

# The Theory of Art Criticism

The tools of art criticism

Types of art criticism

Kinds of critical judgment

There is no eternally valid, permanently correct interpretations and evaluations of particular works.

There are systematic procedures for making interpretations and evaluations which are fairly durable and defensible.

The chief goal of art criticism,

- Is understanding
- A way of looking at art objects
- Yield the maximum of knowledge about their meanings and their real or alleged merits.
- Delight/pleasure

The purpose of art criticism is not entirely hedonistic or centered on introspection and a search for causes.

We want to know whether others share our feelings when they have experienced the same work.

# The Tool of Art Criticism

A wide acquaintance with art

Knowledge of art history

Direct experience of original artworks

Reproductions with information

Museums studios

Understanding style

Social and cultural context

The opinions of critics and scholars during the principle periods

Technical factors governing artistic execution in various media

Art historians do not usually gain through their training as much technical knowledge as do the practicing artists. Studying artwork in various stages of execution may compensate this lacuna.

Some feel that artists are almost constitutionally incapable of making critical judgments objectively and dispassionately.

## The Tool of Art Criticism

A critic with mainly theoretical and verbal preparation may be ill-equipped to assess properly the elements of technical intension and quality of execution.

Critics often denigrate technical facility, to regard it as a fault, as *prima facie* evidence of superficiality.

Critics may not recognize poor craftsmanship or construct theoretical grounds for consigning craftsmanship to the dumping ground of history.

Conscientious critics are eager to be fair to be open to legitimacy of artistic expression no matter how unusual, shocking or experimental.

A critic must have access to a wide range of aesthetic emotions, else his usefulness is severally limited. Many heated controversies about contemporary art may, indeed be based on a restricted sensibility or range of aesthetic perception on the part of a critic.

Example: regarding straight lines, rectilinear composition, simplified planes, and crystalline structures as harsh, cold, impersonal, mechanical, repellent

and preferring curvilinear composition, for convex shapes, for smooth surfaces, for the S-curve which theorists used to consider the 'curve of beauty'

Would prevent dealing adequately as a critic with the work of Feininger, Mondrian, Mies van der Rohe, Albers, Gabo, and many others.

A critic who dislikes planimetric forms would be emotionally prevented from experiencing fully the architecture of Mies or the painting of Mondrian.

Some of us may be debarred from the fullness of experience by 'emotional blind spots' or by strongly held preferences, as cited above.

We may be limited in our emotional range and reluctant to extend that range further.

It is difficult to avoid deductive critical procedures entirely, and some times they are useful, but it is usually best, when confronting a difficult work, to attend to one's experience systematically, relying on the soundness of one's critical technique to lead rationally towards verdict.

## Types of Art Criticism

Journalistic criticism

Pedagogical criticism

Scholarly criticism

Popular criticism

## Kinds of Critical Judgment

Formalism

Expressivism

Instrumentalism

The term formalism describes an emphasis on form over content or meaning in the arts, literature, or philosophy.

A practitioner of formalism is called a formalist.

A formalist, with respect to some discipline, holds that there is no transcendent meaning to that discipline other than the literal content created by a practitioner.

For example, formalists within mathematics claim that mathematics is no more than the symbols written down by the mathematician, which is based on logic and a few elementary rules alone.

General speaking, formalism is the concept which everything necessary in a work of art is contained within it.

The context for the work, including the reason for its creation, the historical background, and the life of the artist, is not considered to be significant. Examples of formalist aestheticians are [Clive Bell](#), [Jerome Stolnitz](#), and [Edward Bullough](#).

## Morellian analysis

- In the late 19th Century, physician and art collector Giovanni Morelli developed a technique, which seeks to distinguish individual artists and workshops by idiosyncrasies or repeated stylistic details that arise in their works.
- Morelli recognized that an artist, upon reaching a level of proficiency, develops formulas in the creation of figures, which maintain consistency and are sustained throughout his life, even as his style evolves.
- Through close study of these repeated details, formulas are identified and mapped.
- This allows the observer to readily identify evidence of the hand of a particular painter in a work like a detective matching fingerprints.
- The evidence lies in the workmanship of both large and small brushstrokes and the artist's application of paints to create features such as eyes, collars or plants.
- The painting's features are then matched with the unique formulas by which the painter is known.



This technique came to be known as “Morellian Analysis,” and to be a widely used practice in the fields of fine art attribution and authentication.

Although Morellian Analysis is sometimes called a scientific technique, it relies to some degree on the experience of the analyst.

By combining a general study and a set of consistency checks with Morellian analysis, our experts can produce a highly accurate assessment of a painting's authenticity.

With a detailed examination we can also determine the age, origin and materials of a work.

Our skilled researchers can then assess the stylistic intricacies of the painting and workshop to which it is attributed.

Norman Bryson

Vision and Painting: the Logic of the Gaze; Art history beyond Gombrich

As an art theorist, he employs a methodology examining what he identifies as conflicting factors ("impulses") in the creation to the work of art, including social history and psychology. Art history, he argues, "attempts a mimesis of the absolute idealism of art, as the latter had been defined since early aesthetics."

## Feldman's Model of Art Criticism

From the work of Edmund Burke Feldman, available in many of his books from the late 1960's and early 70's

### Description

Make a list of the visual qualities of the work that are obvious and immediately perceived. Ask students "What do you see in the artwork"? and "What else"?

Includes content and subject matter in representational works, includes abstract elements in nonrepresentational pieces.

### Analysis

Focus on the formal aspects of elements of art, principles of design and other formal considerations: exaggeration, composition etc.

"How does the artist create a center of interest?" How does the use of color impact the painting?"

## Interpretation

Propose ideas for possible meaning based on evidence. Viewers project their emotions/feelings/intentions onto the work. “What do you think it means”?

“What was the artist trying to communicate”?

“What clues do you see that support your ideas”?

## Judgment

Discuss the overall strengths/success/merit of the work. This step is usually used with mature audiences