

Art Criticism and Aesthetic Judgment

Have you ever recommended a new music CD to your friends? If you have, you were judging the music and making decisions about why it was a success and not a failure. You were acting as a critic.

Have you ever become so absorbed in watching a wonderful play or movie that you forgot about the passing of time? If you have, you were deeply involved in a work of theatrical or cinematic art and you were having an aesthetic experience. Understanding criticism and aesthetics as they apply to art is the purpose of this chapter.

When you look at Matisse's *Purple Robe and Anemones* (Figure 2.1), you may have difficulty understanding what you see because everything looks so flat. Notice that you can see both the top and sides of the table. The artist has used the same effect in painting the woman. Every area of the painting is filled with patterns of lines or shapes. Where do you see patterns in this work? Most of the colors are very bright because Matisse used color to express his emotions and ideas. He was more concerned with visual pleasure through color and pattern than with realism in his paintings.

Developing Your

PORTFOLIO

The act of creation may be satisfying for an artist.

The act of appreciating an artwork—having an aesthetic experience—can be satisfying for a viewer. Select an artwork in the book that attracts your eyes. Study it for several minutes. Read the caption and answer any questions. Give yourself time to perceive the artwork instead of just looking at it. Then write a short paragraph about the experience and what you learned from it. Be sure to list the title of the artwork as well as the artist.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the purpose of art criticism.
- Use the steps of art criticism.
- Explain the three aesthetic theories of art.
- Know what to look for when judging functional objects.
- Use the steps of art history operations.

WORDS TO LEARN

criteria
aesthetics
art criticism
aesthetic experience
description
analysis
interpretation
judgment
literal qualities
design qualities
expressive qualities
Imitationalism
Formalism
Emotionalism
individual style

Art Criticism: Learning from a Work of Art

There are professional critics who appear on television or write reviews about new movies, plays, television shows, videos, books, art exhibits, and music. These critics describe their responses to various forms of art, and give you their assessment of the merits of the works. You may not always agree with their opinions because your **criteria**, or *standards of judgment*, may be very different from those of the professional critic. In this chapter you will learn about **aesthetics** (es-thet-iks), *the philosophy or study of the nature and value of art*. This will allow

you to form your own intelligent opinions about works of art. You will also learn about art criticism. **Art criticism** is *an organized approach for studying a work of art*.

Why Study Art Criticism?

What do you think of when you hear the word *criticism*? Do you think it means saying something negative? This is not true. A criticism can be a positive statement. For example, when you shop for clothes, you try on many things. You act as a critic using personal criteria to determine which pieces of clothing look good on you and which pieces do not suit you. You have developed your own criteria for choosing clothing through personal experience.

When you look at Alma Thomas's painting, *Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses* (**Figure 2.2**), you may experience confusion. You may not have had enough experience to develop a set of criteria to judge a work that has no recognizable subject. If you are like most people who are new to art, you may not know what to say. You may be afraid that you will say the wrong thing.



◀ **FIGURE 2.2** At first glance, this painting appears to consist of simple shapes and bright colors. The title of the work, however, should help you understand what the dabs of color represent. Notice how large the painting is. How big does that make each dab of color? Can you imagine the garden these flowers would grow in?

Alma Thomas. *Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses*. 1969. Acrylic on canvas. 152.4 × 127 cm (60 × 50"). The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay.

Art criticism is not difficult. In fact, it can be a lot of fun. At the very least, it can make the study of art less mysterious and more logical. Art criticism is a sequential approach for looking at and talking about art.

Your own life experiences may also help you understand the meaning of each work of art. No one has done or seen exactly the same things you have, so no one will see exactly what you see in a work of art. No one can think exactly the way you think. You may see ideas in a work of art that were never dreamed of by the artist. This does not mean that you are wrong; it simply means that the work of art is so powerful that it has a special meaning for everybody.

