of a link, photos, or other record of your creation that can be viewed outside of class.

You may choose to form small groups of two or three to collaborate on this assignment. Be sure that your submission includes the names of all contributors. Please be a considerate and responsible group member by sharing equally in the research and production of the analysis.

**Timeline**

Compose a timeline that creatively incorporates text and images to describe at least ten key works of art with relevant historical, political, cultural, and/or socio-economic events from the periods we have studied this semester - the Renaissance to early Modern periods. Works of art should be properly identified with artist, title, and date, and exemplify the artistic concerns of the era. Include concise explanatory text to connect the key events with the exemplary works of art you have identified.

Consider creating a digital timeline like the Top 50 Works of Modern Art on [artstory.org](http://artstory.org). TimelineJS, an open source tool may prove an interesting way of making a dynamic art historical timeline. See: <https://timeline.knightlab.com>

Please provide CMS Endnotes or Bibliography to cite at least two credible sources of information you consulted while developing your timeline. This can be printed/glued to the back of your timeline, if making a poster.

**Visual Analysis 3**

Due Thursday, May 10

50 points

Respond to one of the following essay prompts for the third Visual Analysis assignment.

**Option 1**

Marxism is the ideological and socioeconomic theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels including the belief that the struggle between social classes is a major force in history and that there should eventually be a society in which there are no classes. The fundamental ideology of communism, it holds that all people are entitled to enjoy the fruits of their labour but are prevented from doing so in a capitalist economic system, which divides society into two classes: non-owning workers and non-working owners. Marx called the resulting situation “alienation,” and he said that when the workers repossessed the fruits of their labour, alienation would be overcome and class divisions would cease. The Marxist theory of history posits class struggle as history's driving force, and sees capitalism as the most recent and most critical historical stage because at this stage the proletariat will at last arise united.

Analyze a work made in the early modern period using a Marxist approach. What socio-economic classes are represented in the work? What visual clues convey this class distinction? Who would the artist have assumed would be the viewer of this work? What social class was the artist? What message would this work have conveyed to the viewer concerning labor, wealth, and socio-economic groups?

**Option 2**

Why was Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* considered so shocking when it was first displayed? In what ways did Manet break with convention in this work? Compare Manet's work with at least one previous work considering similar subject matter to illustrate and describe the artist's break with the past. Consider how *Luncheon on the Grass* asserts a modern perspective with modern subjects. How is the impulse towards rule breaking in the arts, especially after Manet, related to modernism?

**Option 3**

Attend a professional exhibition that includes works made between the Renaissance and early Modern periods. The Getty Museum, LACMA, the Huntington Museum, the Norton Simon Museum, and the Bowers Museum regularly feature exhibitions of Renaissance to Modern works. Plan ahead by checking museum websites to be sure that relevant works will be on view when you plan to visit. In addition, read Marjorie Munsterberg's, <http://writingaboutart.org/pages/visualdesc.html> for information on visual description and analysis.

Choose one work seen in person and develop a visual analysis. Visual description involves communicating what you see and feel when viewing a work of art to a general reader who may or may not have experienced the work themselves. For the Museum Analysis, assume that your reader has a background in art, but has not seen the work you are discussing in person. Begin your description with the basics - let your reader know the artist's name, the title of the work (being sure to distinguish the title in your text by italicizing or bolding your font), and the date the work was made. Describe what you see, drawing the viewer's attention to key elements (objects, figures, symbols). Discuss the work's subjects. What are the main components, what is represented, who is portrayed, where does the story take place? While you may want to keep your visual description concise, remember that you cannot assume that what you are seeing and experiencing is universal.



Then, craft a persuasive visual description that supports your thesis and that skillfully utilizes pertinent vocabulary. After discussing the denotative meaning of the work (it's primary and literal features), consider the work's connotative meaning by describing the ideas that are suggested and implied by its formal properties. While this may feel descriptive, what you're focusing on in this section are the qualities and characteristics of compositional elements such as *atmospheric* perspective, *asymmetrical* balance, *irregular* rhythm, *organic* shapes, *faint* line work, and *bold* color harmonies. The handouts on design and the elements of art from the Getty Museum may be helpful. Refrain from offering iconographic, biographic, or semiotic analysis as much as possible in this essay.

Finally, connect your visual description, denotative consideration, and connotative read into an overall interpretation of the work. What meaning do the objects, subjects, and symbols suggest? What meaning is conveyed by the work's form and visual elements? What story is told, or view of the world expressed by this work of art? If the exhibition venue, layout, and interpretive materials did their work well, your final interpretation should nicely reflect the exhibition's theme and concepts.

Please include a photograph of yourself at the museum with your essay, and remember to list each contributor (if written collaboratively).

### Extra Credit

Due by Thursday, December 7      maximum 25 points

View the episode on Caravaggio, Bernini, Rembrandt, David, Turner, or Van Gogh from Simon Schama's *The Power of Art* and report on the presentation of information. How was your understanding of this artist's work either extended, confused, or maintained by viewing this documentary? What effect did the documentary have on your appreciation for the works considered during this semester? What new insights can you offer in response to the episode?