Every student has the capacity to analyze the visual world around them—from advertisements in SEPTA stations, images on the Internet, to works of art in museums. And yet, the very word “visual analysis” has been known to conjure fear and anxiety in scores and generations of students. There are many reasons for this, but it would not be wrong to say that our formation as thinkers is largely based upon logocentric assumptions—from an early age, we have been trained for the most part to read and analyze texts, not images. Yet like with all things, however, practice makes the master in visual analysis. Here are some important points to consider:

What is a visual analysis? While it is certainly important to locate and identify what is depicted in an image, a visual analysis is not a simple description. Descriptions often sound like dry inventories, only informing us what is visible in the image at hand. For example: “The Samaritan, who holds a pitcher, looks at the sitting Christ. In the foreground there is a well. Vines grow on the wall behind.” Such a description continuing page after page is unsatisfying and tedious.

By contrast, a visual analysis explains the effect of an image, specifically how the image works. How does the artist manipulate elements such as body, landscape, color, depth, perspective, etc to create a composition? For instance: “The Samaritan and Christ look intensely at one another. The strong diagonal of their gaze and the choreography of the hands create a tight connection between the two protagonists. Furthermore, the precise depiction of the still life, the pitcher, cup, and the wall, conveys a
sense of immediacy and presence of the Biblical story.” In other words, a visual analysis proposes an argument about the image.

Formulating a clear and convincing claim is the goal of any visual analysis. Just as the stones used in a masonry foundation stabilize a building and help it withstand the force of external elements, so too should your observations support and solidify a central thesis. In my experience, it takes several hours to begin such a thesis, so plan to spend at least 2 hours in front of the image, ideally before the original, jotting down notes in random order. Eventually you may see that certain patterns emerge, certain priorities and points of emphasis brought forth from the image’s composition. Look again at the image and structure your notes around these patterns. Rewrite your notes and organize them such that they follow a logical sequence. Then look again at the image to refine your notes into more detailed and concise observations. Needless to say, this process can be never ending, but like most intellectual work, endlessly satisfying.

N.B.: In early modern art the representation of the body often plays a central role. One possible point of departure, therefore, is to attend to how the artist depicts the body. How is the body represented? How are emotional expressions and gestures depicted, and more importantly, what is depicted? How does the body interact with other bodies and elements in the composition? What type of narrative or compositional function does the body have? How does the body convey meaning?

For further reference, please consult Andrei Pop’s thoughtful comments on art historical writing:
http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic649702.files/Writing%20about%20Art_final%20web.pdf