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TOP SCHOLAR



Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

Scholarship 2025 Art History

Time allowed: Three hours
Total score: 24

ANSWER BOOKLET

Check that the National Student Number (NSN) on your admission slip is the same as the number at the top of this page.

Answer THREE questions from Question Booklet 93301Q: ONE from Section A, ONE from Section B, AND the compulsory question from Section C.

Write your answers in this booklet. Start your answer to each question on a new page. Carefully number each question.

Check that this booklet has pages 2–27 in the correct order and that none of these pages is blank.

Do not write in the margins (///). This area will be cut off when the booklet is marked.

YOU MUST HAND THIS BOOKLET TO THE SUPERVISOR AT THE END OF THE EXAMINATION.

SELECTED QUESTION

Copy and paste the question you have chosen into the space below.

Composition is the most important aspect of style in an art work.

PLANNING

Q3
Brueghel
Monet
Mitchell

ANSWER SPACE

Type your answer in the space below.

B I U     

Composition, as the arrangement of forms within the pictorial space, has throughout art history been employed for varying purposes and effects. The way in which a canvas is laid out or a picture constructed has immense impact on the way the reviewer receives art. However, the debt that composition owes to various other stylistic characteristics makes its certain posturing as "the most important aspect of style" somewhat questionable. Composition can interrelate with form or color, or subordinate itself to line or shape as themselves forms of composition. The schematic and architectural nature of composition as a characteristic means that it is most potent, both aesthetically and meaningfully, when it integrates itself into the artwork by way of other stylistic properties.

The use of composition in consonance with *line* is clearly visible in Pieter Brueghel the Elder's 1566 oil painting *Hunters in the Snow*, and it becomes evident that neither property is isolatable from the other in terms of contribution to the overall effectiveness of the painting. Brueghel's genre painting depicts a group of villagers returning from a hut on a hill overlooking their village, which sprawls across the snowy landscape towards the horizon. Brueghel constructs his pictorial space around two intersecting diagonal lines dictating the composition of the landscape. The first cuts across the lower left corner of the painting to separate the foreground, the hill on which the hunters stand, from the middle-ground; the second traverses both the hunter's path and the length of road that runs through the village, carrying the viewer's perspective from the foreground through the pictorial space as it recedes towards the distant houses on the horizon. This diagonally linear composition echoes Brueghel's other genre paintings, like *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, and marks a departure from precedents such as the *quattrocento* paintings of Hieronymous Bosch, which were composed in strict vertical hierarchy. Heinrich Wölfflin, for example, saw this compositional shift as a movement towards the Baroque style. Brueghel's toppling of this compositional hierarchy induces the viewer's perspective to appreciate the scale and extent of the village in which the hunters live, and advance the general purpose of Brueghel's genre scenes, which are to celebrate the workings of man and his subsistence on the earth, in line with the protestant vocational ideology of the Northern Renaissance. The harshness of the snow is starkly contrasted with the liveliness of human play, bright hearths, and chimney smoke that dominate the landscape, as space, line, and colour all converge on composition to further the ideal of subsistence which marks Brueghel's style. While composition becomes structurally important, it serves only as a skeleton for Brueghel's more foregrounded stylistic aspects to supplement.

With an example of composition as deliberate as Brueghel's, questions can be raised as to whether composition can be important in a style or medium where the artist has little control over the arrangement of their pictorial space: as is true for photography, but also for the impressionists, who painted purely receptively what existed in the world around them. Claude Monet's 1877 painting *The Gare St. Lazare* proves the control a receptive subject has on the imparting of meaning into their works purely through framing and what they choose to include. Monet's depiction of the Auteuil Line terminus in Paris constructs a vivid psychological image of the attitude to modernity in the wake of the city's Haussmann renovations purely by composing his scene around the existent structures of the train station. The trains at the station, billowing steam, are placed centrally along the canvas' horizontal, but Monet elects to have the horizon only around a fifth above the bottom edge of the frame, focusing the viewer less on the trains themselves and more on the contents of the sky above them. This composition already places the viewer in a reverential position of supplication by requiring their gaze turned upwards, which is mirrored within the painting by the man waiting at the station, staring at the towering roof in awe. This steel roof becomes the core of the painting both compositionally and meaningfully as it frames the train station below an almost church-like pediment, the solid iron form contrasting heavily with the transient impasto smoke and cloud in the center of the canvas. This contrast is further forced on the viewer by the steel lattice on the underside of the gable that form transversals and orthogonals that point towards the central caliginous cloud, reinforced by the lattice's shadow for the same effect. The religious symbolism and forced reverence that originates from the composition is translated into a Baudelarian response to the sheer scale and immediacy of modernized Paris, using framing alone to subordinate the ground to the dwarfing metal structure, plumes of smoke, and Haussmannised apartments in the very background. While this occurs heavily in conjunction with form, the limitations imposed on the *plein air* mimetic strictures of the impressionists makes the derivation of meaning from such a restrictive compositional palette more impressive.

