

For teachers and learners . . .

ART CATEGORIES, CRITICISM, AND APPRECIATION

"I don't know anything about art!" This is a typical lament of both teachers and parents when they consider helping children learn to appreciate art. Yet a few simple principles can make art criticism accessible to nearly everyone.

Art criticism simply means talking about art. One learns to defer judgment until one has looked closely at a work of art and followed a few simple steps of critical investigation. Instead of quickly dismissing a work, without taking time to think about the artist's purpose or method, one learns to appreciate the work on its own terms.

Discovering the Purpose of Art

Generally, artists create art for one of three reasons. One, they want to recreate the physical world as they see it. Two, they want to express an idea or feeling. Or three, they want to create an interesting design. Trying to discern the primary purpose of a work of art not only makes for an interesting discussion, but also lays the foundation for evaluating the work.

Art categories are not ironclad, of course, and some works may blur the boundaries between categories. For general purposes, however, the following three categories are useful.

Imitationalism

Some works of art are meant to look like the world around us, much like a photograph. Much of the work of Winslow Homer could be classified as imitationalism. Imitationalism is the type of art that most people can identify with and enjoy. Indeed, for most people, this IS art. The work looks like the real world as we know it. Most people feel comfortable with this kind of art. The term imitationalism is used because this type of work seeks to *imitate* the world around us. Other terms for imitationalism include realism, representationalism, and naturalism.

Emotionalism

While imitationalism shows us the world we see with our eyes, emotionalism shows us an interior world we cannot see. Emotionalism renders the world of ideas, feelings, moods, fantasy, emotions. The works of Chagall, El Greco, Van Gogh, and Dali fall into this category, as would most religious paintings. Artwork classified as emotionalism may range from realistic to abstract, but the primary purpose of the work is to express strong feelings and the primary impact of the work is *emotional*, thus the term emotionalism. Other terms for emotionalism include expressivism and instrumentalism.

Formalism

Most artists are concerned with the design of the work they create. For some artists, however, creating the design is the primary purpose of the work. They are concerned with the formal qualities of art, the lines, shapes, colors, and textures and how they are arranged on the page. Most of the work of Braque and Mondrian could be classified as formalism. Sometimes recognizable objects appear in formalist paintings, such as in the work of Matisse, but the primary purpose of the objects is to create a visually interesting composition. The artist may use objects from the world as we see it, but these objects are chosen for their *formal* qualities, for the form they take in the work, thus the term formalism. In the work of Matisse, one can recognize flowers, people, doors, windows, tables, but the objects are used to create an interesting composition.

The first step in learning to appreciate art is learning to classify a work according to its primary purpose. Using these categories is somewhat like eating apples and onions. A perfectly good onion will never taste good to a person who expects it to be an apple. The same is true for a work of art in one category that is judged in terms of another category. A person will never learn to appreciate formalism if he or she expects it to look like the real world. Apples need to be judged by apple standards, and onions by onion standards.

Once we have classified a work of art, we are ready to critique it.

Learning to Talk about Art

Critiquing art is like solving a mystery, except the process of investigation is as important as the solution! The work of art will be the mystery. Following four simple steps, we will look at the clues the artist has provided to help us learn more about the work. The first two steps—describing the art elements and analyzing the design—involve looking for clues. In the third step—interpreting the meaning—we try to discover what the clues mean, and in the fourth step—judging the work—we evaluate the work according to what we have found.

Step 1: Describing the Art Elements

In making a work of art, every artist uses a few basic elements: lines, shapes, colors, textures. These can be thought of as clues. In Step 1 of critiquing art, we describe the art elements in the work of art. Lines that are sharp, jagged, and heavy, for example, will convey a different feeling from lines that are soft, graceful, and horizontal. A hard-edged triangle will give a different feeling than a soft-edged circle. Different textures similarly convey different feelings. Colors are also critical. Warm colors are reds, oranges, and yellows. Cool colors are blues and greens. Neutral colors are browns, grays, and whites. Each conveys a different feeling. In Step 1, each art element is examined for the message or clue it conveys about the work of art.

