

Formalism



Historical Context

Formalism = the concept that a work's artistic value is entirely determined by its form -- the way the artwork is made, its purely visual aspects, and its medium.

An artwork that is made with a formal approach will emphasize compositional elements such as color, line, shape and texture rather than realism, context and content.

Viewers wanting to understand the form of a work will ask questions such as: What is the first thing I notice about this artwork? Where does my eye travel after noticing this element?



What are the qualities of color (light vs. dark, bright vs. dull), line (straight vs. curved, thick vs. thin, implied vs. actual), shape (geometric vs. organic, flat vs. three-dimensional) and texture (rough vs. smooth, soft vs. hard)?

How are elements arranged (balanced or with emphasis, sense of movement or illusion of depth, with repetition or variety)?

A writer who is taking a formal approach to understanding a work of art will focus on the visual elements of the work such as the quality of line, the relationship between colors, the placement of shapes, the materials used to make the work etc.



Historical Context = considers significant historical events and important ideas in a period of time, usually when the artwork was made, and how those events and ways of seeing the world may have influenced the way a work of art looks and how it is used.

All works of art are made within context. It is therefore appropriate to always consider a work's historical context to understand its meaning.

To understand a work's historical context, viewers will ask questions such as: When and where was this work made?



What were the concerns of people living in this age? What purpose and value did art have during this time period and in this place?

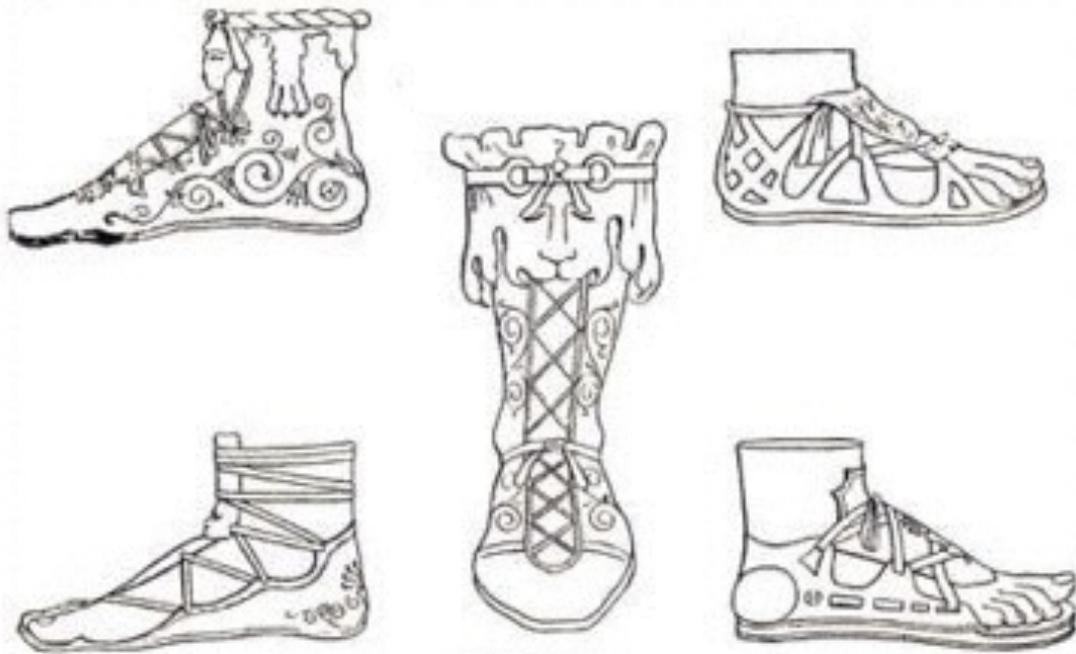
What major historical events took place around the time this artwork was made? What role or experience did the artist have of these events? How might these events have influenced or inspired the making of this work of art?

A writer who is establishing a work's historical context will consider major historical events that may have inspired the work, the places that the artist lived and visited when making the work, the people the artist associated with and admired, and the important ideas that shaped the way people in this time and place viewed the world.





Iconography



Semiotics

Iconography = identifies the symbols in a work, and uses their definition to interpret meaning.

Art historian Erwin Panofsky argued there are three levels of meaning in any work of art: First, basic identification of things represented in a work -> a shoe; second, cultural context of things represented in a work -> a Jordan 1 Chicago high top; third, personal, technical, and cultural history of the work -> The Jordan 1 is significant because basketball great, Michael Jordan was a rookie for the Chicago Bulls when he partnered with Nike to produce the shoe that he wore during games and that was advertised as giving wearers a competitive advantage.



To understand the iconography of a work, viewers will ask:

What important things (a.k.a. symbols) are represented in this work?

