

Aesthetics: Thinking About a Work of Art

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and value of art. Physical beauty was once the only criterion for judging the quality of art. Today, artwork is judged by a different set of criteria and instead of being called “beautiful,” a good work of art is called “successful.” Some successful works of art may not look pretty, but they may be well-organized, and/or elicit emotional responses from viewers.

Vocabulary

literal qualities
formal qualities
expressive qualities
Imitationalism
Formalism
Emotionalism

Aesthetic Theories and the Quality of Art

The aesthetic qualities that are discussed most often by *aestheticians* (specialists in aesthetics) are the literal qualities, the formal qualities, and the expressive qualities. These are directly related to the properties of art discussed in Chapter 1 on pages 18 and 19: subject, composition, and content. The **literal qualities** are *the realistic qualities that appear in the subject of the work*. For instance, if the artist depicts a realistic figure of a man on a horse, the literal qualities of the work are the images of a man on a horse. The **formal qualities**, or *the organization of the elements of art by the principles of art*, are found when you look at the composition of the work. Does it look balanced? Is there a rhythmic quality? Is there variety? Has the artist made a unified work of art? These are the types of questions one must ask to determine how well-organized a work is. The **expressive qualities**, or *those qualities that convey ideas and moods*, are those you notice when you study the content of a work. Is there something in the work that makes you feel a certain emotion or conveys an idea to you?

The three aesthetic theories of art criticism are most commonly referred to as Imitationalism, Formalism, and Emotionalism.

Imitationalism and Literal Qualities

Some critics think that the most important thing about a work of art is the realistic presentation of subject matter. It is their opinion that a work is successful if it looks like and reminds the viewer of what he or she sees in the real world. People with this point of view feel that an artwork should imitate life, that it should look lifelike, before it can be considered successful. This aesthetic theory, called **Imitationalism**, *focuses on realistic representation*.

Formalism and Formal Qualities

Other critics think that composition is the most important factor in a work of art. This aesthetic theory, called **Formalism**, *places emphasis on the formal qualities*, the arrangement of the elements of art using the principles of art.



Emotionalism and Expressive Qualities

This theory is concerned with the content of the work of art. Some critics claim that no object can be considered art if it fails to arouse an emotional response in the viewer. The expressive qualities are the most important to them. Their theory, called **Emotionalism**, requires that a work of art must arouse a response of feelings, moods, or emotions in the viewer.

Look at *Papiamento* by Julio Larraz (Figure 2.6). You may use the theory of Imitationalism to judge this work as successful because the artist has painted everything very accurately. You can recognize the texture of the freshly pressed, white cotton dress, the light flickering on the large, tropical leaves, the texture of the trunk of the palm tree, the palm fronds, the yellow sand of the beach, and the beautiful blue of the

Caribbean waters. Someone else may choose the theory of Formalism to judge the work as successful because the artist has arranged the objects so that the foreground is in shadow and the background glows brightly with sunshine. A third person may choose the theory of Emotionalism because of the mysterious mood created by hiding the woman in the shadow of the tree, or because the painting may arouse in the viewer emotional associations with memories of a vacation on a Caribbean island.

You can judge art using just one aesthetic theory or more than one, depending on the type of art and your own purposes. If you limit yourself to using only one theory, however, you may miss some exciting discoveries in a work. Perhaps the best method is to use all three. Then you will be able to discover as much as possible about a particular piece of art.



▲ **FIGURE 2.6** Notice how the artist has blended the woman into the painting. You don't see her until you look carefully. What may have been the artist's reasons for doing this? The title of this work, *Papiamento*, is the name of a language spoken in the Antilles. What else could you find out about the work and its artist that might help you to understand it better?

Julio Larraz. *Papiamento*. 1987. Oil on canvas. 143.5 × 209.5 cm (56½ × 82½"). Courtesy of Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, New York.

Applying Your Skills. Select one large work of art in this book. Show the picture to at least three people outside of class. Ask them whether they like the work. Then ask them to tell you why they like or dislike the work. Classify their answers according to the three aesthetic theories of art: Imitationalism, Formalism, or Emotionalism.

Judging Functional Objects

You can use art criticism to make aesthetic judgments about functional objects such as cars, shoes, or fine china. The objects in **Figure 2.7** are an example. In criticizing functional objects, you follow the first two steps of art criticism—description and analysis—as described earlier. However, during the third step, interpretation, you must consider the purpose of the object as its meaning. In the last step, judgment, you must consider if the object works when it is used. That is, does it look like it will function properly? A chair may look beautiful, but if it is not comfortable to sit in, then it does not function properly. It is unsuccessful.

When you study a ceremonial object from a culture you are not familiar with, refer to the title and your observations during the first two steps of art criticism. During interpretation, you must imagine the function of the object and then judge it using one of the three aesthetic theories. Finally, research the object using the art history operations in the next lesson and refine your interpretation and judgment.

Judging Your Own Artwork

Art criticism will help you use critical thinking to analyze your own works of art. The four steps of art criticism will help you be as honest and unbiased as possible. When you apply all four of the steps of art criticism to your work, you should find out why your work either needs improvement or is a success.



Check Your Understanding

1. What are the three aesthetic qualities most often discussed by art critics?
2. What is Imitationalism?
3. Compare and contrast Formalism and Emotionalism.
4. How does judging functional objects differ from judging fine art?



▲ **FIGURE 2.7** These chairs are appealing to the eye, but are they successful as functional objects? To find out, you will have to apply the steps of art criticism. Do they appear to be the right height for sitting? Would they provide enough back support? Is the padding thick enough for comfort?

John Dunnigan. *Slipper Chairs*. 1990. Purpleheart wood with silk upholstery. Left: 67.9 × 64.8 × 58.4 cm (26³/₄ × 25¹/₂ × 23"). Right: 110.5 × 66.7 × 61 cm (43¹/₂ × 26¹/₄ × 24"). © John Dunnigan. Renwick Gallery, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.