Step 2: Analyzing the Design

In Step 2, we look at how the art elements are put together. A system is a set of interrelated parts designed to create a whole, and as such, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A work of art can be thought of as a system in which all the parts, or art elements, are essential in creating the whole. The way the elements are put together or arranged is called the organization, composition, or design. In Step 2, we analyze the design of the work of art. The principles of design include repetition, variation, proximity, focal point, balance, space, and dark and light. These will be further explained in the following pages, but as an example of design, an artist may create rhythm in a work by repeating an element such as line or color. An artist may bring elements together in the work or keep them entirely separate, and a symmetrical design, in which the art elements in each half of the work are in balance, gives a greater sense of stability than an asymmetrical design. In Step 2 we analyze the design of the work in terms of each of the design principles. This gives us further clues to the meaning of the work.

Step 3: Interpreting the Meaning

In Step 3, we look at what we have discovered about the art elements and the design and try to establish the meaning of the work. A work of art can have many meanings, of course, but for the observant investigator, one meaning will stand out as paramount. In this step you ask why. Why is the sky dark? Why are the lines jagged? Why is the balance asymmetrical? This is the time to encourage insight and brainstorming using the information that has been gathered.

Step 4: Judging the Work

After examining the art elements, analyzing the design, and interpreting the meaning, you are ready to judge the work of art. You are now ready to make an informed evaluation of how well the artist has succeeded with his or her work. In Step 4, recall the category in which you originally classified the work and judge how well the artist has succeeded. If you have decided that a work is an example of emotionalism, now decide if it is a successful example of emotionalism. Does it do a credible job of expressing emotion? Judge the work by the standards appropriate to its classification. If the work is an example of formalism, ask if it is successful in creating an interesting composition that makes you aware of the visual elements of line, shape, color, or texture, not whether it looks like something in the real world. Finally, defer judgment no longer. You may decide that a work is an excellent example of emotionalism, but still you may not like it. Or you may love it. In Step 4, you get to choose. Regardless of your final judgment, however, you will have conducted a thorough investigation and, like it or not, will have a greater appreciation of the artwork, the artist, and the process of creativity.

Glossary of Terms

Abstract: Art which places emphasis on distortion of reality, sometimes changing color, line, or the like in dealing with subject matter.

Art: Human effort to imitate, supplement, alter, or counteract the work of nature. Examples are: photography, sculpture, fiber arts, theatre (set design, costumes, programs, etc.), music (vocal/instrumental), drawing, flower arranging, fashion design, calligraphy, origami, culinary art, architectural design, painting (water colors, oil and acrylics, tempera, pen & ink, sand etc.), print making, papier mach'e, beading, dance, carving, scrimshaw, skin sewing, oratory, etc.

Art Elements: Line, shape, form, space, texture, value and color make up the elements of art.

Asian Art: Asian Art is defined by country and certain time periods in history. Refer to the following web site http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_periods

Balance: A sense of stability when applied to opposing visual attractions or forces.

Color: (*noun*) - Color is the element of art that is produced when light, striking an object, is reflected back to the eye. There are three (3) properties to color.

First is hue, which simply means the name we give to a color (red, yellow, blue, etc.).

The second property is intensity, which refers to the strength and vividness of the color. For example, we may describe the color blue as "royal" (bright, rich, vibrant) or "dull" (grayed).

The third property of color is its value, meaning its lightness or darkness. The terms shade and tint are in reference to value changes in colors.

Contrast: Contrast makes it possible to show differences within a composition. An example would be a dark object on a mostly light colored background.

Critique: The act of making judgments; analysis of qualities and evaluation of comparative worth; especially the critical consideration and judgment of literary or artistic work.

Culture: The word *culture*, from the Latin *colo, -ere*, with its root meaning "to cultivate", generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activity significance. Different definitions of "culture" reflect different theoretical bases for understanding, or criteria for evaluating, human activity. There is no one universally accepted definition.

Emphasis: Emphasis calls attention to important areas of design and subdues everything else on the picture plane or on a three-dimensional form.

Folk Art: Art made by people who have had little or no formal schooling in art.

Folktale: A tale or story circulated by word of mouth among common people. Traditional among a people and characteristically anonymous, timeless, and placeless

Form: (*noun*) - Form is an element of art. At its most basic, a form is a three-dimensional geometrical figure (i.e.: sphere, cube, cylinder, cone, etc.), as opposed to a *shape*, which is two-dimensional, or *flat*.

Harmony and Unity: The arrangement of color, size, shape, that is pleasing to the eye. All parts of the composition work and belong together.

Legend: A story handed down from early times by tradition and popularly regarded as historical although not entirely verifiable.

Line: (noun) - A line is a basic element of art, referring to a continuous mark, made on a surface, by a moving point.

