

[NEW PAGE]

## Works Cited

Prown, Jules David. *John Singleton Copley*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.

Sellers, Charles Coleman. "Mezzotint Prototypes of Colonial Portraiture: A Survey Based on the Research of Waldon Phoenix Belknap, Jr." *Art Quarterly* 20 (1957): 407–68.

### ✓ Checklist for Writing a Comparison

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- Is the point of the comparison clear? (Examples: to show that although X and Y superficially resemble each other, they are significantly different; or, to show that X is better than Y; or, to illuminate X by briefly comparing it to Y.) Phrases like "Despite these differences" and "A less conspicuous but still significant resemblance" are signs that critical thinking is at work, that a point is being made.
- Are all significant similarities and differences covered?
- Is the organization clear? If the chief organizational device is lumping, does the second half of the essay connect closely enough with the first so that the essay does not divide into two essays? If the chief organizational device is splitting, does the essay avoid the Ping-Pong effect? Given the topic and the thesis, is it the best organization?
- If a value judgment is offered, is it supported by evidence?

## 6

## WRITING AN ENTRY IN AN EXHIBITION CATALOG

I do not know any reading more easy, more fascinating, more delightful than a catalogue.

—Anatole France

### KEEPING THE AUDIENCE IN MIND

Today most exhibition catalogs are written by specialists who ought to speak both to their colleagues and to a more general public. An exhibition catalog is not a *catalogue raisonné* (from the French, literally "reasoned catalog"), which is a catalog that seeks to give all the relevant factual information about every work by an artist or every work in a particular medium by an artist. Thus, in addition to commenting on each work, a *catalogue raisonné* seeks to record every known owner and every exhibition in which the work appeared. A *catalogue raisonné* is aimed at specialists such as art historians, dealers, and collectors, but an exhibition catalog is aimed at a larger audience, the museum-going public. This means that the author of an exhibition catalog should present the latest scholarship in a reader-friendly way, and indeed some authors—usually curators or academicians—succeed admirably. But many authors of exhibition catalogs fail to engage the general public, often for a simple reason: They write for themselves or for their colleagues, and they do not bother, when they draft or revise, to envision any other audience.

How else can one account for the fact that—to take a recent example, in a handsome catalog called *Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium BC from the Mediterranean to the Indus* (2003)—one reads (page 281) that a "pin with flanged head" was found along with "a silver pin with pyriform head"? You don't know what "pyriform" means? (You might guess that it is related to "pyre" and "pyromaniac" and, therefore, means "flame-shaped," but this guess would be mistaken.) In this same catalog—filled with excellent illustrations of wonderful objects—you will also find that #63 in the

exhibition is described (page 114) as a “Cosmetic box lid inlaid with a lion attacking a caprid.” Readers with a bit of Latin can guess that a caprid is some sort of goat—a goat is the sign of Capricorn—but that will only be a guess because “caprid” is not defined in any of the standard college dictionaries. In reading catalogs one routinely finds words like “caprid,” “felly” (the rim of a wheel), and “protome” (a bust), words unknown to many highly educated people, and indeed “protome,” like “caprid,” is not defined in any of the chief college dictionaries.

It would be inaccurate to say that the persons who wrote entries with these words were trying to impress their readers, because the authors almost surely were not thinking about an audience when they wrote. When queried, a few authors of comparable entries huffily said that they would not dumb-down their writing. Yet why these authors think that if they say “pear-shaped”—that’s what pyriform means—instead of “pyriform,” or “rim of a wheel” instead of “felly” is a mystery.

That these writers have not bothered to think about writing for a nonspecialized audience is puzzling, but the further mystery is this: Why do they use such language when writing for themselves? The profession of art history necessarily has developed specialized terms, for instance, “baroque” and “perspective,” and these terms must be used in some discussions, just as “shortstop” and “double play” must be used in talking about baseball, but what possible realm of discussion requires “pyriform” instead of “pear-shaped”?

### A RULE FOR WRITERS:

In drafting and writing a catalog entry—as in all of your other writing—use technical terms only when necessary and, since a catalog is usually designed for the general reader, make sure that you define the terms clearly.

Entries in catalogs vary greatly in length—some entries may be only a few sentences, while others may run two or three pages. The heading of an entry usually includes the following material:

- artist’s name and dates if known, for instance:

Greek (fifth century BC)  
Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–56)

- title of the work or, for untitled works, a brief description:

*The Last Supper*  
Plaque with Lion-headed Eagle

- material:

bronze  
oil on canvas

- dimensions, height preceding width, usually given in inches and often also in centimeters, in one of two forms:

H. 1 3/8 in. (4.2 cm.); W. 2 1/8 in. (5.4 cm)  
1 3/8 x 2 1/8 in. (4.2 x 5.4 cm)

- condition:

Left forearm restored

- owner (and sometimes provenance, i.e., list of previous owners, beginning with the first known owner and ending with the last); if you are writing an entry as an exercise, your instructor probably will expect only that you give the name of the current owner, as in the second of these two examples:

