

# “Intelligent Seeing”

## Description and Analysis of Form

“Nothing that is seen is seen at once in its entirety.”

—from “The Optics of Euclid,” trans. H. E. Burton

“The picture is a series of blotches which are joined together and finally form the object, the finished piece, over which the eye may wander completely unimpeded.”

—Pierre Bonnard, notebooks

“It is the spectators who make the pictures.”

—from an interview with Marcel Duchamp

“The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything.”

—Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*

Seeing is a mental as well as a physical operation. Consider your impressions of *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden* by Pierre Bonnard (Color Plate 3). After examining the color reproduction for a moment, look away from it and try this experiment: make a rough sketch of the general outlines of the painting, to the best of your recollection. Now return to the reproduction: What patterns do you notice at second glance that you didn’t see at first? What objects can you make out on further inspection?

Throughout his career, Bonnard experimented with this hide-and-seek interplay of perception and memory, of startling colors and hidden forms at the periphery of vision. It is the gradual process of perception—the way our eyes receive visual stimuli, which our brains then integrate into a meaningful whole—that allows the submerged figures and designs in Bonnard’s painting to swim to the surface of the canvas and into the viewer’s consciousness.

Because of the way our eyes are constructed, we can take in only a narrow range of visual data at one time; objects become fuzzier at the edges of the visual field.

Scientists tracking the eye movements of viewers have discovered that an observer’s gaze roams constantly over an image, scanning and pausing at prominent features. The way we perceive a work of art depends not only on the physical facts of sight but on the artist’s methods for directing the path and duration of our gaze.

Although vision is inevitably selective, we can learn how to attend more carefully to the visual information transmitted to us. Bonnard himself distinguished between *vision brute*, or crude vision, and the more sophisticated and rewarding viewership he termed *vision intelligente*. This chapter is designed to develop your skills of “intelligent seeing” by providing you with a glossary of terms for describing and analyzing the elements and design principles that go into the making of visual art. You’ll discover that when you attempt to capture an image in a verbal description (or even to sketch the image, as in the foregoing exercise), you become a more receptive viewer because you have begun to appreciate the kinds of creative choices artists make. We’ll be returning to Bonnard’s *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden*, to consider what an understanding of form and composition contributes to our perceptions of the painting.

Naturally, there will be variations in what each viewer notices, infers, or emphasizes. What allows spectators and writers to explain their different points of view is a shared vocabulary of descriptors. Having learned to perceive and describe the visual elements, you are able, in a *formal analysis*, to analyze how the elements work together to achieve their effects. This is not to say that the appeal of a work of art is entirely attributable to matters of form and color: in Chapters 3 and 4 we’ll examine contextual elements, as well, that contribute to the object’s meaning and expressive power. But all essays on art require writers to provide a verifiable and coherent account of the object at hand.

### Writing Assignment

#### *Formal Analysis of a Work of Art*

Select an artwork that appeals to you; as with any formal analysis, you should spend a good deal of time in front of the

work you choose. Describe the key visual characteristics of the object: the subject, forms, colors, and textures as well as their physical and psychological effects on you. (Remember that the surface of the artwork not only excites our tactile sense but records the artist's physical activity in making the object.) How are all these expressive components arranged into a composition? Do you see a balanced harmony of lines, and shapes or an unstable arrangement of conflicting forces? The artist combines formal elements to record a particular perception of the world: What sensations and moods does he or she convey by these methods?

The objective of the following discussion is to define the elements and design principles of visual art by concentrating on how a single artist reworks these basic components over the course of a career. As it happened, a major retrospective of paintings by Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), shown at the Tate Gallery in London and then at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was attracting a good deal of attention in the media as I was putting this chapter together. Owing to its "blockbuster" appeal and its controversial claims for Bonnard as a revolutionary figure in modern art, the show generated passionate debate among the viewing public and in the press. The retrospective thus furnished numerous illustrations of the terms in which critics, artists, and other informed viewers describe, analyze, and argue over what they see.

In the following pages, each visual element will first be explained and then illustrated with examples from various commentaries on the Bonnard retrospective. By way of an experiment, I tape-recorded the conversation of three knowledgeable friends—a writer and two professional artists—as they toured the show in New York; portions of their transcribed conversation are quoted below. In the margins alongside the speakers' comments, I've reprinted excerpts from reviews of the exhibition by British and American art critics.

Under the time constraints of academic coursework, we sometimes lose sight of art as a living subject that provokes physical and emotional reactions as well as intellectual inquiry. The comments cited below are striking for

the obvious pleasure each observer derives from looking at and thinking about paintings. You'll note that the three speakers address (sometimes earnestly, sometimes comically) the same interpretive questions being debated by the critics quoted in the margins. Together, these interwoven strands of dialogue enact the dynamic process by which the borders of art history—indeed, of any scholarly field—are continually being surveyed and redrawn.

Below, the speakers (we'll call them A, B, and C) and reviewers discuss Bonnard's choice of subjects, his handling of *line, shape, color, value, texture, space, time, and movement*, and his methods of *composition*. Although the discussion focuses on painting, I've provided additional examples of works of sculpture and architecture to demonstrate how similar formal considerations apply regardless of medium. The questions that introduce each section are meant to serve as general guidelines for your written descriptions and formal analyses.

## The Visual Elements

### Line, Shape, Mass, and Volume

**How does the artist use line to define shape and volume?**

In two-dimensional or graphic art such as drawings, paintings, and prints, *lines* are the marks produced as the artist moves an implement—pencil, brush, engraving tool—across the picture surface. Lines inscribe the boundaries of two-dimensional *shapes*. Broken or faint *implied lines* suggest visual paths or connections between points in the composition. In three-dimensional works of sculpture and architecture, lines define the contours of actual forms in space. In describing the design of the rock garden at Ryoan-ji Temple (pictured in Color Plate 4), for instance, we would note how the jagged contours of the rocks emerge in relief against the straight horizontal lines of ground, wall, and viewing pavilion.

Various devices may be used in two-dimensional works of art to create the illusion of objects occupying three-dimensional space. Artists depict solid *form* or *mass*

(the two words are often used interchangeably to refer to three-dimensional physical bulk) and *volume* (*volume* is the space enclosed by mass) by means of overlapping lines, shading, and hatching or crosshatching (that is, areas darkened with clustered lines drawn in different directions). Shadows and half-shadows suggest an object's solid form by approximating the way light would hit its surface in actual space; the object's cast shadow, falling on the surface beneath or behind the object, reinforces the impression of volume.

Lines and shadows aren't simply illusionistic devices: they create drama and tension in works of art. If we extend our discussion of these visual elements a bit further, we can understand the viewers' reactions (on page 30) to the painting shown below in fig. 2.1.



2.1 Pierre Bonnard, *Nude Crouching in the Bath*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 67 × 85 cm. (26<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 33<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in.). Private Collection.