

I suggest you approach the visual analysis as an artist would his empty canvas. Start with a general idea (*simple description of the painting*) and then begin to apply the specifics (*technical descriptions concerning line, shape, color and light, texture, composition*) as the artist would his paints. Analysis is a step-by-step process, each component flowing into the next. In the guidelines that follow, you will notice sample questions you might ask your classes have been placed on the left side of the page. Explanations of the particular concepts being discussed appear to the right of those questions. To illustrate this process, we will use Mary Cassatt's painting, *The Boating Party* (previous page) as a visual aide.

The Simple Description

This element of the analysis explores the most basic information about the painting and elicits the most minimal emotional response. It would be quite appropriate to use only this data when discussing a painting with your youngest students (K and 1st graders). If you are teaching older students, this will serve as the basis of your presentation.

In *The Boating Party*, the subject of the painting is a mother and child's outing on the river. Cassatt's intent was to depict a lovely and exciting boating adventure. The subjects' eyes are focused on each other in an amicable manner suggesting a familiarity with the oarsman. The day is sunny and bright and, perhaps, windy because the sail appears full and the water seems choppy.

This painting was done in oils and belongs to the Impressionist School. It was painted in 1893-4.

Is the painting a portrait, a landscape, or still life? Does it depict everyday life (genre)? Or is an abstract version of one of these? What is the setting? Are there trees, people, action?

Did the artist paint the picture to tell a story (biblical or mythological), capture a moment in history, or to express a feeling? Was it painted to educate, show beauty or ugliness?

Did the artist use oils, watercolors, acrylics, etc? To which school did the artist belong and when was it painted?

The Technical Description

The artist expresses an idea in a visual language. To better understand this "language", it is necessary to consider all the separate parts and how they work together to produce the artist's style. These components are: **line, shape, color and light, texture, and composition.**

Let's discuss each one beginning with the most basic (**line**) and progressing to the integration of all the parts (**composition**).

Line

How does the artist use line?

Is it fine (delicate) or bold (strong)? Is it straight (decisive) or curved (soft). How does the artist use line to make objects appear three dimensional on a flat two dimensional surface?

The kind of line and how it is used will act as a blueprint to the composition of a painting. In Cassatt's painting, the *elliptical* curve of the boat and the sail act as a guide in which our eyes travel upward to the faces of the subjects. We are forced to focus on the woman's face by the *diagonal* line of the oar and by the man's arm holding it. The lines converge to achieve perspective. Diagonals throughout a picture are a tool to coax our eyes in the direction the artist intended.

Shape

When discussing shape with your students, ask them to consider the shapes contained in the painting:

Are the shapes geometrical or are they natural?

Are the shapes repeated throughout the painting bringing balance and rhythm?

How do they all relate to one another?

Are there combinations of shapes or symbols (such as flags or logos)?

Are they completely devoid of detail but still recognizable (silhouette)?

Lines combine to make shapes. No shape can exist alone. As an example, the frame containing a picture of a single object (perhaps a *circle*) represents the *geometrical* shape of a *rectangle*.

It is natural to identify familiar objects separately without relating them to one another. The organization of shapes and symbols combine to make a *pattern*. It is this assembly of patterns that define the *composition* of a picture. The shapes contained in Mary Cassatt's painting are all natural because they are human beings. Notice how the shapes of the figures and boat are all defined by the dark *boundary* of the dark water.