



▲ **FIGURE 2.1** The goal of some artists is to imitate life. Their works are lifelike, down to the smallest detail. The goal of other artists is to create a mood or feeling. What do you think was the goal of the artist who created this work? Explain your reaction.

Red Grooms. *Ruckus Rodeo* (detail). 1975–76. Wire, celastic, acrylic, canvas, and burlap. 442 × 1539.2 × 746.8 cm (174 × 606 × 294"). Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, Texas. Museum purchase and commission with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and The Benjamin J. Tillar Memorial Trust, 1976. I.P.S. © 2003 Red Grooms/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Art Criticism and Aesthetic Judgment

Have you ever seen—or skipped—a movie based on a friend’s recommendation? We all make judgments about music, television, and other forms of culture. We share with others what we like and what we don’t like. Making such *aesthetic judgments* about art is called *art criticism*.

In this chapter, you will:

- Learn the purpose of art criticism.
- Select and analyze artworks using the steps of art criticism to form precise conclusions.
- Explain the three aesthetic theories of art.
- Compare and contrast contemporary and historical styles, identifying themes and trends.

Focus on Art History

In the second half of the twentieth century, a new form of three-dimensional art emerged on the scene. It was the *installation*. Installations are artworks made not to be walked *around* but walked *through* as one walks through a room. The installation in **Figure 2.1** is one of a series of creations by American Pop artist Red Grooms (b. 1937). Pop art is a style of art that explores everyday subjects and objects from contemporary culture. In Grooms’s “Ruckus” series, the artist created life-sized environments such as Manhattan or a Texas rodeo and inhabited these fun, offbeat environments with cartoonlike characters.

Identify. Compare and contrast the contemporary styles in Figure 2.1 and Figure 2.6 on page 32 to identify the general themes of the works. Note that a theme could be revealed in the subject matter or as a concept communicated by the work.

Art Criticism: Learning from a Work of Art

Vocabulary

criteria
aesthetics
art criticism
aesthetic experience
description
analysis
interpretation
judgment

There are professional critics who appear on television or write reviews about new movies, plays, television shows, videos, books, art exhibits, and music. These critics describe their responses to various forms of art, and give you their assessment of the merits of the works. You may not always agree with their opinions because your **criteria**, or *standards of judgment*, may be very different from those of the professional critic. In this chapter you will learn about **aesthetics** (es-thet-iks), *the philosophy or study of the nature and value of art*. This will allow you to form your own intelligent opinions about works of art. You will also learn about art criticism. **Art criticism** is *an organized approach for studying a work of art*.

Why Study Art Criticism?

What do you think of when you hear the word *criticism*? Do you think it means saying something negative? This is not true. A criticism can be a positive statement. For example, when you shop for clothes, you try on many

things. You act as a critic using personal criteria to determine which pieces of clothing look good on you and which pieces do not suit you. You have developed your own criteria for choosing clothing through personal experience.

When you look at Alma Thomas's painting, *Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses* (**Figure 2.2**), you may experience confusion. You may not have had enough experience to develop a set of criteria to judge a work that has no recognizable subject. If you are like most people who are new to art, you may not know what to say.



◀ **FIGURE 2.2** At first glance, this painting appears to consist of simple shapes and bright colors. The title of the work, however, should help you understand what the dabs of color represent. Notice how large the painting is. How big does that make each dab of color? Can you imagine the garden these flowers would grow in?

Alma Thomas. *Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses*. 1969. Acrylic on canvas. 152.4 × 127 cm (60 × 50"). The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay.

Art criticism is not difficult. In fact, it can be a lot of fun. At the very least, it can make the study of art less mysterious and more logical. Art criticism is a sequential approach for looking at and talking about art.

Your own life experiences may also help you understand the meaning of each work of art. No one has done or seen exactly the same things you have, so no one will see exactly what you see in a work of art. No one can think exactly the way you think. You may see ideas in a work of art that were never dreamed of by the artist. This does not mean that you are wrong; it simply means that the work of art is so powerful that it has a special meaning for everybody.

