

TWO WAYS OF ORGANIZING
A COMPARISON

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Probably a student's first thought, after making some jottings, is to discuss one work and then go on to the second work. Instructors and textbooks (though not this one) usually condemn such an organization, arguing that the essay breaks into two parts and that the second part involves a good deal of repetition of categories set up in the first part. Usually they recommend that the students organize their thoughts differently, somewhat along these lines:

1. general introduction of the two objects, X and Y
2. first point (e.g., subject matter)
 - a. similarities between X and Y
 - b. differences between S and Y
3. second point (e.g., medium)
 - a. similarities between X and Y
 - b. differences between X and Y

and so on, making as many points as seem appropriate. Here is an outline, paragraph by paragraph, of a short essay of this sort comparing two fifteenth-century Italian low-relief carvings of the Madonna and Child, one by Desiderio da Settignano, the other by Agostino di Duccio. The essay itself is printed later in this chapter on pages 59-63.

The two were contemporaries, but their work is markedly different. Desiderio's Madonna has a "natural, homely humanity while Agostino's is elegantly aristocratic."
The differences are evident if we look at the hair; in Desiderio it is less clearly defined than in Agostino, who "treated the hair as a highly stylized pattern of regular lines." The drapery reveals a similar difference.
A comparison of the right forearms and hands of the two Virgins reveals a difference. Agostino . . . ; Desiderio. . . .
The outlines and modeling of the contours differ.
Conclusion: This is not to say that Agostino's relief is more carefully designed or that Desiderio's is more naturalistic — only that Desiderio's design is less obtrusive.

In a comparison it is usually advisable to begin by defining the main issue — here, although the works are of the same period, one depicts "homely humanity," the other depicts "aristocratic" figures. Then proceed with a comparative analysis, probably treating first the major aspects (e.g., composition, space, color) and next the finer points.

But a comparison need not employ this structure, and indeed an essay that does employ it too rigidly is likely to produce a ping-pong effect. There is also the danger that the essay will not come into focus until the essayist stands back from the seven-layer cake and announces, in the concluding paragraph, that the odd layers taste better. In one's preparatory thinking one may want to make the comparisons in pairs (line in Desiderio, line in Agostino; hair in each; treatment of arms in each, etc.), but one must come to some conclusions about what these add up to before writing the

clearly and effectively. After reflection one may believe that although there are superficial similarities between X and Y, there are essential differences; in the finished essay, then, one probably will not wish to obscure the main point by jumping back and forth from one work to the other, working through a series of similarities and differences. It may be better to discuss X and then Y. Some repetition in the second half of the essay (e.g., "In contrast to the rather nervous lines of X, in Y we get . . .") will serve to bind the two halves into a meaningful whole, making clear the degree of similarity or difference. The point of the essay presumably is not to list pairs of similarities or differences but to illuminate a work, or works, by making thoughtful comparisons.

Although in a long essay one cannot postpone until, say, page 30 a discussion of the second half of the comparison, in an essay of, say, fewer than ten pages, there is nothing wrong with setting forth half of the comparison and then, in light of it, the second half. The essay will break into two unrelated parts if the second half makes no use of the first, or if it fails to modify the first half, but not if the second half looks back to the first half and calls attention to differences that the new material reveals.

Finally, remember that the point of a comparison is to call attention to the unique features of something by holding it up against something similar but significantly different. If the differences are great and apparent, a comparison is a waste of effort. (Blueberries are different from elephants. Blueberries do not have trunks. And elephants do not grow on bushes.) Indeed, a comparison between essentially and obviously unlike things can only obscure, for by making the comparison, the writer implies that there are significant similarities, and the reader can only wonder why he does not see them. The essays that do break into two unrelated halves are essays that make uninformative comparisons: The first half tells the reader about five qualities in El Greco; the second half tells the reader about five different qualities in Rembrandt. Notice in Bedell's essay (p. 63) that the second half occasionally looks back to the first half.



