

ART CRITICISM AS A FOUR STEP PROCESS

(Based on the work of Dr. Edmund Feldman, From *Varieties of Visual Experience*.)

There are four steps to 'unwrapping a work of art'. A discovery of meaning and goal, invites people to go beyond initial 'snap' judgments such as "I like it." or "I don't like it."

In real practice, these questions flow forward and back as the viewer is guided to establish a meaning from clues in the work.

1. **Description** = "What do you see?"
2. **Analysis** = "How is it arranged?"
3. **Interpretation** = "What does it mean?"
4. **Judgment** = "Is it significant?"

DESCRIPTION

Describe the work in terms of what can be seen, this includes sensory elements of art: color, line, texture, shape and space, but also can include the title, artist, date created, size, subject matter, materials used, and presentation.

Prompts:

"What do you see?"

"Are there things in the art work that you recognize?"

"Try to discover as much as you can about the art work."

"Think like a detective."

Good questions to ask:

"Can you identify any objects? Describe them. Where are they in the image?"

Are there open and closed spaces in the work? What takes up the most space in the picture?

Are people shown to you? What are they doing?

Is a time, place or event shown?

What kind of colors, shapes, lines, and textures has the artist used? Describe them.

Where do you see them?

What is the first thing you notice when you look at the art work?"

ANALYSIS

Analyze how the parts you see and have described are arranged and work together. The formal principles of art: balance, movement, proportion rhythm unity, and contrast relate to the organizational properties in a work of art.

Prompts:

"How is it arranged?"

"How has the artist used the elements together?"

Good questions to ask:

"Is this picture balanced? Is it symmetrical or asymmetrical? Has the artist used color shape or space to create the balance?"

Do you see pattern or repetition in this picture? What has the artist used to create that effect? Does it make your eye move around the picture? Has something else created movement?

Unity is the feeling of the image "holding together". Is this picture unified-? What elements has the artist used to create unity? Where is the focus? How does the artist make this area stand out? Does another color shape, space or texture make it stand out?

Is there distance created in this picture? Is there a foreground, middle ground and background? What visual tricks has the artist used to create the balance?"

INTERPRETATION

Interpret the meaning based on the description and analysis. Always come back to the things known about the artwork as evidence to support the interpretation

Multiple meanings are appropriate if they make sense based on the evidence but some interpretations are better than others. Plausible interpretations leave no obvious components unexplained.

Prompts:

"What does it mean?"

"What is the art work about?"

"Have we covered all the possible meanings?"

Good questions to ask:

"What mood or feeling seems to be expressed in this art work? Does it seem quiet? Happy? Powerful? Dreamy? What in the work makes you think this?"

What are the ideas, meanings, and concepts presented? How are they revealed?

Are any of the following devices used:

Allegory: a representation that illustrates a deeper meaning;

Symbol: represents something by association, resemblance, or convention;

Sign: something that stands for something else; ***Iconography:*** identifying content of subject matter.

What insights do you have about this work now that you have looked at it in depths Has your idea of what it means changed from your first thoughts?"

JUDGEMENT

Judge the significance or value of the work of art. Go beyond whether you like it or not to decide if it is good/ important/ worthwhile or bad/ trivial/ not worth examining. Judgment requires reasons. Reasons rest with criteria and standards found in theories of art.

Evaluation can be viewed as a way to find value and significance rather than stamping approval or disapproval.

Prompts:

"Is it significant?"

"Remember to give careful reasons for your opinion."

Good questions to ask:

"What do you see in the artwork to help you judge it as good or not so good?"

Is the artwork important because of what it means? Why?

Is the artwork important because of what it does? Why?

How well does the art achieve the interpretation identified?

What standards are you using to judge this artwork?"

Some standards are derived from traditional theories of art:

Mimetic: art is an imitation of the world;

Expressionistic: art is an expression of an emotion;

Pragmatic: art functions toward some practical end;

Formal: art is a significant arrangement of sensory elements.