Learning art criticism will help you interpret works of art. It will give you the confidence to discuss works of art without worrying about what other people might think. It will help you to organize your thoughts. You will develop the courage to speak your mind and make sound aesthetic judgments.

As you learn the language of art, you will be able to “dig deeper” into the layers of meaning of each art object. The deeper you dig, the more important your feelings for that work of art will become. This will make your **aesthetic experience**, or *your personal interaction with a work of art*, more meaningful and memorable. The work will then become a permanent part of your memory.

The Steps of Art Criticism

When you become involved in the process of art criticism, you learn *from* the work of art. Critiquing an artwork is like playing detective. You must assume the artist has a secret message hidden

within the work. Your job is to find the message and solve the mystery.

In this chapter you will learn a special four-step approach that will help you find the hidden meanings in art. The four steps, which must be taken in order, are *description*, *analysis*, *interpretation*, and *judgment*. By following these steps you will be able to answer the following questions:

- What do I see? (*description*)
- How is the work organized? (*analysis*)
- What message does this artwork communicate? (*interpretation*)
- Is this a successful work of art? (*judgment*)

As you go through the steps of *description* and *analysis*, you will collect facts and clues. When you get to *interpretation*, you will make guesses about what message you think the artwork is communicating. Finally, during *judgment*, you will make your own decisions about the artistic merit of the work.

Step One: Description (What do I see?)

In the first step of art criticism, **description**, you carefully *make a list of all the things you see in the work*. These include the following:

- The size of the work, the medium used, and the process used.
- The subject, object, and details.
- The elements of art used in the work.

During the description step, notice the size of the work and the medium used. You will find these facts in the credit line. This information will help you visualize the real size and look of the work. Notice that Figure 2.4 on page 29 and Figure 2.6 on page 32 are about the same size as reproduced in this book. Read both credit lines and notice the difference in the actual size of each work.

Look at the painting by José Clemente Orozco called *Barricade* (**Figure 2.3**). Notice that the work is 55 inches tall. How does that compare to your own height? If this artwork were standing on the floor, would the figures be larger or smaller than you? What materials were used to create this work?

During the description step, you must be objective. In describing Orozco's painting, you can say that you see five people. You could not say they are all men. That would be a guess. You can describe the person crouched on the ground as wearing a blue shirt and holding a large knife. You can describe the tense muscles that are bulging on the other four figures, but at this point in the criticism process, you should not try to guess why they are tense.

Look again at Figure 2.3. Line and color are two of the art elements that play an important part in this work. Can you identify the other art elements used?

Look at Figure 2.2 on page 26. This is a nonobjective work. In nonobjective works, the art elements become the subject matter.

Step Two: Analysis (How is the work organized?)

During this step, you are still collecting facts about the elements and principles of art that are used in the artwork. In **analysis** you *discover how the principles of art are used to organize the art elements of line, color, value, shape, form, space, and texture*. You will learn how the artist has used these formal qualities to create the content of the art, which is known as the theme or the message. Look at *The Piper* by Hughie Lee-Smith (**Figure 2.4**). Notice the horizontal line that passes behind the boy's shoulders. Where are the darkest colors? Where are the lightest colors? Is the texture of the bricks on the wall the same as the texture of the plaster? As you learn more about the elements and principles, you will be able to collect more clues that you can use to interpret each work.



◀ **FIGURE 2.3** Orozco was one of the Mexican muralists who combined the solid forms of ancient Mexican art with the powerful colors of European Expressionism. This work depicts the peasants fighting for freedom during the Mexican Revolution in 1910. What could you do to find out more about the event this painting depicts?