S. Yabumoto; Matthias Komor; Emily Andrews; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

- exhibitions, if the catalog aims at completeness (again, your instructor probably will not expect such a list):

Fogg Museum 1996; Detroit Institute of Arts, 1997; Brooklyn Museum, 2002

- bibliographical material, i.e., references to relevant publications. Usually this information is given in the form of a brief reference to a work fully cited in the bibliography at the rear of the catalog. Sometimes in the catalog entry the citation is introduced by the word “literature”; if there are two or more works by the author, the date of the appropriate work is given:

Literature: Jackson 1999

Headings with material of this sort are fairly standard from one catalog to another, but when it comes to the discussion that constitutes the body of the entry, there are enormous differences. For instance, a catalog dealing with material from the ancient world or the medieval world will probably contain a larger number of technical words—words that need to be briefly explained—than a catalog of American folk art or a catalog of a painter of the twentieth century. Similarly, a catalog of Islamic silver or Buddhist painting or Yoruba sculpture probably will have to introduce the reader to a larger number of new concepts than will a catalog devoted to Winslow Homer.

Instructors who ask students to write an entry for a catalog will provide a general idea of the length of the entry (e.g., “about 500 words,” “about 1,500 words”), and it is then up to the student to apportion the space. What does the reader of a catalog want and deserve to get? Most entries in a catalog say something about the following aspects:

- the subject (for instance, the birth of the Buddha, the myth of Leda and the Swan, the historical associations of the landscape depicted, the biography of the person whose portrait is painted)
- the technique of manufacture—usually not necessary for a painting or drawing, but necessary if the work is a ceramic, bronze, or other manufactured material
- the conditions of production (for whom was the work produced? is it part of a larger group?)
- the meaning, and how the meaning is conveyed (for instance, the significance of the gesture a figure makes, the significance of the color of the clothing a figure wears, the implications of the symmetry or asymmetry or of the thickness or thinness of the paint)
- the way in which the work fits into the artist’s development, or (for an anonymous work) how the work fits into the period
- the way in which the work fits into the subject of the exhibition. An entry on Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* in an exhibition of European influences on American painting of the first half of the twentieth century ought to be somewhat different from an entry on the same painting in an exhibition of, say, “American Realism,” or in a one-man exhibition of Wood.

Perhaps most important of all, a good entry in a catalog conveys

- the inherent value of the work; the entry helps the reader and viewer to understand why the work is worth looking at and is worth reading about. In fact, a good entry should help the reader

to see the work more clearly, more fully. It should make the reader want to return to the exhibition to take another look at the work (or if the exhibition is no longer available, the entry should make the reader take a second and closer look at the reproduction of the work in the catalog), and cause the reader to say mentally, “Ah, I hadn’t noticed that. That’s *very interesting*.”

The only way to learn to write an entry for a catalog is to read a number of catalogs, get an idea of what they do—and then do *that*, but (equally important) do *not* do any of the annoying things that you may encounter. An example of what not to do: In *Art of the First Cities*, the catalog for an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the entry on the handsome *Kneeling Bull Holding a Vessel* (#13) begins (page 43):

The subject of animals engaged in human activities held particular meaning for the people living in the mountains and the lowlands to the east of Uruk at the turn of the third millennium BC.

Fine; we now are eager to learn what the “particular meaning” of this beautiful, curious sculpture is. We are all ears, all eyes, all mind, but, oddly, the rest of the entry disappoints us because it says not a word about meaning, other than that “the function of these small sculptures is unclear.” If *this* is all that the author can tell us about the meaning of the work, why did the entry begin by asserting that the motif of “animals engaged in human activities held particular meaning for the people”? It should have begun by saying something like this: “The motif of animals engaged in human activities is common, so it probably held particular meaning for the people, but we don’t know what that meaning was.”

There are countless excellent catalogs; your instructor can recommend examples, but here are a few titles, chosen almost at random:

Barnet, Peter, ed. *Images in Ivory: Precious Objects of the Gothic Age* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1997)

Boggs, Jean Sutherland, et al. *Degas* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988)

Cikovsky, Nicolai, Jr., et al. *Winslow Homer* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1995)

Evans, Helen C., and William D. Wixom. *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era AD 843–1261* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997)

- Herbert, Robert L., et al. *Georges Seurat 1859–1891* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991)
- LaGamma, Alisa. *Art and Oracle: African Art and Rituals of Divination* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000)
- Menzies, Jackie, ed. *Buddha: Radiant Awakening* (Sydney, Australia: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2001)
- Mowry, Robert D. *Hare's Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers: Chinese Brown- and Black-Glazed Ceramics, 400–1400* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 1996)
- Pickvance, Ronald. *Van Gogh in Arles* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984)
- Tinterow, Gary. *Master Drawings by Picasso* (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Museum, 1981)

## A SAMPLE ENTRY

Because the following entry deals with a Japanese image of the infant Buddha, a subject unfamiliar to most Americans, it inevitably spends a fair amount of time sketching the background, but it also looks closely at the work itself, and it conveys something of the work's meaning and importance. What may seem like a puzzling entry in the heading, "Literature: Washizuka No. 25," was clarified in the bibliography at the end of the catalog, which included a publication by Hiromitsu Washizuka, *Transmitting the Forms of Divinity*, where a comparable image was illustrated and discussed in entry 25.

