Compositional Analysis Exercise

In class exercise 5pts

For this exercise we’ll look into how great artists composed their paintings. I hope this can help you develop a more sophisticated understanding of compositional strategies. Think of composition as the inner structure or architecture of a visual work of art, divorced from the specific content. The composition is used to build relationships within the work, create hierarchies of importance, amplify the content, control the eye’s movement, and create spatial illusions. As you’ll discover color, form, pattern and proximity often combine to make this happen.

**Formalism:** the concept that a work's artistic value is entirely determined by its form--the way it is made, its purely visual aspects, and its medium. Formalism emphasizes compositional elements such as color, line, shape and texture rather than realism, context, and content. In visual art, formalism is a concept that posits that everything necessary to comprehending a work of art is contained within the work of art.

We’ll do three different exercises.

1. Light and Dark Contrast a.k.a.

**chiaroscuro** [kɪˌɑːrəˈskʊərəʊ]

*n* *pl* **-ros**

**1.** (Fine Arts & Visual Arts / Art Terms) the artistic distribution of light and dark masses in a picture

**2.** (Fine Arts & Visual Arts / Art Terms) monochrome painting using light and dark only, as in grisaille

Find a famous painted work from the history of art that you believe exhibits a stunning use of composition. I’d like you to find a representational painting (not abstract), and one with a good number of elements. Print a Xerox copy of the image out at close to 8.5”x11”. Now place a piece of tracing paper on top and draw a 1”x1” grid on top. By referencing the original painting fill in the **average** value for each square in gray scale.

1. Rhythm, Continuation and Emphasis

Place your tracing paper over the Xerox copy of your painting. Lightly trace the painting on the paper. Spend some time looking at the original painting and find the area/form that is the most prominent - this is the painting’s main point of emphasis. Using a compass draw a circle that corresponds in size to the point’s volume/amplitude and fill it in black. Now look back at the original painting. Where is the next place your eye gravitates toward? How loudly is this point screaming out for attention? Draw another black circle here with a size that’s relative to the first point of emphasis and connect the two with a line. Repeat these steps until you’ve mapped out the way your eye moves across the whole image. The resulting diagram should reflect the hierarchy of emphasis, the rhythm and route your eye has traveled. You can also connect the dots so to speak to look for geometric shapes embedded in the composition that use a gestalt phenomenon.

1. Write a statement that talks in detail about how the artist used the specific design principles we’ve covered in class to create a compositional strategy.

Unity (which kind(s))

Emphasis Focal Point

Figure/Ground Relations

Scale/Proportion

Balance (which kind?)

Rhythm

“The composition is the organized sum of the interior functions of every part of the work.” -[Wassily Kandinsky](http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth_search.php?authid=56)