José Clemente Orozco. *Barricade*. 1931. Oil on canvas. 139.7 × 114.3 cm (55 × 45"). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. Given anonymously. © Estate of José Clemente Orozco/SOMAAP, Mexico/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

► **FIGURE 2.4** Your interpretation of this work will depend on the clues you have collected during the first two steps of art criticism—description and analysis—plus your personal life experiences. People have different experiences which will produce a variety of interpretations, all of which could be acceptable.

Hughie Lee-Smith. *The Piper*. 1953. Oil on canvas. 55.9 × 89.5 cm. (22 × 35 1/4"). Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley J. Winkelman. © Hughie Lee-Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



Step Three: Interpretation (What message does this artwork communicate to you?)

During this step, you will answer the question, “What message does this artwork communicate to me?” In **interpretation** you will *explain or tell the meaning or mood of the work*. It is here that you can make guesses about the artwork, as long as they appear to be supported by what you see in the work. Use your intelligence, imagination, and courage. Don’t be afraid to make an interpretation that is different from someone else’s. After all, you are different from other people. Your interpretation will be influenced by what you have experienced and seen in your life.

Your interpretation can be based on your feelings, but your feelings must be backed up by the visual facts and clues you collected during the first two steps.

When you look at Figure 2.4, you see a crumbling wall with the shadow of a neatly shaped modern building falling on it. Then you notice the boy standing between the modern building and the

crumbling wall. He is playing a musical instrument. What is the meaning of the boy and his instrument? What message does this work communicate to you?

Step Four: Judgment (Is this a successful work of art?)

In this step you will judge whether or not the work is successful. In **judgment** you *determine the degree of artistic merit*.

This is the time to make your own decisions. There are two levels of judgment to be made. The first is personal. Do you like the work? No one can ever tell you what to like or dislike. You must make up your own mind. To make a fair judgment, you must be honest with yourself. Only you know why you feel the way you do. Otherwise, you may close yourself off from experiencing different kinds of art. The second level of judgment you must make is also subjective, but it is somewhat different. At this point, you use aesthetics to help you decide whether the work is successful. A work can be very successful aesthetically, but you might not want to live with it.

MEET THE ARTIST

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE



American, 1887–1986

From the time she was a child, Georgia O'Keeffe knew she was going to be an artist. She studied with several teachers. At age 29, she decided to focus totally on nature and she burned her earlier works in order to start fresh, emphasizing shapes and forms. The flower paintings that made her famous were begun at this time. She painted her flowers big so that they would take viewers by surprise. She continued following her own vision throughout her long life, never being pulled into any of the many movements that have dominated the American art scene during the twentieth century.

O'Keeffe loved to see “connections” in the shapes of ordinary things. After painting a shell and shingle many times, she painted a mountain. It was only later that she realized that she had given the mountain the same shape as the shell and the shingle. She saw beautiful forms everywhere, even in the most unusual places, such as the vast desert spaces and parched bones found near her home in New Mexico.



▲ **FIGURE 2.5** Georgia O'Keeffe loved the West. She shocked the public with paintings of objects from her environment that people were not used to seeing hanging on a wall. She painted *Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue* because she wanted to create something uniquely American. Do you think she succeeded?

Georgia O'Keeffe. *Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue*. 1931. Oil on canvas. 101.3 × 91.1 cm (39⁷/₈ × 35⁷/₈”). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. The Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1952. (52.203). © 2003 The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

To make a judgment, you must take your time. **Figure 2.5** is a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe. To judge this painting, first think about how you would describe the subject of the painting. Then consider how the artist has arranged the art elements according to the art principles in order to create the composition. Notice how she has used shading to make the skull look solid and the drapery look like a hanging banner. However, she has painted the red borders and the black shape behind the skull flat. Then, think about the feeling the painting gives you. By taking time to look at and describe, analyze, and interpret what you think the meaning of the painting might be, you will be able to make an intelligent judgment. Ask yourself, is this a work of artistic merit? Is it successful?



Check Your Understanding

1. What is aesthetics?
2. Name and describe the four steps of art criticism in order.