Learning art criticism will help you interpret works of art. It will give you the confidence to discuss works of art without worrying about what other people might think. It will help you to organize your thoughts. You will develop the courage to speak your mind and make sound aesthetic judgments.

As you learn the language of art, you will be able to “dig deeper” into the layers of meaning of each art object. The deeper you dig, the more important your feelings for that work of art will become. This will make your **aesthetic experience**, or *your personal interaction with a work of art*, more meaningful and memorable. The work will then become a permanent part of your memory.

The Steps of Art Criticism

When you become involved in the process of art criticism, you learn *from* the work of art. Critiquing an artwork is like playing detective. You must assume the artist has a secret message hidden

within the work. Your job is to find the message and solve the mystery.

In this chapter you will learn a special four-step approach that will help you find the hidden meanings in art. The four steps, which must be taken in order, are *Description*, *Analysis*, *Interpretation*, and *Judgment*. By following these steps you will be able to answer the following questions:

- What do I see? (*Description*)
- How is the work organized? (*Analysis*)
- What is the artist trying to communicate? (*Interpretation*)
- Is this a successful work of art? (*Judgment*)

As you go through the steps of *description* and *analysis*, you will collect facts and clues. When you get to *interpretation*, you will make guesses about what you think the artist is trying to say. Finally, during *judgment*, you will make your own decisions about the artistic merit of the work.

Step One: Description (What do I see?)

In the first step of art criticism, **description**, you carefully *make a list of all the things you see in the work*. These include the following:

- The size of the work, the medium used, and the process used.
- The subject, object, and details.
- The elements of art used in the work.

During the description step, notice the size of the work and the medium used. You will find these facts in the credit line. This information will help you visualize the real size and look of the work. Notice that Figure 2.1 on page 24 and Figure 3.1 on page 40 are about the same size as reproduced in this book. Read both credit lines and notice the difference in the actual size of each work.

Look at the painting by José Clemente Orozco called *Barricade* (**Figure 2.3**). Notice that the work is 55 inches tall. How does that compare to your own height? If this artwork were standing on the floor, would the figures be larger or smaller than you? What materials were used to create this work?

During the description step, you must be objective. In describing Orozco's painting, you can say that you see five people. You could not say they are all men. That would be a guess. You can describe the person crouched on the ground as wearing a blue shirt and holding a large knife. You can describe the tense muscles that are bulging on the other four figures, but at this point in the criticism process, you should not try to guess why they are tense.

Look again at Figure 2.3. Line and color are two of the art elements that



play an important part in this work. Can you identify the other art elements used?

Look at Figure 2.2 on page 26. This is a nonobjective work. In nonobjective works, the art elements become the subject matter.

Step Two: Analysis (How is the work organized?)

During this step, you are still collecting facts about the elements and principles of art that are used in the artwork. In **analysis** you *discover how the principles of art are used to organize the art elements of line, color, shape, form, space, and texture*. You will learn how the artist has used the elements and principles to create the content of the art, which is known as the theme or the message. Look at *The Blue Wall* by Leo Twiggs (**Figure 2.4**). Notice the curved lines that outline the two figures. Where do you see the darkest colors? Where are the lightest colors? What textures do you see? Notice how the head of one figure is cut off at the top, and the body of the other is cut off at the waist. As you learn more about the elements and principles you will be able to collect more clues that you can use to interpret each work.

Step Three: Interpretation (What is the artist trying to communicate?)

During Step Three, you will answer the question, "What is the artist trying to communicate?" In **interpretation** you will *explain or tell the meaning or mood of the work*. It is here that you can make guesses about the artwork, as long

◀ **FIGURE 2.3** Orozco was one of the Mexican muralists who combined the solid forms of ancient Mexican art with the powerful colors of European Expressionism. This work depicts the peasants fighting for freedom during the Mexican Revolution in 1910. What could you do to find out more about the event this painting depicts?

