

# Art History: Learning About a Work of Art

## Vocabulary

art history operations  
individual style

**Y**ou can develop your appreciation for a work of art by gathering information about the artist and the time period in which the work was created. This is the historical and cultural context of the work. The **art history operations** are a *four-step approach for organizing the way you gather information about a work of art*. The names for the four steps of art history operations are the same as the four steps for art criticism: *description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment*. For art history operations, however, there are different definitions for the terms and different questions to be answered.

- **Description.** When, where, and by whom was the work done?
- **Analysis.** What is the style of the work and can the work be associated with an art movement?
- **Interpretation.** How did time and place affect the artist's style, in terms of subject matter, composition, and content?
- **Judgment.** Is the work considered to be significant in the history of art?



## Step One: Description

During this step you will look for information *about* the work of art. You want to know who did it, when, and where it was done. If you were looking at an original work of art, you would look for the artist's signature and the date on the work itself. In this book, because the works have been reduced to fit on the page, you will probably not be able to see the artist's signature or the date on the work. You will find that information in the credit line, however. If you look at the credit line for **Figure 2.8**, you will discover that this painting was created by the same artist who painted **Figure 2.9**, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Figure 2.9 was painted in 1907. Compare that date to Figure 2.8.

▲ **FIGURE 2.8** The objects in this work are easy to recognize—trees, mountains, and night sky—but the colors are not what you might expect. Why do you think the artist used these colors? What does he appear to be saying?

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Winter Landscape in Moonlight*. 1919. Oil on canvas. 120.7 × 120.7 cm (47½ × 47½"). Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan. Gift of Curt Valentin in memory of the occasion of Dr. William R. Valentiner's 60th birthday.

Which was painted earlier? To learn more about Kirchner, such as where and when he lived, you would need to do some further research.

## Step Two: Analysis

During analysis, you examine the work and look for information about the artist's style. Style is like handwriting. No two people have exactly the same handwriting and no two artists have exactly the same style. **Individual style** is the artist's personal way of using the elements and principles of art to express feelings and ideas. To analyze the style of one artist, you will need to see several works by the same artist. When you look at Figure 2.8 and Figure 2.9, you can easily see the unique aspects of the artist's style: his unusual use of color and his exaggeration of shapes for expressive effect.

## Step Three: Interpretation

In order to find the answers for this step you will have to do some research. You will discover that the artist was active in a group of young, adventurous artists in Germany who called themselves Die Brücke (The Bridge) and that their work was part of a larger movement known as German Expressionism. In order to interpret his work, you would need to find out what other artists influenced him, details about his life, and information about his surroundings.

## Step Four: Judgment

Once again you must research to find out the importance of this work in the history of art. You must discover what different art historians have to say about Kirchner and use their assessments to help you shape your own. You can also



▲ **FIGURE 2.9** Spend a few moments describing this work. What is its most unusual feature? What is the subject matter? Then compare it to Figure 2.8, also by the same artist. What are the similarities and differences between the artworks? Can you draw any conclusions about Kirchner's individual style?

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Seated Woman*. 1907. Oil on canvas. 80.6 × 91.1 cm (31<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 35<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"). The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota. The John R. Van Derlip Fund.

discover if Kirchner influenced other artists, which would help you judge his importance.

As you study the information in this book and learn more about the language of art, you will begin to acquire information from works of art. You will learn more about the artists who created the works. In Chapters 12 and 13, you will find a brief overview of art history. Refer to these chapters to learn more about art movements and time periods as you encounter them throughout the book.



### Check Your Understanding

1. What are the art history operations?
2. Describe each of the steps of art history operations.
3. What is individual style?