Entering the 20th-century, this mimesis would be relegated to photography, and the subsequent response of avante-garde formalism brought new questions about the role of composition when representative qualities like form or tone had been eschewed. Clement Greenberg, in his *Toward a Newer Laocoon*, emphasised the formalist importance of painting-specific stylistic characteristics like shape, line, and composition, bringing composition into an *explicit* (though still not dependent) position of stylistic importance in the 20th century. This can be seen in Joan Mitchell's 1955 abstract expressionist painting *City Landscape*, which makes heavy use of composition to convey both its meaning, and Mitchell's specific stylistic traits that set her apart from other abstract expressionists. The painting contains a single uniform mass of neon colors that chaotically unravel across the center of the canvas. The extremities of the canvas are painted in a cloud-like off-white that fills in any portions of the work not reached by the neon paint. The apparent haphazardness of the central mass, painted in frivolous impasto that drips down the center of the painting, reveals a stylistic shift in composition for Mitchell, present in another contemporaneous painting, *Hudson River (Blue)*. The centripetal layout represents Mitchell's shift from the all-over painting style of other expressionists like Jackson Pollock, covering the entire canvas indiscriminately, to a 'figure-ground' compositional style, like that of Philip Guston's abstract works. This is somewhat of a capitulation to representational tendencies, by making clearer the existence of a transcendental subject matter, but it also has noticeable effect formally, creating the allowance for chaotic uses of shape against the demarcated background. This is all subservient to the theme suggested by the piece's title, *City Landscape*, which hints that the neon yellows, greens, and pinks are evocative of city lights and the chaos of an urban landscape that was so prescient to expressionist painters. This transcendental subject-matter is not directly represented but rather displayed as a psychological impression of the city environment. As Adolphe Gottlieb and Mark Rothko stated in an interview "it is the role of the painter to make the viewer see the world our way, not theirs." The impression of Mitchell's centralised chaotic shapes and lines resemble the descriptions of fin-de-siecle modernist writer Georg Simmel in 'The Metropolis and Mental Life': "the rapid telescoping of images", "the tempo and multiplicity of social and economic life", "the unexpectedness of visual stimuli." All converge into a condensed compositional space that reflects Mitchell's personal impression formalistically, not only due to this composition, but in large part facilitated by it.

It is a slight exaggeration to claim composition as the most important stylistic characteristic, but this could be said of any stylistic characteristic. Each aspect of visual style and application is interrelating and mutually beneficial, and no one can be given specific prominence. However, the ability for composition to macroscopically oversee and dictate other subordinate characteristics as a way of *facilitating* this interrelation, like shape and line in Mitchell, or space and form in Brueghel, makes a convincing argument for it's auxillary importance as a form of backbone to any artistic process in a way that other aspects cannot claim.

SELECTED QUESTION

Copy and paste the question you have chosen into the space below.

It is the viewer who holds the power to interpret and determine meaning in art.

PLANNING

Q4

Cariani (1510)

Masson (1924)

Lange (1937)

ANSWER SPACE

Type your answer in the space below.

B I U     

[The subjectivisation of the viewer and the desubjectivisation of the artist is a trend that has been continually increasing across history as more self-critical theories and iconoclastic creatives question the autonomy of the artist for any claim over their work. Hermeneutically, the power of the viewer, which is the obverse of the death of the author in Barthes, asserts a certain autonomy over interpretation that cannot be reclaimed by the artist. However, the completeness of certain artworks and the alacrity of certain artists to imbue their works with meaning to such a degree that the viewer is excluded from any entrance into subjecthood whatsoever, rendering a claim on this autonomy entirely futile and unnecessary. Moreover, as Michel Foucault describes in his *What is an Author?*, viewers are *afraid* of interpretative autonomy and would *prefer* a single point of reference for interpretation. Such positions manifest themselves in manifold ways throughout art history.

