Assignment 6: Compositional Design in the Art of the Ancient World
Due: Tuesday, May 5, 2020

Scan through chapters 1 to 9 in Janson’s, and/or the corresponding slide presentations.

For this assignment you are to choose one (1) work of art from the textbook or slides from any one of the time periods we have discussed so far.

You will make a drawing of the work, and by drawing, it could be an exact replica of the work (depending on your draughtsmanship skills and confidence), a detailed sketch, OR a tracing, whichever you feel most comfortable with. If you’d like to trace the work but you do not have tracing paper, a really good alternative is parchment paper that you can find in a roll in the baking/aluminum foil section of the supermarket; it’s inexpensive (I found a 25ft. roll at the DollarTree) and you can use it to bake some cookies afterward; wax paper would work as well but you’ll need a permanent marker to draw with.

Your drawing needs to be labeled (write it on the paper itself) with the artist’s name, title and date of the original work, along with your own name and date of completion for the drawing. Include your drawing with the assignment (I took a photo of sketch and dragged it into my Pages document) and the original image of the artwork with a corresponding label. Both of these images will introduce your formal (design) analysis.

Based on what you observe through this process, you are to identify one (1) design principle that is present in the work. You will define the design principle (see the handout, Introduction to Visual Art Forms, on class website for a refresher on definitions) and explain how the artist is applying this principle to their composition. Identify the subject as well. An example is being provided for you below.

- Principles of Compositional Design—

1) Unity and Variety
2) Balance
3) Emphasis and Subordination
4) Directional Forces
5) Contrast
6) Repetition and Rhythm
7) Scale and Proportion
For this assignment, I chose to evaluate the Etruscan krater (fig. 1), a ceramic mixing bowl for wine and water, decorated in the black-figure technique by a painter identified as part of the Lotus Bud Group from ca. 480 BCE. The focus of this formal analysis will be on Side B, depicting athletes,
particularly sprinters or short distance runners racing at top speed in a competition.\(^1\) Side A of this krater depicts the legendary hero Herakles, son of Zeus and Alcmene\(^2\) and Geras, the personification of the daimon, or spirit of old age.\(^3\) The krater itself measures approximately 10 1/4 inches in height making it a work of modest proportions, and the figures represented in the panels are approximately four inches in height. Through the process of drawing the sprinters on Side B, and observing their forms and the composition, what becomes recognizable is the application of repetition and rhythm as a design principle.

Repetition and rhythm as it is defined, is the “repetition of similar elements such as shapes, lines, colors, in such a way that we recognize a particular order and sequence of images. Pattern identifies the repeated element, rhythm identifies the interval or sequence between the repeated elements.”\(^4\) In the case of Figure 1, the element that creates the pattern in the main, central scene on the body of the krater is the sprinter whose form is repeated three times. The painter renders the representational male form in a similar pose, bodies erect, arms bent at the elbows and elevated, and legs outstretched in an open running stance. One heel of each runner’s foot is repeatedly shown not hitting the ground but bent upward, as their other foot, shown flat is readied to land on the ground and support the gravity of their weight shift. The dynamic pose of these runners, as it is multiplied, and as the forms overlap one another, enhance the implied movement of these youthful athletes. The rhythm that sets the pattern is short and tight, the bodies are placed close to one another, again as the legs and arms overlap each other, allowing for small areas of negative space, the red areas of the background color, to contrast with the black silhouettes of the forms.


In addition, the painter highlights the repetition of movement on the body of the vessel by incorporating organic, lotus bud forms on the lip of the krater, and repeated geometric forms that frame the runners themselves. The regularity of this ornamentation enhances the anticipated stride of the competitors. The even spacing between the lines and patterns ornamenting this ceramic also speaks to the precision required to decorate this vessel and the concerns of the artist to depict accuracy. The artist’s exacting portrayal of pattern and rhythm reflects the rigorous training that is needed for such a decoration. It again mirrors the rigorous training these athletes no doubt pursued in order to prepare for these games, and the interest of Classical artists to portray the capabilities of the human body at its peak strength and youthfulness.

Simply recognizing one design principle within this work highlights the compositional concerns of the artist and their successful application of repetition and rhythm to bring attention to the purpose of commemorating a victorious athlete.