Medium: The material or technique used by an artist to produce a work of art.

Mood: An overall feeling or emotion influenced by a particular art form.

Movement: The path our eyes follow as we look at a work of art.

Opinion: A belief not based on absolute certainty or positive knowledge but on what seems true, valid, or probable to one's own mind; judgment.

Perspective: In the context of drawing or painting, perspective is the technique an artist uses to create the illusion of three dimensions on a flat surface. Simply put, perspective is a means of fooling the viewer's eye.

Pre-historic Art: In the history of art, **prehistoric art** is all art produced in preliterate cultures (prehistory), beginning somewhere in very late geological history. Refer to the following web site http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_periods

Realism: Art forms which confirm what the eyes see.

Repetition: Repetition occurs when elements which have something in common are repeated regularly or irregularly, sometimes creating a rhythm.

Rhythm: The flow or movement within a work of art. The pace the eye travels over an art work.

Shape: (noun) - A shape is an element of art. Specifically, it is an *enclosed space*, the boundaries of which are defined by other elements of art (i.e.: lines, colors, values, textures, etc.). Shapes are limited to two dimensions: length and width. **Geometric shapes** like circles, rectangles, squares, triangles, have the clear edges that one achieves when using tools to create such shapes. **Organic shapes** have natural, less well-defined edges (think: an amoeba or a cloud).

Space: (noun) - An element of art, **space** refers to distances or areas around, between or within components of a piece. **Space** can be *positive* (white or light) or *negative* (black or dark), *open* or *closed*, *shallow* or *deep* and *two-dimensional* or *three-dimensional*. Sometimes space isn't actually within a piece, but the *illusion* of it is.

Strands: The four main strands of art are: dance, music, theatre, and visual art

Texture: (noun) - **Texture**, an element of art, is used to describe either the way a three-dimensional work *actually* feels when touched, or the *visual* "feel" of a two-dimensional work. Take rocks, for example. A real, 3-D rock might feel rough or smooth, and definitely feels hard when touched or picked up. A painter, depicting a rock, would create the illusions of these qualities through use of color, line, shape, etc.

Unity: Oneness, consistency or integration where each element plays an important part within the art piece.

Value: (*noun*) - An element of art, value refers to the lightness or darkness of a color. Value becomes critical in a work which has no colors other than black, white and a gray scale. For an example of *value* in action, think of a black and white photograph. Visualize how the infinite variations of gray suggest planes and textures.

Variation: Diversifying elements within an art work to add visual interest. Choosing a design element and change it within the composition by modifying shape, color, position, or texture.

Western Art: Western Art is defined by certain time periods in history. Refer to the following web site http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_periods

Student Art Critique Form

Name _____

Art Critiqued _____

What is a critique?

A critique is an oral or written discussion strategy used to analyze, describe, and interpret works of art. Below is a sample set of focus questions for an art critique related to four major areas of art criticism: description, analysis, interpretation, judgment.

Focus Questions

Critique

| Focus Questions | Critique |
|---|----------|
| Description Describe the work without using value words such as "beautiful" or "ugly": | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the written description on the label or in the program about the work? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the title and who is (are) the artist(s)? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When and where was the work created | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the elements of the work (i.e., line movement, light, space). | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the technical qualities of the work (i.e., tools, materials, instruments). | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the subject matter. What is it all about? Are there recognizable images? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the inspiration (if known)? | |
| | |
| Analysis Describe how the work is organized as a complete composition: | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the work constructed or planned (i.e., acts, movements, lines)? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify some of the similarities throughout the work (i.e., repetition of lines, two songs in each act). | |

| | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify some of the points of emphasis in the work (i.e., specific scene, figure, movement). | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If the work has subjects or characters, what are the relationships between or among them? | |
| | |
| <p>Interpretation</p> <p>Describe how the work makes you think or feel:</p> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the expressive qualities you find in the work. What expressive language would you use to describe the qualities (i.e., tragic, ugly, funny)? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the work remind you of other things you have experienced (i.e., analogy or metaphor)? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does the work relate to other ideas or events in the world and/or in your other studies? | |
| | |
| <p>Judgment or Evaluation</p> <p>Present your opinion of the work's success or failure:</p> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What qualities of the work make you feel it is a success or failure? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compare it with similar works that you think are good or bad. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What criteria can you list to help others judge this work? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How original is the work? Why do you feel this work is original or not original? | |