Rebelling against the "fear of the proliferation of meaning", as Foucault puts it, the quest to reject any powers to determine meaning is embodied in the relentless venture to ascribe the proper artist to each painting, in order that that paintings meaning may be firmly secured within its creator. This is embodied in an oil painting, dated c. 1510-1515, titled "Portrait of a Venetian Gentleman". First attributed to Giorgione, and then Titian, the work was finally reappraised in the 20th century as being painted by Giovanni Cariani. The work is a portrait of a subject angled at a 3/4 position to the viewer, at whom he gazes with a head slightly tilted upwards and a sternness that gives the impression of judgement or patronisation. He clutches in his right hand a bag of money atop a book which is rested on a stone pulpit that separates the viewer from subject. This visual separation doubles the emotional separation constructed by the harsh repellent gaze and is only bridged by the book, which is angled towards the man so as to cross the pulpit and lead the viewer into the subject's space. This emphasis on the book also foregrounds the man's bag of money, likely to emphasise his belonging to the mercantile class of Venice. The mans fully black dress highlights his pale face, just as the dark and shadow wall behind him highlights by contrast the sunny window on the far left of the pictorial space. The importance of the stern expression is the vacillation in its interpretation over time not because of any "power to interpret," but due precisely to the rejection of that power by attempting to link the man's face to sets of stylistic expressions as opposed to any meaning. As Foucault states, the Author (or artist) is not a concrete being but rather a "function" we use to impart and foreclose meanings from interpretation. The original attribution to Giorgione was understandable stylistically, as Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* describes Titian imitating "Giorgione's style so well, that soon after many of his works had been attributed to Giorgione." As National Art Gallery curator David Alan Brown states, the expression of the subject led to the reappraisal "since Giorgione was known as the more lyrical painter and Titian the more dynamic one, leading to the attribution of the dynamic expression to Titian." While the portrait heavily resembles Titian's *Man with Quilted Sleeve*, the fact that the final reattribution was to neither of these painters, but to Giovanni Carianni, the interpretations through style of the man's expression collapse instantaneously. At one level, the viewer is exercising their power to interpret and determine meaning, but at another, the Portrait is not being interpreted, but rather connected to a ready-made interpretation existent in a function that explains meaning for them.

This notion of 'having meaning explained' is embodied in artworks that are hostile to the "power to interpret" and instead force a certain viewpoint, emotion, or understanding on the viewer. This is a prevalent idea in another theoretical work of Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, in which he creates two theoretical terms for experiencing photography - the *studium*, which is the intended and social meaning of the photograph, and the *punctum*, which is a personal, unintended 'puncture' that creates real individual response in a viewer. Dorothea Lange's 1937 photograph *Migrant Mother* lacks entirely the latter feature, and is a potent example of how the 'power to determine meaning' can be countered with a completely transparent display of meaning. Lange's photograph was taken as part of the Farm Security Administration project during the New Deal, in which administrator Roy Stryker sent a team of photographers to document the famine and poverty in Dust Bowl America to leverage sympathy for the New Deal reform. The artistic implication of this was a pre-determined meaning in every photograph taken in the project, leaving little room for the "power of interpretation" for the reason that the political goal of the photograph is to strip the viewer of any ability to *not* react a certain way. *Migrant Mother* depicts a thin woman in a tattered dress as she is embraced by her two children and holds her baby. The black-and-white colouring of the silver print photograph gives a sense of reality and austerity that makes the documentation feel more authentic, which is combined with the close intimacy of the framing and the pensive pose of the central subject. The woman looks off to the side and holds a slightly emaciated arm up to her cheek in an expression of abject sadness and dejection. The faces of her two children are turned away, buried in their mother's gown, which makes clear the children's structural role as tokens of sympathy - this, combined with the title and the woman's baby, makes the primary case for sympathy the motherly status of the subject, as opposed to her human status. "By choosing how a photo will look, by selecting one exposure over another," Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, "photographers are constantly imposing meanings on their subjects." The entire goal of the FSA project was to deny as strongly as possible the "power to interpret and determine meaning" from the opposition to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program: the photographs of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans lack any form of *punctum* since they make the sympatheticness of their subjects (the *studium*) the entire content of their photographs, represented through both the physical and moral framing of *Migrant Mother*.

