Formal Analysis of Museum Artworks

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The first image that I have selected for analysis is of a lion, which was made by the Asante people of Ghana in the mid-1900s. This belongs to Brooklyn museum collections. The artwork is made up of cast gold and its dimensions are mentioned on the website as 2 1/4 x 2 3/4 x 1 3/4 inches (5.7 x 7 x 4.4 cm). The image is donated to the museum by several unknown donors and the Asante collection number of this image is 67.178.10. The image of the lion is shown below.

Description

The image is a golden lion bearing some leaves and coins in its mouth. It has a large and muscular body as it is sitting, with a high posture, on all four of its legs, which appear strong and energetic. The lion has long claws, which make it look authoritative and strong. It has a peaceful expression, although, one can guess by its eyes that it could be anything but peaceful. Long ears show increase its beauty and spark the sense of hearing.

Formal Analysis

The artist of the image used several elements to make the lion realistic. Although, there is an indication that the artist avoided using dark shades of color to reflect the lion's peaceful nature. Golden color is used to show a representation that the lion is also precious. As a result, people are required to cherish and protect it. The way this golden lion is promoted might also serve an indicator that the art plays a significant and symbolic role in the Asante culture.

In other cultures, the lion is portrayed as a red animal where red is a symbol of might and action. The golden color, on the other hand, represents loyalty and honor. Therefore, it can be argued that the Asante culture has a different approach to the lion as compared to Western cultures. Creative and peaceful colors have been used. The Asante artist disregarded the traditional representation of lions as violent and rather adopted a different style to show them as model creatures (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.).

The image of the golden lion is an example of Asante royal regalia. Gold was associated with kingship, authority, and the wealth of the Asante state. Small cast-gold objects could be worn, displayed, or used in courtly contexts. The lion itself was not native to the forests of southern Ghana, so its representation may have reflected knowledge of distant animals, imported imagery, or a broader symbolic language of power.

Museum Context

The presentation of the object in a museum separates it from the original setting in which it was used. In a glass case, viewers may focus on the material and craftsmanship while missing the sound, movement, clothing, ceremony, and social relationships that gave the object meaning.

A useful museum label should explain who made such objects, how gold was acquired and worked, who was permitted to wear or display them, and how they related to the Asantehene and other leaders. It should also acknowledge uncertainty when the exact function of the object is not known.

Object 2: Benin Plaque

The second object selected is a brass plaque from the Kingdom of Benin in present-day Nigeria. Benin artists created plaques and sculptures for the royal palace. The works are known for detailed figures, hierarchical scale, and sophisticated metal casting.

The plaque shows a central figure accompanied by smaller attendants. The central figure is larger, indicating higher status rather than physical distance. The figure may represent an oba, military official, or courtier. Clothing, coral beads, weapons, and gesture provide information about rank.

Formal Analysis

The composition is symmetrical and organized around the central figure. The relief creates shadows that make the figures stand out from the background. Repetition of shapes, beads, and patterns creates rhythm. The metal surface connects the work to wealth, trade, technology, and royal authority.

The figures face the viewer directly, producing a formal and commanding presence. The limited depth keeps the scene legible, while overlapping bodies suggest a crowded court environment.

History and Provenance

Many Benin artworks were removed during the British military expedition of 1897, when the royal palace was attacked and looted. Objects entered museums and private collections through military distribution, auction, and the art market. This history has created international debates about ownership and restitution.

A formal analysis should not ignore provenance. The visual meaning of the plaque is connected to its role in the palace and to the violence through which many related objects left Benin. Museums should provide this history clearly.

Object 3: Egyptian Funerary Figure

The third object is an ancient Egyptian funerary figure, often called a shabti or ushabti. These small figures were placed in tombs and were intended to perform labor for the deceased in the afterlife.

The figure is shaped like a mummified person and holds agricultural tools. It may have an inscription naming the owner or containing a spell. The material may be faience, stone, wood, or pottery.

Formal Analysis

The vertical form creates stability and solemnity. The arms and tools are simplified, while the face receives enough detail to suggest identity. The blue-green color associated with faience may symbolize regeneration, water, vegetation, and life.

The object is small enough to be placed in groups. Repetition matters because wealthy tombs sometimes contained many figures, including supervisors. The individual figure should therefore be understood as part of a larger funerary system.

