

TEACHERS GUIDE TO ANALYSIS OF *NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE*

Elements of Art	
Light and shadow	The light seems to be emanating from the figure on the stairs, especially at the bottom of the stairs, certainly not a natural light. The figure is surrounded by shadows. If this is a person descending, then light seems related to time, with the latest moment the brightest, the most distant moment the darkest.
Space	The space is very closed, with the figure taking up nearly all the space. It seems like a series of flat images overlapping one another.
Shape	In some ways, the image is nothing but shapes, triangles, ovals, rectangles and other odd polygons.
Line	The lines are mostly straight or simple arcs, sometimes sharp, sometimes a bit blurred.
Color	The figure is in shades running from gold to tan, while the stairs and the surrounding area are dark brown and black. Considering that this is a “nude,” only some of the colors seem “skin-tone” like, the others far too orange or gold.
Principles of Design	
Balance	The painting is balanced, with a kind of diagonal parallel structure.
Emphasis	The viewer’s eyes are drawn to the figure at the bottom of the stairs, the part that is brightest. Light and color seem to dictate what is seen first or is most important.
Movement	The figure seems to be moving from top left to bottom right.
Pattern	The shapes that define the figure are repeated, as though one figure overlaps the other.
Interpretation	
Summary	The title says that it is a nude descending a staircase, though the image in the painting only vaguely represents a human form descending nearly invisible steps.
People and things	Presumably, this is a person descending, though it is depicted in a geometric rather than realistic way.
Symbols	There are no obvious symbols present, though the tradition of the nude in painting is certainly at play.
Degree of Representation	The painting is not realistic and only vaguely represents what the title claims it to be.
Meaning	Since this is not a realistic painting, Duchamp must be after something else in his use of the classic nude image. Given the way the figure is comprised of shapes, perhaps he wants viewers to see the geometry of life, the way everything is comprised of shapes. Since the title refers to only one person, but the painting seems to depict many versions of that person, it seems a bit like one of those long exposure photographs that capture moving car lights, only the painting has captured a moving person. In this sense, the painting isn’t of a single moment, but many. So perhaps Duchamp wants the viewer to think about shapes and time, and to think about the limitations of realistic paintings.