HARC0227: Formal Analysis of Vishnu Sculpture
Due Thursday, February 26 in class.

Looking Guide and Observation Prompts for your Museum Visit
(adapted from http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/about-1/)

The purpose of a formal analysis is to use visual evidence to make a point, or an argument about a work of art based upon what you see—i.e., the formal properties—in the work.

This 4-5 page (1000-1250 words) paper (format details below) is a pledged assignment that should be a product of your OWN individual work. You need nothing more than your course texts, your eyes, this information sheet, some patience, and a curious mind. You do NOT need to do any further outside research, and I will not reward any details that come from other sources—on the contrary, I will dismiss any information outside of the stated parameters. Do not be tempted to do any library or Internet research on this work—it is not necessary for this assignment; in fact, it would be a detriment, and I will not give you credit for outside research.

Your first paper in this class is designed to develop your powers of observation and analysis. I want you to look, look, look, and look again. With this exercise, you are asked to describe and explain the overall impact and significance of what you see—in (hopefully!) persuasive, exciting, eloquent, and elegant prose—to a reader who (presumably) knows nothing about this kind of imagery.

Why? What is the point? Close looking—and translating your visual experience of a work of art into writing—is an activity that few of us practice unless compelled to. But images like this Vishnu sculpture (and the paintings we will study this semester) are specifically designed to be visually savored—to be seen—and in seeing these works of art, the viewer is emotionally and devotionally transported and delighted. We will delve into the aesthetic theories behind such works in future classes; for now, your task is to look and to write about what you see.

Directions
Take this sheet with you on your museum visit. Use these questions in any order as stimuli for your thinking.

Stand or sit (there are small folding stools in the museum—ask one of the guards) in front of the Vishnu sculpture. Make detailed notes, and make sketches if that helps you order your thoughts. DO NOT just take a picture with your phone and leave. Stay in front of the object and look at it for an extended period of time—a minimum of an hour for looking, thinking, writing notes, starting to formulate your thoughts. Do not leave this to the last minute—you will be overwhelmed, I guarantee you! You have two full class hours free that you can use to do this, so there should be absolutely no reason that you can’t find the time to complete this assignment.
Look around at other objects in the museum and Reiff gallery as well, as it is often very useful to see other objects—this can help you more clearly articulate observations about this work. In particular, I highly suggest you take some time to compare the Vishnu sculpture to something that may be more familiar; especially effective for helping you formulate your thinking is a comparison to another religious icon: Lippo D’Andrea’s *The Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels and Saints John the Baptist and Nicholas of Bari*, Italy, 14th-15th c. (2005.056) downstairs in the museum.

1) Form (think about these questions, but your final paper does not have to follow this order)

Read the label. Look for the media/materials used in creating the work, and when and where the piece was made.

Begin by identifying the work fully, right in the beginning of your paper. Be sure to include complete information about the work in your introduction (in complete sentences): its title, place of origin, material, dimensions if available, chronological and other attributions, and museum accession number.

Read the information (appended) about the Hindu god Vishnu, and become familiar with the list of iconographic attributes, signs, and symbols.

What was its purpose? What might have been its original context? See WOTA, p.24, fig.10, for a similar (Buddhist) sculptural example that was most probably ensconced in a temple niche.

Now, start to think about how this particular work of art is designed to express something about the god to his worshipers. What might that be? How do the visual details add up to a particular vision of the deity?

How big is the work? How does size affect your reaction to the work? How does size affect the depiction of the subject?

What about the composition? Is it balanced, symmetrical, asymmetrical?

You have identified the material(s) used from the object label. Why might the artist have used this material?

Note textures and the quality of the surface of the work. What adjectives could you use throughout your analysis? Eg. shiny, dull, hard, soft, rough, smooth, detailed, sketchy, elegant, crude?

Are the effects of light and shadow important for this work?

What is unusual? What tells you that this figure is out-of-the-ordinary, something special?
Is the subject ideal or real? Is this a realistic depiction? Is it abstract?

2) Your thesis: what is the overall effect of the visual form?

After you have spend time becoming intimately familiar with this sculpture, you can start to organize your thoughts around a point—a thesis—that will guide your reader through your analysis.

Your formal analysis is not just a description. It is an evaluation with a POINT, based upon visual evidence. Make sure that you are able to articulate the difference between mere description unconnected to any developing ideas in your essay (bad) and formal analysis that connects and deepens as your essay progresses (good). You must use CLAIM + EVIDENCE.

• Eg. “This work is very beautiful. The sculpture has two arms, two legs and is covered by a long garment.” NO. This just states the obvious and provides very little guidance to your reader. You need to go further than this. What do you mean by “beautiful”? How do the formal elements of the work add up to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts? The descriptive sentence following the claim (“the work is very beautiful”) does nothing here to support the claim—it’s just description and not evidence.