The Buddha at Birth  
 Gilt Bronze  
 Asuka Period (542–645), 7th Century  
 H. 3 3/8 in. (8.5 cm)  
 Freer Gallery  
 Literature: Washizuka No. 25

Like Christianity and Islam, Buddhism is rooted in the teachings of an historical figure. Shakyamuni ("Sage of the Shaka Clan," c. 560 BCE–c. 483 BCE), also called the Buddha (Enlightened One) or the Historical Buddha, was born into a princely family in north-central India, in the Himalayan foothills of present-day Nepal. According to semi-historical



*The Buddha at Birth.* Gilt bronze, Asuka Period (542–645), 7th Century. Height 3 3/8 in. (8.5 cm.). Private collection. Photographer: Bruce Schwartz. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

lore, although within the palace he was shielded from all possible pain, when at the age of twenty-nine he discovered suffering in the outside world he left the royal household in a quest for a better way of life, a different kind of existence. After six years of asceticism he found the Middle Way, a path between the two extremes of self-indulgence and asceticism, which brought enlightenment (Sanskrit: *bodhi*; Japanese: *bodai*). For the next forty-five years he preached a doctrine that came to be called The Four Noble Truths:

All existence is characterized by suffering;  
 Suffering is caused by desire or craving;  
 There is a way to overcome craving;  
 The way is the Eight-Fold Path, which involves leading a disciplined, moral life.

According to legend, at his birth the infant Buddha miraculously took seven steps, pointed with one hand to heaven, with the other to earth, and proclaimed, "Between heaven and earth, I alone am honored." This small image shows the smiling infant Buddha making the assertive gestures that announced a new way of perceiving experience. (He smiles because he has discovered a happy way of living.) All religious

art, no matter how realistic, calls our attention in one way or another to an idealized world, for in effect religious art tells us that our daily perception of the world is severely limited, and—guided by the religion's teachings—we must see differently, see a different world.

Consider the *unnaturalness* of this image: A tiny newborn infant with golden skin (the Buddha's gold skin symbolizes his perfect knowledge) and a full head of hair that is shaped like a natural crown (the cranial protuberance symbolizes his supreme wisdom) stands unaided and makes a confrontational gesture. Although the image is far from realistic, it does catch the supple, undefined body of a child (except for the delightful indication of the spine), and it interestingly contrasts the smooth bodily surfaces with the finely detailed elaborate garment. This paradoxical image—a smiling infant who commands—itself is an embodiment of the challenging idea that there is a world different from our visible world of helpless infants who are born, grow old and sick, and then die.

*The Buddha at Birth* was produced by the lost-wax method: The image was made in wax, encased in a clay mold with a drain hole, and the mold was then heated. When the melted wax ran out, bronze was poured into the mold through an inlet, filling the space where the wax model had been. After the bronze cooled, the mold was broken to free the bronze image. Details were perhaps refined, and the image was gilded—i.e., it was painted with powdered gold dissolved in mercury, and heated until the mercury vaporized, leaving gilt fixed to the surface.

Although Buddhism was introduced to Japan from Korea in the sixth century, the oldest surviving Japanese Buddhist sculptures are, like this one, from the early seventh century. (In later images the face is rounder, less rectangular, and the skirt is longer.) The present sculpture may be the earliest Japanese gilt bronze in the United States, and perhaps the earliest outside of Japan.

### ✓ Checklist for Writing a Catalog Entry

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- Details of artist, title, dimensions, material, owner correct?
- Length of entry appropriate to the assignment?
- Necessary technical words unobtrusively defined?
- Nature and significance of the work communicated?

## 7

# WRITING A REVIEW OF AN EXHIBITION

Pleasure is by no means an infallible guide, but it is the least fallible.

—W. H. Auden

That which probably hears more nonsense than anything else in the world is a picture in a museum.

—Edmond and Jules de Goncourt

### WHAT A REVIEW IS

Your instructor may ask you to write a review of an exhibition at a local museum or art gallery. Like other writing about art, a review should deepen the reader's understanding of art history, or enhance the reader's experience of works of art, or both.

Writing a review requires analytic skill, but a review is not identical with an analysis. An analysis usually focuses on one work or at most a few, and often the work (let's say Picasso's *Guernica*) is familiar to the readers. On the other hand, a review of an exhibition normally is concerned with a fairly large number of works, many of which may be unfamiliar. The first paragraph or two of a review usually provides a helpful introduction, such as the following, in which a reviewer writing in a newspaper—i.e., a publication read by nonspecialists—gives some background material about Mary Cassatt, not an unknown figure but not known in the way that Rembrandt or van Gogh or Picasso is known:

The Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) was a character of intriguing contradictions. The daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia banker, she led a social life of impeccable gentility, but as an artist in Paris in the late 1870s, she fell in with a disreputable gang of outsiders—the officially denigrated Impressionists.