Contrary to this, however, there are artworks that are functionally useless to exercise a power of interpretation on, a uselessness which manifests in many forms of conceptual or formalist art, but also the personal art of the Surrealists, which was focused greatly on their own interpretations of what they had created. "Surrealism," writes Andre Breton in the 1915 manifesto, "is pure psychic automatism, by which one represents the actual functioning of thought." The psychoanalytical project of surrealism made interpretation and meaning incredibly important to their art, but pertaining broadly to their own interpretations, rather than those of an audience. Thus, Andre Masson's 1924 work *Automatic Drawing*, becomes hermeneutically irrelevant to anybody but Masson. The drawing, ink on paper, consists of a large array of variegated scribbles covering a small sheet of paper. The lines are of varying thickness and consistency, and overlap into dense clusters in certain portions (such as the center of the sheet), while becoming more sparse in others (such as the lower left). The chaotic lines are occasionally broken up by distinguishable forms, such like hands, feet, breasts, or genitalia that are sporadically built out from the intersection of lines at various points. Masson called free association "pure gesture, pure rhythm, and as a result: pure scribbles.", as it involved the artist letting their hand travel freely over a sheet of paper and constructing what amounts to, in the eyes of the viewer, a series of scribbles - scribbles which represent the dictations of the Unconscious and "the actual functioning of thought." The "second stage" of this process is what manifests the body parts within the drawing: the "interpretation" of the scribbles in the vein of Freudian free association, which can only be done by the analyst/artist himself. The feet and hands represent what Masson saw within the products of his own unconscious: and while "the viewer" does have an ontological *power* to interpret Masson's scribbles, the psychoanalytical basis of automatism renders this somewhat useless and unproductive. The foreclosure from interpretation within automatism was what led Salvador Dali to later construct the paranoid-critical method, which was able to aestheticize the unconscious in such a way that it was freely interpretable, in paintings like *The Persistence of Memory*, or *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937) - however, the mandate against interpretation by earlier surrealists provide a succinct example of the privileged position of interpreter and the futility of exercising such a right to irrelevant artworks.

Hence, there is rather unanimous consensus after post-structuralism that the viewer, as subject, *does* have the ability to impart whichever reading or interpretation they wish on art irrespective of artistic purposes (as evidenced by the Cariani) - but there are certain rebellions against this by both the avant-garde, which flees interpretability, or kitsch, which force-feeds it. The question of whether or not an unrestrained right to interpretation *should* be exercised is a separate question, but the question of whether or not the viewer possesses such an ability is unquestionably affirmative.

PLANNING

Casatt
Warhol/
Rosler

ANSWER SPACE

Type your answer in the space below.

B I U     

[The relentless circulation of images in modern life makes it impossible now more than ever to avoid influence by one or another style or individual, to such a degree that 'inspiration' is mandated by participation in society. The ideas which Kate Boucher sets forth with regards to this are generally correct, but she makes certain omissions and makes certain presumptions which leave exceptions to her arguments in certain cases. While every artist is a product of their predecessors and the anxiety of influence, she takes a rather neutral position to artists "taking" artworks and "add[ing them] to their own ideas," an action which has the capacity for problematic outcomes. Additionally, she assumes a degree of vested interest and "excitement" in the appropriation of images which is swiftly avoided by a large subsection of post-modern and contemporary artists, and facilitates the onset of kitsch sentimentalism. Overall, her arguments are solid, but they can be elucidated by examining exceptions to her rules.

Firstly, Boucher's piece creates a somewhat flippant apologetic for indiscriminate appropriation: "This research is not copying or cheating", and artists "are able to spread their net wide, look to other cultures" without worry or care. Presumably unintentionally, Boucher's essay privileges artistic pursuit over cultural consideration and vouches for the arrogation of foreign styles or artists in exactly the same logic that Edward Said describes colonialism with in his book *Orientalism*. Orientalism, Said states, is a "systematic discipline of accumulation", a phrasing which mirrors the entire contents of Boucher's piece: "Artists compile a collection of images, notes, and clippings that interest or excite them." could be quoted from either text. The aesthetic interest in the styles of the Other and the subsumption into ones own style is an occasion with heavy precedent in art history, with one of the more famed instances being Japonisme in 19th century France. Mary Cassatt's *The Coiffure (1890-91)*, for example is an intaglio print that was made in direct inspiration by the ukiyo-e woodcuts of Japan. The Meiji restoration had opened up the country and allowed the "systematic discipline of accumulation", or rather the compilation of "a collection of images, notes, and clippings that interest or excite" to take hold. Cassatt's print embodies the attitude toward the foreign aesthetic by using it to provide her bedroom scene, of a woman sitting at a mirror, with a clear fascination and removal. Orientalism "allows one to view ones own culture with the same level of intimacy and distance." and hence Cassatt's print turns her traditional subject-matter of female private life into an unfamiliar and sensationalised territory unavailable to her through French aesthetics. Though the woman's arched back, small breasts, and flat form deny a traditional form of fetishism, there is a clearly detectable new form of fetishism that idealises the Otherness of the woman not by her gender but by her 'Oriental' appearance. Boucher's unquestioning accumulation facilitates a colonialist logic, that allows for the reductive essentialisation and subsumption of foreign cultures as simply an "aesthetic" to be adopted and reused.

