**Defining Criticism of Art**

Art criticism is responding to, interpreting meaning, and making critical judgments about specific works of art.

Art critics help viewers perceive, interpret, and judge artworks.

Critics tend to focus more on modern and contemporary art from cultures close to their own.

Art historians tend to study works made in cultures that are more distant in time and space.

When initially introduced to art criticism, many people associate negative connotations with the word "criticism."

A professional art critic may be

a newspaper reporter assigned to the art beat,

a scholar writing for professional journals or texts, or

an artist writing about other artists.

Journalistic criticism –

Written for the general public, includes reviews of art exhibitions in galleries and museums.

(Suggestions that journalistic criticism deals with art mainly to the extent that it is newsworthy.)

Scholarly art criticism

Written for a more specialized art audience and appears in art journals.

Scholar-critics may be college and university professors or museum curators, often with particular knowledge about a style, period, medium, or artist.

**FORMAL ANALYSIS**

**-Four levels of formal analysis, which you can use to explain a work of art:**

**1. Description** **= pure description of the object without value judgments,**

**analysis, or interpretation.**

It answers the question, "What do you see?"

The various elements that constitute a description include:

a. Form of art whether architecture, sculpture, painting or one of the minor arts

b. Medium of work whether clay, stone, steel, paint, etc., and technique (tools used)

c. Size and scale of work (relationship to person and/or frame and/or context)

d. Elements or general shapes (architectural structural system) within the composition, including building of post-lintel construction or painting with several figures lined up in a row; identification of objects

e. Description of axis whether vertical, diagonal, horizontal, etc.

f. Description of line, including contour as soft, planar, jagged, etc.

g. Description of how line describes shape and space (volume); distinguish between lines of objects and lines of composition, e.g., thick, thin, variable, irregular, intermittent, indistinct, etc.

h. Relationships between shapes, e.g., large and small, overlapping, etc.

i. Description of color and color scheme = palette

j. Texture of surface or other comments about execution of work

k. Context of object: original location and date

2. **Analysis = determining what the features suggest and deciding why the artist used such features to convey specific ideas.**

It answers the question, "How did the artist do it?"

The various elements that constitute analysis include:

a. Determination of subject matter through naming iconographic elements, e.g., historical event, allegory, mythology, etc.

b. Selection of most distinctive features or characteristics whether line, shape, color, texture, etc.

c. Analysis of the principles of design or composition, e.g., stable,

repetitious, rhythmic, unified, symmetrical, harmonious, geometric, varied, chaotic, horizontal or vertically oriented, etc.

d. Discussion of how elements or structural system contribute to appearance of image or function

e. Analysis of use of light and role of color, e.g., contrasty, shadowy,

illogical, warm, cool, symbolic, etc.

f. Treatment of space and landscape, both real and illusionary (including use of perspective), e.g., compact, deep, shallow, naturalistic, random

g. Portrayal of movement and how it is achieved

h. Effect of particular medium(s) used

i. Your perceptions of balance, proportion and scale (relationships of each part of the composition to the whole and to each other part) and your emotional

j. Reaction to object or monument

**3. Interpretation = establishing the broader context for this type of art.**

It answers the question, "Why did the artist create it and what does it mean

The various elements that constitute interpretation include:

a. Main idea, overall meaning of the work.

b. Interpretive Statement: Can I express what I think the artwork is about in one sentence?

c. Evidence: What evidence inside or outside the artwork supports my interpretation?

**4. Judgment: Judging a piece of work means giving it rank in relation to other works and of course considering a very important aspect of the visual arts; its originality.**

Is it a good artwork?

Criteria: What criteria do I think are most appropriate for judging the artwork?

Evidence: What evidence inside or outside the artwork relates to each criterion?

Judgment: Based on the criteria and evidence, what is my judgment about the quality of the artwork?

**Barrett's Principles of Interpretation**

1. Artworks have "aboutness" and demand interpretation.

2. Interpretations are persuasive arguments.

3. Some interpretations are better than others.

4. Good interpretations of art tell more about the artwork than they tell about the critic.

5. Feelings are guides to interpretations.

6. There can be different, competing, and contradictory interpretations of the same artwork.

7. Interpretations are often based on a worldview.

8. Interpretations are not so much absolutely right, but more or less reasonable, convincing, enlightening, and informative.

9. Interpretations can be judged by coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness.

10. An artwork is not necessarily about what the artist wanted it to be about.

11. A critic ought not to be the spokesperson for the artist.

12. Interpretations ought to present the work in its best rather than its weakest light.

13. The objects of interpretation are artworks, not artists.

14. All art is in part about the world in which it emerged.

15. All art is in part about other art.

16. No single interpretation is exhaustive of the meaning of an artwork.

17. The meanings of an artwork may be different from its significance to the viewer. Interpretation is ultimately a communal endeavor, and the community is ultimately self- corrective.

18. Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and to continue on our own.