• Eg. “The sculpture is wearing a long garment that emphasizes the proportion and length of her body. In keeping with Hellenistic tradition, the effect makes the figure seem life-like, as if the clothing might move if touched; it as if the sculpture could walk. This is contradicted by the fact that the work is actually made from very hard and immovable white marble.” YES. Now we are getting past the materials into the realm of overall effect and expression. The writer provides visual evidence that supports the claim that the work is “beautiful.”

3) Organizing the paper: from large to small and back to large.

The easiest and most effective way to organize your paper is to begin with a “thumbnail sketch” of the entire work. As an example, consider this vivid, concise opening sketch of a 17th c. North Indian painting that I have adapted from a short analysis by the great painting historian B.N. Goswamy (see following image), whose thesis in this brief analysis is relatively simple, but nevertheless instructive: “There is, and has been, much room for fine and detailed argument [about this painting], so much of it that it almost comes in the way of savouring (this) work. . . . (T)here is much to be gained in turning to the painting (itself), and moving inside (it) in a leisurely fashion, lingering over every nuance.”

Thumbnail sketch (large): “In this painting . . . the painter takes us to the inner apartments of a place where (a) princely figure . . . Kamsa . . . is seen conversing with an old woman seated close to his feet. Maids and attendants stand around, flanking the two central figures: three at right and three at left. Behind the latticed screens more women, evidently belonging to the royal household, can be seen even if hazily, and in the
spacious carpeted courtyard leading out from Kamsa’s chamber a large group of women musicians—as many as twelve—can be seen playing on instruments or singing. Further down, a fountain plays and water courses down a channel, on either side of which we see glimpses of a rich garden."

Getting closer (small): Now that the scene has been set, the next step is to take your reader further into the details of the work, such as: “The painter creates architectural detail and soft furnishings of remarkable richness: marble everywhere, from walls to courtyard; the scalloped arch under which Kamsa sits, and the delicately carved niches with decorative objects at the back; the stunningly executed tall lattice screens . . . , behind which the clearly articulated figure of palace women can be seen. Note, too, the rolled-up curtains featuring floral sprigs echoing the design on the jama worn by Kamsa. . . ; the fountain playing at the very heart of the painting with water swirling all around a strong jet holding aloft a single rose delicately poise at top; exquisitely painted panels featuring . . . flora and fauna that flank the fountain; the two short flights of marble steps; the cypresses in the garden patches; the doorway in the outer wall in which a woman guard stands questioning a visitor of petitioner. . .”

Zoom out to the big picture again for your conclusion: “There is subtle detail everywhere if one pays close attention. . . The remarkable thing, however, is that with all this happening—royal instructions being issued, music being played, whispered conversations behind latticed screens, water gurgling down marbled channels—there is an air of hushed silence in the painting, possibly because the moment is such.” (B.N. Goswamy, The Spirit of Indian Painting: Close Encounters with 101 Great Works, 1100-1900. (Allen Lane, Penguin Books India), 2014: 184-187

There is, of course, so much more that could be said about this painting—a discussion of the colors, the way figures seem to float in space, a more detailed description of the spatial complexities of the work, etc. would be rewarding. Yet, even though brief, this analysis is so effective because it provides the reader with not just an accounting of the myriad details of the painting, but also an focused, ordered, consistent, thorough and unhurried exploration of the overall effect of all those luscious details. The reader is gently and kindly led by the hand (eye) through this visual experience; by the end of the analysis, the reader has been inducted into a close, aesthetic, eye-opening, educational understanding of the painting.

Naturally, I don’t expect you to be able to write such vividly evocative prose. But I do expect you to try to get at the Vishnu stele’s overall aesthetic effect by allowing enough time to truly see in all its glorious detail. I encourage you to reach beyond the merely descriptive—could you perhaps try to envision this work as if through the eyes of a devotee (as, for example, with the icon of the Virgin Mary, whose devotional and aesthetic purpose was virtually the same?). However, as I note below, don’t go overboard—and do not try to “interpret” the work beyond the available visual evidence.
Your paper should thus not be a random flow of ideas about the work (i.e. stream of consciousness writing). Rather, your paper should have a sense of order, moving purposefully through your description with regard to specific elements (after the introduction, subsequent paragraphs may deal with composition, others with a description of the figures, others with the background, etc.). Finally, in your conclusion (the final paragraph) you should end your paper with a brief summary of your observations and a restatement of your thesis.

