

The Art of Critique

The following is the outcome of discussion at the November 208 Chapter Meeting, where we reviewed the Mentorship Program – and then focused on ways that people could structure a helpful critique. This summary is by no means but it may give a helpful starting point.

This is a very condensed summary and we recommend that members also access good books, DVDs, classes, etc that give information in greater depth.

What to Critique

Start with your **general impression** of the painting

What stands out most in the work?

Is there anything bothersome or unsettling about it?

Is the media used appropriate to the subject matter?

The use of a common, understandable **vocabulary** is essential. It is useful to refer to the basic building blocks of design: the Elements and Principles...

The Elements of Design are the most basic aspects of design:

Line

Shape

Colour

Form

Value

Texture

The Principles of Design refer to how these components are combined, related to each other, and used to create a composition.

Balance

Emphasis (or Dominance)

Contrast

Unity (or Harmony)

Movement

Rhythm

(Sometimes Pattern, Gradation, Repetition and Depth are also included here.)

Useful questions to ask yourself include:

How is the composition organized? Does it follow an “S” format (the stream or path winding into the distance), a “T” or “L” format? Cruciform? Diagonal? Is it based on a triangle?

If it is a landscape, what is the **point of view** (high, low...)?

Where is the **horizon line**, how does that divide up the picture plane?

Colour

Is there a dominant colour scheme? Is the painting primarily warm or cool

Does it follow a certain colour concept such as monochromatic, analogous, complimentary, split complementary, triadic, etc.?

Focal Point (this is the place that attracts the viewer's eye)

Is it clear whether the painting has a focal point?

Is it well located?

How is the **viewer's eye** lead around in the painting?

Are there places where the eye seems lead out of the painting, or gets stuck? Entry & exit points?

Depth in Space – if the painting intends to create a sense of real space, is there a clear foreground, middle ground and background? Is the perspective accurate?

Edges – how are the edges of things treated in the painting?
Are they hard or soft? Are they lost & found in places?

Is there **variety** within the painting?

• in the elements (eg – are the trees lined up like teeth in a comb, or do they have a natural variation?), in the proportion of elements, or the nature of the marks made by the painter.

What about the **perimeter** of the painting?

Do elements touch the perimeter of the work in an interesting way?

Do the edges support the Focal Point or take away from it

How do **shapes** in the painting work together? Is there a **varied level of detail** in the work?

Is there **consistency** in the point of view & the light source?

What is the **mood** created by the work?

How is it created and is it appropriate?

How to Critique

A nice framework for critiquing is to offer “a plus and two wishes”. Start with a positive observation (the plus) on what seems to work or what you like about the painting. Then you can offer a couple of comments on what you think may be weak spots or difficulties. By describing them with sentences like “I wish the painting had a greater range of value” or “I wish you had tried to simplify the forms of the trees in the background” you can tactfully soften what may seem like a harsh judgement.

Try to start with the bigger, more general comments (like overall composition issues) and then move to the more specific. Commenting on two or three ideas is probably enough.

If you are struggling to identify a problem, try looking at it from a different viewpoint on the work – turn it upside down or look at in a mirror – that can sometimes help the process.

Make specific comments using precise vocabulary. This is the difference between “The light doesn’t work” and “The way you have described the light source is not consistent, such as where it falls on the vase from the right, but on the fruit from behind”

A final thought - suggestions on making use of the critiquing process:

If you are the person requesting feedback on a painting, add a few comments on what your intent is as well as observations on what you are struggling with.

If you are the person who is doing the critique, don’t hesitate to ask questions to get greater clarity on what the artist wants feedback on.

Critiquing is a great learning opportunity, from both sides of the process, and it gets easier with practice as skill in looking and formulating responses develops. As artists, we don’t get many opportunities for feedback on our work, and helping each other out through mutual critiques can be a great tool for growth.