This issue with fetishism is prevalent in a different manner, which is the idea that artists accumulate artworks "that interest or excite them," a vested interest which is noticeably foreclosed by the logic of many postmodernists and facilitates sentimental or kitsch obsession with past art. The question is simply the nature of irony and pastiche against sentimentality. Andy Warhol, in his Pop Art, is able to mobilise the fetishism of images in a unique aesthetic that embodied the logic of image circulation and fetishism without participating in sentimentalism due to the degree at which he propelled his synthesis of high modernism and low art. For example, his printing of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* in *The Scream (After Munch)* recreates the famed modernist work in an infinitely reprintable series with alternating day-glo and neon colors. His fetishism and imagery avoids the pretensions of kitsch due to the direction the "interest and excitement" comes from. Rather than treating low art and commodities with high modernist sentimentality, he treats high modernism with the commercialised rationale of low art and commodity production. "Everything in Warhol is phoney," writes Jean Baudrillard, "the image is phoney because it exists not due to some aesthetic exigency but solely due to the desire for an image." Post-modern theorist Frederic Jameson labels this the *waning of affect*, where postmodern art becomes flattened, and the fetishism Warhol propagates is embodied in the very image itself and the logic of its production. "It signifies a break down of aesthetic interest, which was so prevalent in high modernism. The very notion of aesthetic interest presupposes some separation in the subject." The modernist anxiety and meaning behind Munch's *Scream* becomes "flattened" into a commodified *symbol* for that anxiety. This seems alien to what Boucher advocates for, but her logic allows for it. The alternative, which is kitsch, involves "using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture", according to Clement Greenberg. The "interest and excitement" in past styles and aesthetics, without the irony of Warhol, devolves into sentimentality, which Boucher risks. Overall, the appropriation of past images is generally excusable solely through the lens of pastiche, whereby Warhol uses his own art to embody the logic of commodity fetishism rather than fall victim to it.

Finally, there is the question of departures from prior styles. Boucher implicitly allows this when she mentions artists "reacting against" other artists, but it gets noticeably undermentioned in her extract. One of the most potent examples of a rejection of past tradition is in Martha Rosler's 1975 photography exhibition *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, by which Rosler uses the medium of documentary photography to enact a critique on documentary photography itself. What this involves is certainly in line with how Boucher describes inspiration, learning from other artists and collecting other artworks. "Artists and viewers are surrounded by art created by others, which can affect both art practice and viewers profoundly." is a statement that makes no pronouncement on whether the artist must reject or accept their predecessors, but Boucher seems to ignore this possibility. Rosler's exhibition depicts a series of photographs of the Bowery, a neighbourhood in New York frequently documented for its alcoholic and homeless population, with many of them in Rosler's time being Vietnam veterans. Rosler, wishing to enact a critique on what she called "liberal documentary", staged her photos so that no person was included within the frames. The composition mirrors exactly how photographs of the homeless on the street are typically taken, perpendicular to the road and angled downwards in a position of both moral and physical superiority, but she eschews showing the actual subjects. "Liberal documentary assuages the stirrings of conscience in the viewer the way scratching relieves an itch, while simultaneously assuring them of their relative wealth and social position." She rejects the self-gratifying moralisation of liberal documentarians by using their semiotic language against them, and adopting their productive mechanisms. This involves all the same steps as Boucher describes, and yet Boucher fails to mention this as a possibility. This is a large failure since, as stressed throughout, the ability to critically engage with the "sources" that inform one's aesthetic palette is crucial for a large number of reasons.

Overall, Boucher is required to be more critical and less optimistic in order to avoid the pitfalls of how she describes influence. Harold Bloom, for example, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, revolves his entire description of influence on the rejection of predecessors. Critical engagement with predecessors is immensely important, and so is the ability to construct *new* styles and aesthetic languages without becoming enamored by the products of yesterday in regressive and sentimental fashion. The moral dangers, not to mention the kitsch banality, of the blind use and incorporation of a wide variety of styles is one of the most frequent criticisms levelled at the idea of AI art. By not focusing on the *critical* tasks of dissecting one's influences, Boucher promotes the artist as an unquestioning and blind receptacle of universal history in the same way that an Artificial Intelligence might produce art, which is a problematic endorsement to make in the present artistic world.