

# ***ART CRITICISM AS A FOUR STEP PROCESS***

(Based on the work of Dr. Edmund Feldman, From Varieties of Visual Experience.) Four steps to 'unwrapping a work of art', with a discovery of meaning the goal, and 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 that has a basis of clues from 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?"

**Describe:** Tell what you see (the visual facts).

- What is the name of the artist who created the photograph?
- What is the title of the photograph?
- When was the photo created?
- List the literal objects in the photo (trees, people, animals, mountains, rivers, etc.).
- What do you notice first when you look at the work? Why?
- What kinds of colors do you see? How would you describe them?
- Are there lines in the work? If so, what kinds of lines are they?
- What sort of textures do you see? How would you describe them?
- What time of day/night is it? How can we tell?

**Analyze:** Mentally separate the parts or elements, thinking in terms of textures, shapes/forms, light/dark or bright/dull colors, types of lines, and sensory qualities. In this step consider the most significant art principles that were used in the artwork. Describe how the artist used them to organize the elements. Suggested questions to help with analysis:

- How has the artist used colors in the work?
- What sort of effect do the colors have on the photograph?
- How has the artist used shapes within the work of art?
- How have lines been used in the work? Has the artist used them as an important or dominant part of the work, or do they play a different role?
- Does texture play in the work? How has texture been used within the work?
- How has the artist used light in the work? Is there the illusion of a scene with lights and shadows, or does the artist use light and dark values in a more abstracted way?
- How has the overall visual effect or mood of the work(s) been achieved by the use of elements of art and principles of design?
- Direction of attention: What do you see first in the photo? Is it the right thing? Do you have to hunt for the subject or does it stand out? Is your eye drawn to objects in the background, rather than the subject, or do you look to the edge of the frame, expecting to find something that isn't there?
- Spatial positioning and composition: Please do NOT just spout standard photographic guidelines as if they were the law! The rule of thirds, for example, is not an instruction handed down from the gods - it is a handy guideline to what will often work well. For some photos, a centered composition will be perfect and using the rule of thirds would ruin it. So think about what works in this case. Does anything look squeezed up against the side of the frame? Are there big open spaces around the edges that could be cropped out? Is there a clear subject that occupies the majority of the frame, or is the subject unclear or small and surrounded by irrelevant material?
- Exposure: Is any area overexposed or underexposed? If so, can you say why you think that happened? Are there details both in the highlights and in the shadows, or are there large "blown-out" highlight areas or "blocked-up" shadow areas? Again, blown highlights are not necessarily wrong. If you look at sunlight reflected in a glass window, what the eye will see is a white area, so there is no reason at all why a photo shouldn't show the same thing. Sometimes blown highlights can be used to good artistic effect. As always, don't parrot rules, think about how well things work in this photo. If the exposure is biased towards light (high key) or dark (low key), did the photographer make a good choice?
- Focus: Is the main subject in focus? Is it sharp focus, or a "soft" focus? Is the focus appropriate for the situation? Is anything in focus? Is it the subject or something else? Is the depth of field appropriate? Is

the subject contained within the depth of field or are parts of the subject fuzzy? Are there distracting elements in the background that are in focus, which would have been blurred out by a wider aperture? As with composition, remember that there are no fixed rules. Think about what works or doesn't work in the case of this particular photo.

- Depth of Field (DOF): Is the DOF shallow or deep? Does the DOF work in this shot, or should more (or less) of the photo be in focus?
- Lighting / White balance: Is the light soft or harsh? Does the type of lighting enhance or detract from the things in the photo? Is the white balance set correctly? Is there a yellowish, orangish, or greenish cast to the photo?
- Color: Was the photographer's choice to use or not use color sound? If they used color, does the color contribute to the image, or would it have been more effective in black and white? If its black and white, does that help to focus on the essentials of the image, or are we missing something important? This will always be a subjective judgment, of course, but hearing other people's opinions on this is often useful.
- Critique the composition: Centered vs. "Rule of Thirds." Is the main subject in the center of the frame? Is it on a third? Somewhere else? Does the chosen composition work, or would you have done something differently?
- Fore, Middle, and Backgrounds (Most applicable to landscape photos): Does the photo contain all three? If not, do you think it would be better if it did?
- Cropping/Framing: Is there wasted empty space in the photo? Should the crop have been tighter? Is it cropped so tightly that important parts of the photo have been cutoff?
- Tonal Range: What type of colors do you see? Did the photographer use a lot of primary colors? Secondary? Complementary? Are the colors too vivid? Not vivid enough? If you are looking at a B&W photo, is there a true black, true white, with a large tonal range in between, or is the photo too "gray"?
- Diagonals, S-Curves, etc.: Did the photographer make use of any visually-interesting elements, such as diagonal lines or S-curves?
- Leading lines: Do the lines and overall composition make you want to look deeper into the photo? Is your eye drawn into the photo, or out of it?
- Dark vs. Light areas: Are there too many bright areas? Too many dark areas?
- Balance: Is the photo balanced? Would it be better if there were other objects or other light/dark areas in the frame to improve the balance? If the photo is off balance, is there a reason for it?

**Interpretation:** An interpretation seeks to explain the meaning of the work based on what you have learned so far about the artwork, what do you think the artist was trying to say?

1. What is the artist's statement and/or title in this work?
2. What do you think it means?
3. What does it mean to you?
4. How does this relate to you and your life?
5. What feelings do you have when looking at this photograph?
6. Do you think there are things in the photo that represent other things-symbols?
8. Why did the artist create this artwork?

**Judgment:** After careful observation, analysis, and interpretation of an artwork, you are ready to make your own judgment. This is your personal evaluation based on the understandings of the work(s). Here are questions you might consider:

1. Why do you think that this work has intrinsic value or worth? What is the value that you find in the work(s)? (For example, it is a beautiful photograph, conveys an important social message, affects the way that I see the world, makes insightful connections, reaffirms a religious belief, etc.)
2. Do you think that the work(s) has a benefit for others? Do you find that the work communicates an idea, feeling or principle that would have value for others?
3. What kind of an effect do you think the work could have for others?
4. Does the work lack value or worth? Why do you think this is so? Could the reason you find the work lacking come from a poor use of the elements of art? Could the subject matter be unappealing, unimaginative, or repulsive?
5. Rather than seeing the work as being very effective or without total value, does the work fall somewhere in-between? Do you think that the work is just okay? What do you base this opinion on? The use of elements of art? Lack of personal expression? The work lacks a major focus? Explore your criticism of the work(s) as much as you would any positive perceptions. Realize that your own tastes and prejudices may enter into your criticism. Give your positive and negative perceptions.