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from Sylvan Barnet
Short Guide to
Writing about Art

or you will be the end
of this class!

We turn now to two fifteenth-century Italian low-relief carvings on the theme of the Madonna and Child. Desiderio da Settignano's all too short thirty-five years of life (1430–64) began and ended during the lifetime of Agostino di Duccio (1418–81). Yet although the two artists were contemporaries who almost certainly knew of each other's work, it would be difficult to find two artists who display a greater difference in the qualities of their lines. Desiderio's lines are full of minute changes of direction and breaks in continuity. They have a nervous delicacy, a gentleness, and quiet unassertiveness which is appropriate, in our example, to the character and mood expressed in a more directly psychological way in the faces

of Mary and the Child. They are neither rhetorical nor merely decorative but describe the form and represent material qualities in a naturalistic manner. There is nothing arbitrary about them. For the most part they are not clear-cut lines; their depth and intensity varies

and they have an irregular scratched rather than a sharp-edged quality. Many of them are little more than short incised "touches" with the chisel. Agostino's relief is also gentle and delicate but it is in every respect more self-consciously "designed," more contrived, than Desiderio's. Both Madonnas are human rather than divine but Desiderio's is a natural, homely humanity while Agostino's is elegantly aristocratic and artificial. If there is anything supernatural about Agostino's relief, it is a supernatural prettiness and sweetness.

The differences between the two works may be brought out more clearly if we compare a few details. Consider the treatment

of the hair. In Desiderio's relief it is rendered as a vaguely unified plastic mass in which curls are merely hinted at by irregular incised lines. The hair of Desiderio's Child has a soft, downy appearance and merges with the form of the forehead without any clear line of demarcation. Agostino, on the other hand, has treated the hair as a highly stylized pattern of regular lines. These fall into graceful waves, and on the Child they twist round to form elegant tight little spiral curls. A similar difference pervades the drapery of the two reliefs. Desiderio's treatment is spare, full of irregularities, crumpled passages, and straightness. There are no lines which seem to be there purely for their own sake. Agostino's lines on the other hand are mostly decorative and are intended to be enjoyed for their own sake. They are full of graceful curves and elegant rhythms and counter-rhythms. Their linear design is confidently, even exuberantly, lyrical.

A comparison of the similarly positioned right forearms and hands of the two Virgins is most revealing. Agostino makes one continuous curve of the upper line of the forearm and the hand and carries the line right through to the ends of the extended first finger and thumb. But the line of Desiderio's arm and hand changes direction abruptly where the hand broadens out at the wrist. And although there is a connection through from the arm across the hand and into the extended finger, it is a straight line, not an elegant curve, and it is not continuous. Notice, too, the contrast in the lines of the fingers themselves in the two reliefs.

The outlines of the fleshy parts of Desiderio's figures — the head, arms, and shoulders of the Child, for example — are softer and more variable than those of Agostino's. This is true also of the modeling inside the contours. The lines down the left arms of both infants clearly show the difference. Finally, the lines of the facial features — the center line of the nose, the outlines of the lips and the eyes — are sharper in the Agostino than in the Desiderio, where their softness contributes to the "dewy" look of the faces.

It would be wrong to conclude from all this that Agostino's relief is more carefully designed and that Desiderio's merely describes the forms naturalistically. Desiderio's relief is in fact designed with extreme care and sensitivity. Indeed, according to John Pope-Hennessy, "in composition this is Desiderio's finest and most inventive Madonna relief."* Pope-Hennessy does complain, however, that its execution is "rather dry" and inferior to that of some



Desiderio da Settignano, *Virgin and Child*, 1455–60. Marble, 23¼" × 17¼". Philadelphia Museum of Art. (Purchased by the Wiltach Committee)



Agostino di Duccio, *Virgin and Child with Four Angels*, ca. 1460. Marble, 35" × 30¼". The Louvre, Paris.