

Learning to See

4 steps to effectively dissecting a painting

Looking at a work of art and really *seeing* what is there are not necessarily the same thing. There are many components that come together to create an effective piece of artwork. By studying individual parts we can help to increase our understanding and enjoyment of the total image.

S--L--O--W-- D--O--W--N:

The first part of learning to look meaningfully at art (or the world for that matter) is to take time to focus. Rather than breezing past, reading the label and moving on to the next item:

- stop and stand still for a moment.**
- let your eye travel around the picture plane
- take in the colors and textures
- move forward and back to see if distance changes the view (think Monet's water lilies- they're blurry up close, but sharper from the center of the room)

It's elemental, really:

Once you have experienced the overall image, it's time to start taking things apart. Identify and describe the formal characteristics of the image - find which of the basic elements and principles of art have been used (hint: in a great work of art you'll find most of them!).

- **Line**- a moving point, lines can be actual or implied, and define the edges of objects and spaces
- **Shape**- an area enclosed by a line, shapes can be geometric or organic
- **Form**- an object that exists in 3-D space, or has the illusion (through shading) of existing in space
- **Value**- refers to light and dark
- **Color**- one of the most expressive elements of an image, it has three properties: hue, intensity, and value. Colors are frequently talked about in terms of "schemes" such as warm or cool
- **Texture**- the actual feel of the surface, or the simulated look of something smooth, rough, grainy, etc.
- **Space**- determined by shapes and forms, space in an image can be deep or shallow. Positive space is the area occupied by objects; negative space is the empty area around them
- **Balance**- the distribution of visual weight, balance can be described as symmetrical, asymmetrical, radial, or even unbalanced
- **Unity**- refers to what works together to give the image a sense of harmony (or what ties everything together)
- **Contrast**- the difference between light and dark, contrast can be high or low
- **Movement**- the way a viewer's eye is drawn around the image to focal areas
- **Emphasis**- an area that stands out from others in the image and tends to hold the viewer's attention
- **Pattern**- repeating of objects, shapes, forms, symbols, etc. over a large portion of the surface
- **Rhythm**- a "visual beat," often using repetition to create a controlled movement around the image

Once you have described what you see, you can use those observations to talk about the composition, or layout, of the work.

People, Places, Plots:

The next piece of the artwork puzzle is to determine a few things about the content of the image before you.

- What is it? A head-and-shoulders portrait of a rich patron has a very different message and reason for existing than a sweeping landscape of the American west.
- What kind of story does the painting tell? Are we watching a Greek myth unfold before us, or is the story concerned with historical events? Is there a cautionary tale or a Memento Mori that we are supposed to pick up on?
- What are the story elements?
 - **Plot**- what is happening?
 - **Setting**- where are the events taking place?
 - **Characters**- who is being depicted? Who's most important?
 - **Action**- What moment of the story are we seeing? Is it at the pinnacle moment of decision, or does it foreshadow coming events?
 - **Theme**- what is the controlling idea, and what is the intended message?

Picking up the pieces:

Now that you've spent some time pulling out all the distinct pieces that combine to make an effective image, it's time to put everything back together.

Up to this point you have primarily done analysis and description of the various elements present in the painting. Now you can move on to the most exciting part of critiquing an image- interpreting and judging the artwork. The following questions are a place for you to start, but the possibilities of what to talk about here are pretty much endless!

Interpretation:

- What message do you think the artist wants viewers to get from looking at a particular work of art? Why is that important?
- What visual choices did the artist make to underscore their message? These can be as abstract as you would like... for example, did the artist use straight, bold lines to underscore the strength of the main character in a painting?
- What about the title? Does it *add* meaning to the work?

Judgment:

- Do you like the piece of artwork? Is it aesthetically beautiful or do you find it repulsive?
- Meaning- do you think the artist's message is clear? Is it an important idea? Does it seem relevant to society today? How about in the past and/or the future?
- Is the style the work is painted in effective for communicating the artist's ideas?

Examination of an artwork often yields a very personal connection to the piece. We all have different tastes and opinions, but the experience of truly understanding a work (and maybe even passing that knowledge on) is universally rewarding.

"The most fundamental reason one paints is in order to see." – Brett Whiteley