What cultural meaning did the artist, patron, and first viewers of this work understand about these symbols?



A writer who is using a work's iconography will first identify important subjects represented in the work, then define their cultural context. To fully develop meaning, the author will build upon the identification and cultural context of a symbol by explaining the personal, technical, and cultural significance of the symbol to the artist, owners of the work, and contemporary viewers.

Semiotics = identifies symbols in a work, and considers why they mean what they mean to interpret meaning. Semiotic theory is used to analyze meaning in a work of art in order to break elements of the work (subjects, objects, signs) down in order to make sense of the whole.



Viewers using semiotic theory will ask:

What are the denotative (literal) and connotative (secondary, suggested or associated) meanings in the work?

How do the signs within the work relate to each other, to the artist's context, and to the viewer's context?

What connections can be seen between the signs in the work? How do these connections unfold, and what meanings do they offer to the viewer?



A writer using a semiotic approach will consider the relationship between the sign, the signifier, and the signified. Structuralist, Post-Structural, and other Postmodern theories are used to illuminate the mechanics meaning and how a sign (i.e. an apple) means what it means within the context of a work (i.e. original sin).



Marxism



Psychoanalysis

Marxism = considers the relationship between power, economics and class as related to interpret meaning in a work of art.

A Marxist approach considers the relationship between a work of art, its maker(s), the people who view or use it, and the people or institutions that own it. Marx argued that human life is governed by material concerns, and in capitalist societies, materialism, competitiveness, and individuality are encouraged by a division between those with power (the bourgeoisie) and those who labor (the proletariat). Institutions such as the law and art (the superstructure) exist to convince the people (the base) that the way their economic structure works is the right way of doing things (false consciousness).

Viewers using a Marxist approach will ask questions such as:

What class of people are represented in this work? Do these people exhibit power, alienation, or false consciousness?



Was this artist highly regarded during their time? What groups did this artist identify with? What is the current and historical value of this work?

Does this work question the structure of power? What political and socio-cultural beliefs does this work convey? Is the message of this work counter cultural or revolutionary?



A writer using a Marxist approach will use Marxist theory to consider issues of power, alienation and, the production of material wealth such as art.

Psychoanalysis = considers the unconscious effects of traumatic events or experiences in the life of the artist, viewer or, shared society, to interpret meaning.

Psychoanalysis holds that human behavior is driven by biological pleasure (the ID), which is controlled by a moral-self called the superego, and that a person is only conscious of a small part of this dynamic (the ego). Psychoanalysis seeks to bring the unconscious mind into consciousness to resolve conflicts formed during developmental stages.

Viewers using a psychoanalytic approach will ask questions such as:



What drives, impulses, and fears are demonstrated and illustrated?

What psychological traits and struggles does the work reveal about the artist? What psychological states (i.e. terror, serenity, joy) does the work prompt in the viewer?



A writer using psychoanalysis would consider the unconscious drives and traumas exhibited in the work and glean the psychological expression of the artist and effects of a work on the viewer.



Biography & Autobiography



Feminism

Biography & Autobiography = considers the life of the artist, and/ or significant events in their lives to interpret meaning.

When analyzing a work of art, it is often useful to understand who the artist of a work was, and what significant life events encouraged and influenced their creative output.



Viewers using the artist's biography to understand a work will ask questions such as:

What important events did the artist experience and participate in?

What important thinkers, artists, writers, and groups influenced this artist?

How did this artist understand and describe their work and their self?



A writer who uses an artist's biography to understand a work of art will focus on personal details about the artist's life, often exploring their formative years and how they became an artist or arrived at a significant question. When taking a biographic approach, it is important for the writer to consider how the artist perceived their age and what experiences they may have had relating to major historical circumstances.

Feminism = considers the social, economic, and cultural positions of subjects who are represented, implied, making, or viewing works of art, as well as issues of equality and power (or the lack thereof) related to gender and sex to interpret meaning. Feminism seeks equality and uses Marxism, Semiotics, Psychoanalysis and historical context to analyze and critique inequity.



To use feminist theory to analyze a work, viewers will ask:

Are subjects portrayed in a stereotypical manner? Does the work reinforce or critically evaluate stereotypes?

What types of subjects exhibit power and how is that power understood (logical, rebellious, odd or conforming) within the work and by the viewer?

Were the artist's contributions valued during their time? Is the artist and this artwork valued today? If so, for what characteristics?



Feminist analysis identifies the expression of oppression along with the socio-cultural implications of gendered power imbalances as exhibited by subjects in a work, by the circumstances of the artist's career and personhood, and by the relationship between the work of art and how it is perceived through various lenses of difference and privilege.