Function

The shabti was not primarily made for display in daily life. Its meaning depended on burial practices, religious beliefs, and inscriptions. Removing it from a tomb and presenting it as an isolated sculpture changes how it is understood.

Museum interpretation should explain ancient Egyptian beliefs while avoiding the suggestion that those beliefs were simple superstition. Funerary practices formed a coherent religious and social system.

Object 4: Greek Red-Figure Vase

The fourth object is a Greek red-figure vase. In red-figure pottery, the background was painted with slip and became black during firing, while figures remained the color of the clay. Details could then be drawn with lines.

The vase depicts a mythological or everyday scene. The shape of the vessel indicates its use, such as storing wine, mixing wine and water, carrying water, or holding oil.

Formal Analysis

The curved surface influences the composition. Figures follow the contour of the vessel, and the artist uses gesture and overlapping to suggest movement. Decorative borders frame the scene.

The contrast between red-orange figures and black background makes the image clear. Anatomical details and clothing folds are drawn with fine lines. The technique allowed greater flexibility than black-figure pottery, where details were incised.

Use and Viewing

Greek vases were functional objects as well as artworks. They could be used in homes, religious ceremonies, graves, or symposia. Images may have encouraged conversation, reinforced social values, or referred to myths familiar to viewers.

A museum display often places the vase at eye level and allows visitors to walk around it, but ancient users may have viewed it while drinking, carrying, or pouring. The original use affected how the image was seen.

Object 5: Roman Marble Portrait

The fifth object is a Roman marble portrait bust. Roman portraits range from idealized images of emperors to highly individualized representations of older citizens.

The bust includes the head, neck, and part of the chest. The hairstyle, facial expression, wrinkles, and clothing provide clues regarding date, identity, and status.

Formal Analysis

The white marble creates a sense of permanence, although ancient sculpture was often painted. Light moves across the carved surface, emphasizing facial structure and hair.

If the portrait is veristic, wrinkles and age are emphasized to communicate experience, discipline, and public service. If idealized, the face may connect the subject to youth, beauty, or divine qualities.

Political Meaning

Portraits were used in homes, tombs, public buildings, and political spaces. Imperial portraits communicated authority across the empire. Standardized features allowed subjects to be recognized even when artists had never seen the emperor.

The absence of original paint can lead modern viewers to imagine Roman art as purely white. Reconstructions and labels should explain polychromy.

Object 6: Medieval Reliquary

The sixth object is a medieval Christian reliquary. Reliquaries contained or represented relics associated with saints, such as bones, clothing, or objects connected to their lives.

The container may be made of gold, silver, enamel, gems, wood, or ivory. Its shape can resemble a body part, church, box, or statue.

Formal Analysis

Precious materials create visual brilliance and communicate sacred value. Reflective surfaces would have interacted with candlelight. Gems, patterns, and figures direct attention toward the relic.

The difference between the humble physical remains and the rich container expresses the belief that the saint's body had spiritual power. The object's beauty honored the saint and attracted pilgrims.

Religious Experience

Reliquaries were carried in processions, placed on altars, or approached by pilgrims. Touch, movement, prayer, music, and smell were part of the experience.

A museum display may emphasize artistic materials while limiting religious interaction. Curators should acknowledge that some visitors continue to regard related objects as sacred.

Object 7: Islamic Manuscript Page

The seventh object is a page from an Islamic manuscript, possibly a Qur'an or literary text. Arabic calligraphy is central to the design, and the page may include illumination, geometric patterns, or vegetal forms.

The script style, paper, ink, and decoration help identify the place and period of production.

Formal Analysis

Letters create rhythm through repetition, spacing, and variation. The text is both readable language and visual form. Gold and color mark titles, verses, or sections.

Margins and frames organize the page. The balance between empty space and writing contributes to clarity and beauty. If the page belongs to a Qur’an, accurate copying is a religious responsibility.

Manuscript Context

A single page was once part of a bound book. Removing pages for sale or display disrupts the sequence and physical integrity of the manuscript.

Museums should identify whether a page was separated legally, through damage, or through the art market. Digital reconstruction can help viewers understand the original book.