José Clemente Orozco, *Barricade*, 1931. Oil on canvas. 140 × 114.3 cm (55 × 45"). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. Given anonymously. © Estate of José Clemente Orozco/SOMAAP, Mexico/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

► **FIGURE 2.4** Your interpretation of this work will depend on the clues you have collected during the first two steps of art criticism—description and analysis—plus your personal life experiences. People have different experiences which will produce a variety of interpretations, all of which could be acceptable.

Leo Twigg. *The Blue Wall*. 1969. Batik painting. 61 × 76.2 cm (24 × 30"). Private collection.



as they appear to be supported by what you see in the work. Interpretation can be the most difficult step in art criticism, because you must dare to be adventurous in stretching the range of your thought processes and imagination. It can also be the most creative and the most rewarding step.

You must use your intelligence, imagination, and courage. You must not be afraid to make an interpretation that is different from someone else's. After all, you are different from other people. Your interpretation will be influenced by what you have experienced and seen in your life.

Your interpretation must be based on the visual facts and clues you collected during your first two steps. Your interpretation can be based on your feelings, but your feelings must be backed up by observation of what you actually see in the artwork.

When you look at the two boys in Figure 2.4, you notice that the boys are

frowning and looking away from each other, but you also notice that there is one point in the work where they are touching. What do you think is happening? What is the artist telling you about these two boys?

Step Four: Judgment (Is this a successful work of art?)

In Step Four you will judge whether or not the work is successful. In **judgment** you *determine the degree of artistic merit*. This is the time to make your own decisions. There are two levels of judgment to be made. The first is personal. Do you like the work? No one can ever tell you what to like or dislike. You must make up your own mind. To make a fair judgment, you must be honest with yourself. Only you know why you feel the way you do. Otherwise, you may close yourself off from experiencing different kinds of art. The second level of judgment you must make is also subjective, but it is somewhat different. At this

MEET THE ARTIST

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE



American, 1887–1986

From the time she was a child, Georgia O'Keeffe knew she was going to be an artist. She studied with several teachers and began creating the flower paintings that made her famous. She painted her flowers big so that they would take viewers by surprise. In 1915, however, she realized that she had ideas for art that were not like anything she had been taught. She decided at age 29 to focus totally on nature and she burned her earlier works in order to start fresh, emphasizing shapes and forms. She continued following her own vision throughout her long life, never being pulled into any of the many movements that have dominated the American art scene during the twentieth century.

O'Keeffe loved to see “connections” in the shapes of ordinary things. After painting a shell and shingle many times, she painted a mountain. It was only later that she realized that she had given the mountain the same shape as the shell and the shingle. She saw beautiful forms everywhere, even in the most unusual places, such as the vast desert spaces and parched bones found near her home in New Mexico.

point, you use aesthetics to help you decide whether the work is successful. A work can be very successful aesthetically, but you might not want to live with it.

To make a judgment, you must take your time. **Figure 2.5** is a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe. To judge this painting, first think about how you would describe the subject of the painting. Then consider how the artist has arranged the art elements according to

the art principles in order to create the composition. Notice how she has used shading to make the skull look solid and the drapery look like a hanging banner. However, she has painted the red borders and the black shape behind the skull flat. Then, think about the feeling the painting gives you. By taking time to look at and describe, analyze, and interpret what you think the meaning of the painting might be, you will be able to make an intelligent judgment. Ask yourself, is this a work of artistic merit? Is it successful?



Check Your Understanding

1. What is aesthetics?
2. Name and describe the four steps of art criticism in order.

◀ **FIGURE 2.5** Georgia O'Keeffe loved the West. She shocked the public with paintings of objects from her environment that people were not used to seeing hanging on a wall. She painted *Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue* because she wanted to create something uniquely American. Do you think she succeeded?

Georgia O'Keeffe. *Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue*. 1931. Oil on canvas. 101.3 × 91.1 cm (39 7/8 × 35 7/8"). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. The Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1952. (52.203)