

Elements of a Positive Critique

Thank you to Ilene Spiewak and Carolyn Brancato for providing these guidelines.

A critique is a search to discover what has happened in the work.

Appreciation and discovery stimulates personal activity and growth. In the end, the artist has to settle matters for him/herself with his own point of view. Art appreciation is personal. Each work evokes an individual response.

We can't be told how to appreciate, though often, critical judgment is given without hesitation. We need to leave our preconceived ideas and views about works of art behind, and be open to re-evaluation and new sensations. The artist can err toward too much complacency or overly harsh criticism. Critiques expose one to comparisons with other artists who may approach analysis from different schools of thought. Do not ask for a critique until you are sure that you can't give it yourself. Then you will be in a good state to receive.

Here are some protocols for giving and receiving critiques for useful feedback.

Some things to think about and ways to approach a discussion:

- There is no “good” or “bad” art.
- Be respectful and professional. Refer to the artist in a professional way. Not “**you** did this” but “**The artist** did this...” or “This was executed with an eye towards...”
- If possible, ask the artist what his/her vision was. What was he/she trying to accomplish?
- **As people make comments, the artist shouldn't respond.** This just gets into a defensive back and forth. Just sit back and take it in. Take away what you wish and discard what is not useful to you.
- Avoid judgmental comments. We cannot impose judgments on others.

Make Open-Ended Comments:

- “I am curious about something...”
- “What would happen if...”
- “One of the things I see...”
- “This stands out for me...”
- “What do you think about...”

Make specific comments:

- How does the eye enter the picture? Move around?
 - What are the elements of composition, light and dark, chroma, edges?
 - What stands out?
 - What seems important?
 - What about the style?
 - Composition
- Basics:*
- Play of light
 - Color, line
 - Subject matter
 - Handling of paint

Notes from workshop sponsored by the Guild of Berkshire Artists:

In this workshop we will focus on **Key Elements of Art Appreciation**. We will talk about what makes a good painting, regardless of its style. We will discuss the “language” of art – essentials of composition, design, color, line, use of light and dark, etc. How does your eye enter the painting? How does it move around the painting? Have you accomplished what you sought out to do? Slides and art books will illustrate these concepts. Then we will talk about protocols for giving and receiving critiques to provide useful feedback (*see page 1 of this pdf*).

Imagination is described as a conscious use of images. Perception is how we organize some stimuli while excluding others. We see things in gestalts, wholes.

Recognition of objects and incidents is important in our visual experience and in some ways, engages our attention. But it is only one facet, and to stop there would be simplistic. That said, help the observer by making your example simple. Your viewer comes into your narrative, your place of visual detail.

Technique can be like a language – clear, simple, sincere – and also reflecting emotions about the subject:

- Is your work responsive?
- Is there a dialogue between the viewer and the work?
- Does it hold your attention?

Style is the way you talk in paint:

In a canvas there are two orders working together – the dynamic and the static.

- How does your eye move around the painting?
- Look for echoes... sometimes the same shape or direction, or color will repeat through the composition.
- Look for sequences, patterns, saturation of color, and the grip of a line.

When making artwork:

- Note how a line takes hold. Does it hook vital parts together and bind the composition? Big line expresses ideas. Every mark put down is part of the construction. It adds strength and takes nothing away. There is a power that things have when organized. Each part depends on the other.
- Keep thinking of rhythm, line and forms. Colors have a rhythmic effect. Perception of line and color, continuity of direction and symmetry, as well as rhythmic movement, provide a sense of structure to the picture.
- Scale is important. An unidentifiable object or strong mark or form will help define the space and the proportional relationships of the parts.
- Find shapes and lose them. Add/subtract.

- Notice the meaning of every change. Venture and embrace the difficulties.
- Use of light suggests volume, mass, and organization of space. Study the color environment to which the form belongs. Color does more than characterize the emotional climate of the work.

Expressive content is a unique fusion of subject matter and form that makes a work of art. Two paintings can have the same subject matter and form, but very different expressive content.

Subject is not to be copied, but realized. We want the vision, the result of observation, and the effect of the model (landscape, still-life) on the artist:

- Paint the essence of the subject
- Paint the energy; the vibration of breathing

What is needed is good judgment in the handling of your materials.