It is important to remember that your interest here is formal; NO RESEARCH IS TO BE USED IN THIS PAPER. In other words, you are strictly relying on your ability to visually 'read' a work of art and make interpretations about it based on your analysis of it. Remember too that your analysis should not be just a mechanical, physical description. Please use descriptive language and adjectives to describe your work. Begin with a general description of the work, and then move on to the more specific elements. Resist, however, the temptation to interpret or suggest meanings for the work that may not be accurate.

In addition, do not share your thesis or paper with other students and do not work on your paper with another student. This is considered plagiarism and a violation of the honor code.

**Format:**

One-and-a-half or double-spaced, 12-pt. normal font (Times New Roman and variations), 1” margins on top, sides and bottom except for first page. First page should have a (good) title and your name. Page numbers should be included on all pages but the first. Spell-checked and edited carefully for grammatical errors. Stapled, and printed back-to-back if possible. Honor code signed on the last page. You should have no need for footnotes or bibliography for this assignment. You do not need to cite class notes or this handout—the iconographic information in the following *Encyclopedia Brittanica* excerpt is commonly known.

**REMEMBER:** **you are being graded on the quality of your close looking**, on what you can SEE at the museum, and how you contextualize your object(s) through **YOUR OWN** observations. **THIS IS NOT A RESEARCH PAPER;** you do not need to make any kind of interpretations. To that end, **I would like you to hand in your looking notes with the assignment.**
Vishnu stele (museum accession no. 2004.050—acquired in 2004; Purchased with funds provided by the Christian A. Johnson Memorial Fund)

date: 12th century
nationality: Indian, Bengal
medium: black chloritic schist, h. 38 inches 
period: Sena kingdom

http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/630506/Vishnu

Vishnu, (Sanskrit: “The Pervader”) one of the principal Hindu deities. Vishnu combines many lesser divine figures and local heroes, chiefly through his avatars, particularly Rama and Krishna. His appearances are innumerable; he is often said to have 10 avatars, but not always the same 10. Among the 1,000 names of Vishnu (repeated as an act of devotion by his worshippers) are Vasudeva, Narayana, and Hari.

Vishnu was not a major deity in the Vedic period. A few Rigvedic hymns (c. 1400–1000 bce) associate him with the Sun, and one hymn relates the legend of his three strides across the universe, which formed the basis of the myth of his avatar Vamana, the dwarf. Legends of figures that later became other avatars, such as the fish that saves humankind from a great flood, are also found in the early literature. By the time of the Mahabharata (the great Sanskrit epic that appeared in its final form about 400 ce), the avatars began to be identified with Vishnu. Vishnu is said to manifest a portion of himself anytime he is needed to fight evil and to protect dharma (moral and religious law). Not all avatars are wholly benevolent; some, such as Parashurama and Krishna, bring about the death of many innocent people, and the Buddha corrupts the pious antigods. Vishnu’s vahana, his vehicle in the world, is the bird Garuda; his heaven is called Vaikuntha.

Temple images of Vishnu depict him either sitting, often in the company of his consorts Lakshmi (also called Shri) and Bhumidevi (Earth), or reclining on the coils of the serpent Shesha—asleep on the cosmic ocean during the period between the periodic dissolution and re-manifestation of the world. He is also represented in a standing position and dressed in royal garments, holding in his four (sometimes two) hands the shankha (conch), chakra (discus), gada (club), or padma (lotus). On his chest is the curl of hair known as the shrivatsa mark, and around his neck he wears the auspicious jewel
Kaustubha. In paintings, Vishnu is usually shown as dark-complexioned, a distinguishing feature also of several of his incarnations. By Wendy Doniger

**Useful checklist** for looking at details of the Vishnu sculpture, and some Sanskrit vocabulary words that you might encounter in other sources, starting from top to toe, background first, then figure of Vishnu:

Leonine mask at top (*kirttimukha*, literally “face of glory”)
Flying figures (*vidyadharas*) with garlands (*malas*)
Celestial musicians
Swirling clouds
Throne back with crossbars behind figure
Composite alligator/fish figures on cross bars (*makara*)
Composite animals (*leogryphs*) with riders
Female consorts: often identified as Saraswati (goddess of music and learning—see the figure with the instrument to the right), and Lakshmi (wife of Vishnu; goddess of prosperity); alternatively, Shridevi and Bhudevi are featured.
Flywhisk
Musical instrument (*vina*)

Vishnu’s crown (*mukuta*)
Mace (*gada*)
Chakra (*wheel/discus*)
Lotus (*Padma*)
Blessing (*varada mudra*)
Conch
Garland (*mala*)
Mark in center of forehead (*bindu*)

Figures and worshipers at base
Garuda (bird-man “vehicle”) who carries Vishnu around universe