

# FORMAL ANALYSIS

Design elements and principles



*On the other hand one cannot, since Cézanne, be casual about the structure of the picture.*

John Brack, letter to Eric Westbrook, April 1956, regarding *Collins St 5p.m.*

John Brack  
*Collins St, 5p.m.* 1955  
oil on canvas  
114.6 x 162.9 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Purchased, 1956  
© National Gallery of Victoria

## Structure

John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.* is a stark and compelling painting of office workers that is produced with a limited palette. The colour and structure of the painting are vital to the meaning it conveys. Repeated horizontal lines and intermittent vertical elements make up the grid-like structure, and many sharp lines and edges are used in this composition. Elongated rectangles within the grid are used to express the horizontal nature of the streetscape. This structure provides an overall sense of order to the composition and is reflective of Brack's initial visual stimulus, the city of Melbourne, with its rigid geometric layout. The grid is also often used by architects as they design facades of city buildings.

Compare Brack's grid-like structure with compositions by other artists, such as Edvard Munch, who used a more fluid organic structure.

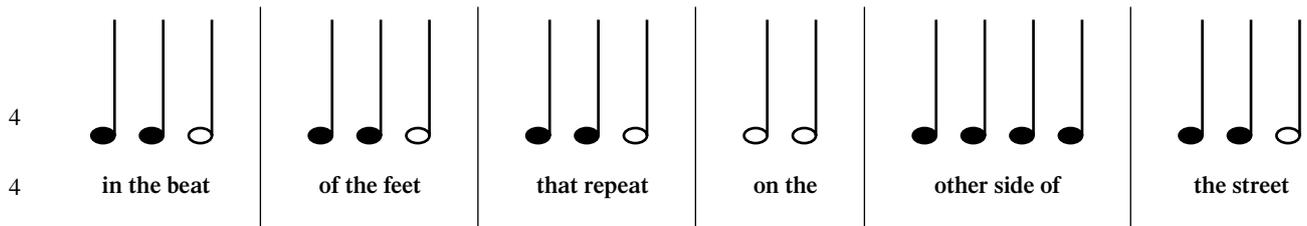
Compare John Brack's work with other artists who depict the city using grid-like compositions such as Piet Mondrian and Fernand Léger. How does Brack's work differ?

Discuss how Brack balanced his composition with the help of this grid. Comment on the placement of the street sign, lamp post and the tree.

## Repetition

The repetition of shape is used to build a sense of unity within the composition. It also highlights the monotony of the subjects' nine-to-five work routines. This concept can be seen here in the repetition of geometric-shaped hats, windows and facial shapes.

Repeated elements in art are similar to beat or rhythm in music and poetry. Rhythm is created by the repetition of many vertical figures, all facing the same direction. For example, the sound of a military marching beat can almost be seen visually.



Imagine what other sounds you would hear in the city at 5pm.

Find examples of other works of art that evoke music or rhythm.

Compose a musical composition to evoke the feeling of a work of art or, alternatively, select a piece of music you think reflects the feeling of the work.

What do you think the blank faces of the people on the 'far side' of Collins Street suggest?

How does repeating the element of the blank face add to the meaning of the work?

Comment on the repetition of the following formal elements:

- shape
- line
- colour



*Two typists* 1955  
oil on canvas  
51.0 x 61.5 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
The Joseph Brown Collection  
Presented through the NGV Foundation by  
Dr Joseph Brown, AO, OBE, Honorary Life  
Benefactor, 2004  
© Helen Brack

## Space

John Brack uses high tonal contrast and relative size to draw attention to the figures in the foreground. He uses more muted colours and smaller-scale figures in the middle ground and background to create a sense of distance.

Look carefully at John Brack's use of colour. Consider the initial colours he would have used in his palette. How did he mix them to create other colours? What moods are evoked by the colour scheme in *Collins St, 5p.m.*? What names are given to these colours by artist paint manufacturers?

Squint your eyes to blur your vision; this will help you observe the light and dark areas in the work.

Where is the contrast of tone strongest? What area of the painting does this emphasise?

Imagine Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.* painted in an incredibly bright florescent colour scheme similar to that of the artist Howard Arkley. How would its meaning be altered? Find comparative images on [www.ngv.vic.gov.au/arkley/education](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/arkley/education)

In music, to mute means to muffle or soften the sound. What do artists mean by the term 'muted colours'?

Explain what Brack may have considered when he painted his background?

Why do you think Brack may have excluded road traffic in this painting of peak hour?

What do you think is John Brack's key message?