Object 8: Chinese Landscape Painting

The eighth object is a Chinese landscape painting in ink on silk or paper. Mountains, water, trees, paths, and small human figures create a world that may be observed gradually.

Landscape painting was connected to poetry, philosophy, government service, and literati culture.

Formal Analysis

Ink varies from pale washes to dark strokes. Empty space represents mist, water, or distance. Perspective is not organized from a single fixed viewpoint; the viewer moves visually through the landscape.

Large mountains may dominate small human figures, suggesting the scale of nature. Brushwork communicates texture and also reveals the artist’s skill and character.

Viewing Practices

A handscroll is viewed section by section rather than all at once. The viewer unrolls one portion while rolling another, creating a journey through time and space.

Displaying the entire scroll in a museum changes that experience. Rotating works protects them from light but limits access. Digital displays can simulate scrolling.

Object 9: Japanese Woodblock Print

The ninth object is a Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock print. Such prints depicted actors, courtesans, landscapes, famous places, and scenes of urban life.

Production involved a designer, carver, printer, and publisher. Multiple impressions could be made from carved blocks.

Formal Analysis

The print uses flat areas of color, strong outlines, patterns, and cropped compositions. Space may be compressed, and figures may be arranged diagonally.

The image reflects both artistic design and commercial printing. Variations between impressions occur because of paper, pigments, wear, and printing decisions.

Circulation and Influence

Woodblock prints were relatively affordable and circulated widely. They influenced European artists when Japanese art entered Western markets in the nineteenth century.

Museum interpretation should avoid treating the prints only as sources for European modernism. They had their own audiences, subjects, industries, and meanings in Japan.

Object 10: Impressionist Painting

The tenth object is an Impressionist painting depicting modern life or landscape. The artist uses visible brushstrokes, changing light, and color relationships rather than smooth academic finish.

The scene may include leisure, urban streets, railway stations, or outdoor environments.

Formal Analysis

Short brushstrokes create movement and atmosphere. Shadows contain color rather than black. Forms may appear incomplete when viewed closely but become recognizable at a distance.

Cropping and unusual viewpoints reflect photography and Japanese prints. The painting captures a temporary visual experience.

Modernity

Impressionist works often represent the transformation of nineteenth-century cities, transportation, industry, and leisure. The pleasant surface may coexist with social inequality and environmental change.

Women and men experienced public space differently. Analysis should consider who is shown, who is absent, and who had the freedom to observe modern life.

Comparison

The ten objects differ in material, function, geography, and time. Some were made for royal courts, tombs, religious ceremonies, books, daily use, or commercial sale. Their museum presentation can make them appear to share a single category of “art,” although their original purposes were different.

Material communicates value in different ways. Gold in the Asante lion and medieval reliquary reflects authority or sacredness. Brass in Benin plaques connects to royal technology and trade. Ink in Chinese painting emphasizes brushwork, while printed color in ukiyo-e enables repetition.

Scale also shapes meaning. The small shabti belongs to a tomb, while a large portrait may dominate public space. A manuscript page demands close reading, whereas landscape painting creates visual distance.

Ethical Display

Museums have responsibilities regarding provenance, cultural sensitivity, conservation, and interpretation. Objects acquired through colonial violence, theft, excavation, or unequal trade require transparent histories.

Restitution debates should consider law, ethics, community requests, and the circumstances of removal. Returning an object does not prevent scholarship; partnerships, loans, and digital access can support research.

Labels should identify uncertainty and avoid presenting interpretation as unquestionable fact. Source communities should participate in decisions, especially when objects are sacred or culturally restricted.

Conclusion

Formal analysis begins with careful observation of line, color, material, composition, scale, and technique. However, visual description alone is insufficient. Objects gain meaning through use, belief, politics, trade, ownership, and movement.

The Asante golden lion demonstrates this combination. Its material, posture, and craftsmanship create a powerful image, but understanding requires knowledge of Asante kingship and gold working. The same principle applies to the other museum objects. A vase, reliquary, print, portrait, or manuscript page should be interpreted as part of a social world.

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Museums can support understanding by connecting close looking with historical and ethical context. Visitors should be encouraged to ask not only what an object looks like, but who made it, who used it, how it entered the collection, and what responsibilities accompany its display. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.) (International Council of Museums, 2022).

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