Formal Analysis: Francois-Andre Vincent's *Arria and Paetus*

*Arria and Paetus*, found in the Saint Louis Art Museum, is a painting done with oil on canvas by Francois-Andre Vincent in 1784. The canvas itself stands a little over three feet by four feet, making the image an imposing presence without dominating its surroundings. Yet, upon closer look, Vincent is able to draw the audience into his painting with the dramatic subject matter of what seems to be a Renaissance couple in the midst of a tragically violent showdown. As a result, studying the visual elements and how these elements are arranged provides insight to the deeper content of this French painting.

The main visual elements of line, texture, light and value, and perspective, are used in such a way as to emphasize the intensity of the interaction between the couple. The fluid, curved lines shape its content by portraying a very realistic depiction of two human figures, referred to as Aria and Paetus. In addition, the smoothness of the line adds to the life-like, highly representational presentation of the human body in motion. There are also elements of implied lines in this painting, as seen in the woman of Arria. Arria is pointing to her forehead while her eyes are staring directly towards her husband’s face. Therefore, our attention and line of sight is directed to where she is looking, emphasizing the main subject of the man, Paetus, whose eyes are fixed towards the floor. Similar to the very realistic portrayal of the human body, Vincent
uses texture to add to this effect. The implied texture of the clothing the figures are wearing adds to his realistic style, making this painting come to life.

Similar to line and texture, the light and value of the color Vincent uses also directs one’s attention towards the male figure, Paetus. The value of the dark, black color in the background abruptly gradates to a light tone of white on the right side of the canvas. The contrast in value from the black background to the lighter colors where Arria and Paetus are standing adds another dimension of focus centered on the interaction of the couple, particularly with Paetus. Vincent highlights the lightest colors in the background behind Paetus to give the implied look as if there is a spotlight being directed shown on him. As a result, the figure of Arria remains on the outskirts of this implied spotlight. Thus, Vincent’s use of light and value with regards to color denies the presence of any significant objects in the background, directing all of the attention toward the feud taking place amongst the two individuals.

Elements of Renaissance space in this two-dimensional oil painting can be seen in the placement of the two figures. Arria and Paetus appear to be closer to us in the painting and lower on the picture plane. Their feet are the lowest objects that can be seen. Vincent portrays the greatest amount of detail in the person of Paetus and Arria, dissolving everything else in the room to be lost in the dark, black background. Although it is not obvious, the presence of a foreground, middle ground and background is portrayed even though there is no light in the background. Therefore, Vincent carefully crafts the atmospheric perspective to establish the presence of a background in the form of an intensely dark room regardless that one cannot fully decipher any other items in the room.

Apart from the basic visual elements, the way in which Vincent arranges these elements provides further insight into the painting’s content. On the surface, as previously described, we are presented with a female figure who stands over the male figure with a knife in her hand, directed towards her stomach. The male figure known as Paetus, appears to be falling backwards towards the floor, looking down and in a defensive position. However, even though it seems as though Aria is in danger of hurting herself, the way in which the elements are arranged convey that Paetus the one who is in the actual line of danger.

In keeping with accord to what Vincent has been trying to imply all along, his use of asymmetrical balance also keeps the focus on Paetus. The way the light is shown towards the far right of the picture displays the central point being of Paetus. In this way, the main focal point
places the emphasis on him more than Arria even though she is the one standing in a more powerful position. Arria remains a more dominating presence by taking up more space in the foreground, yet the focus is still directed toward Paetus from the asymmetrical emphasis of light and implied line of sight. As a result, one must discover the subtext of the dramatic act at hand. Even though Arria holds the knife towards herself, all of these elements focus on the defenseless, despairing figure of Paetus, implying that maybe he is truly the one in danger.

Such questions in Vincent’s paintings are answered through analysis of context and the motives that inspired Vincent to portray this tragic event. This Renaissance painting draws influence based on ancient Roman history in which Paetus joins a failed conspiracy against the Roman emperor. As a result of the failed attempt, Arria instructs her husband to commit suicide rather than face the shame of jail time. 1 Upon learning the subtext and historical context that Vincent uses to inspire his work of Arria and Paetus, the previous description of the artistic elements makes more sense. Based on the prior formal analysis, the way in which all of the elements were arranged shaped and complement the painting’s content. Vincent successfully captured the climatic confrontation in the historical narrative of these two figures through his skilled technique of arranging visual elements in a work of art in such a way as to convey meaning.

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