

# Chapter 21

## A Critical Method

~~Chapter 21~~ explained the purposes of art criticism. Developing your own critical skills will contribute to your enjoyment and understanding of art.

In earlier chapters, you learned about the three stages in the critical analysis of artworks: *description* (~~Chapter 21~~), *analysis* (~~Chapter 21~~), and *interpretation* (~~Chapter 21~~). Criticism may include a fourth stage, *evaluation*. This process is explained at the end of this chapter.

The four stages of criticism are outlined here. The outline can help you understand and talk about art.



21-1 Honoré Daumier, *Connoisseurs*, ca. 1862-64. Crayon, charcoal, wash and watercolor. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund.

### Description

Identify things about the work that you can see, name, and describe with certainty. Be sure your statements do not include opinions, evaluations or interpretations. Just record what is there.

### Label Information

1. Title of work and artist's name.
2. When and where the work was created. (Date)
3. The medium (or media) used.

### 4. DIMENSIONS 5. Current Location Subject Matter

1. Recognizable images such as people, buildings, trees, and other things.
  - a) Describe what living forms are doing
  - b) What is large/small, near/far, in front/behind
2. If the work consists of geometric shapes or free forms, indicate that and then go on to Art Elements.

### Subject matter types

3. Landscape, portrait, genre, still-life, sea scene...

many sub-categories

- historical narrative
- religious portraits
- political narrative
- political portraits

4. How subject matter is portrayed
  - Rep, Abstract

still-life = inanimate objects (i.e. vase and flowers)

5. Non Rep = no subject matter (color, shape, lines etc.)

### Art Elements

#### 1. Line

Straight, curved, swirling, jagged, diagonal, there lines take place to place

Contour lines

Implied by a changes.

#### 2. Color and Value

Are colors warm, light, opaque, unlike real world color? Act

Do values range and white, or value contrast

#### 3. Shapes (two-dimensional)

Are shapes realistic, objective, organic

# Visual Elements

## Art Elements (~~Chapter 4~~)

### 1. Line

Straight, curved, dotted, broken, wavy, swirling, jagged, textured, horizontal, vertical, diagonal, continuous, heavy, thin, etc. Are there lines that direct your attention from place to place? *Create a Mood?*

Contour lines or outlines.

Implied by abrupt color, value, or texture changes.

### 2. Color and Value *+ Light*

Are colors warm, cold, bright, dull, dark, light, opaque, transparent? Are they like or unlike real world colors? Is there a dominant color? *Actual or implied light?*

Do values result from combinations of black and white, or shades and tints of color? Are value contrasts strong, soft, or both? *color schemes?*

### 3. Shapes (two-dimensional) and Forms (three-dimensional)

Are shapes representational, abstract, non-objective, organic, geometrical, open, closed.

### 4. Textures

Are they visible in the work? Where? Are they rough, smooth, coarse, soft, bumpy, hairy, sandy?  $\wedge$

Are they *simulated* (you can see, but not feel it) or *real* (an actual part of the work you can feel)?

Don't confuse texture with *pattern*, which is the repetition of some design in a recognizable order, such as polka dots or a checkerboard. Identify patterns.

### 5. Space

Two-dimensional art (implied depth): Does space appear shallow or deep? Due to shading, colors that seem to advance/recede, foreshortening, linear perspective, aerial perspective, overlap, high-low placement?

Three-dimensional art (real depth): Due to voids, concaves, convexes, volumes?

### 6. Time

- linear
- sequential
- cyclical
- Flashback / Forward
- historical
- specific moment
- Actual or implied

### 7. Motion

- Actual
- implied

## Analysis

### (Principles of Design)

How have the things listed under Subject Matter and Art Elements been organized or inter-related? How do they work together?

### Similarities (creates unity)

1. Are some things similar in shape, color, texture, form, or size?
2. Are some lines similar in direction or kind?

### Contrasts (variety)

1. Are there contrasts in color such as dull/bright, cool/warm, dark/light?
2. Are there contrasts of shape, form, texture, movement, size, complexity, simplicity?

### Movement and Continuation

1. If movement is suggested in the work, which of the following devices is it due to:  
*Rhythm +* Repetition of something, alternating elements, progression from large to small, dark to light, etc., living forms doing something?
2. Are there elements that lead your eye through the composition—edges, rows of things, continuous lines, directional shapes, figures painting, or eyes looking in a particular direction?

### Scale + Proportion

- Large scale
- Medium
- Small
- in proportion (think Golden Mean) "Proportionate"
- out of proportion / exaggerated "disproportionate"

### Dominance

1. Is there some area, element, or arrangement that seems most important? *Focal area*  
*Emphasis*

### Balance

1. What contributes to balance in the composition?
2. Is balance symmetrical, asymmetrical, or radial?

### Relationships

1. What are the relationships between the subject of the artwork and the art elements?
2. What are the relationships between the subject of the artwork and the medium or procedure used to produce it?

## Interpretation

Use the information from your description and analysis to help you identify the *meaning* of the work (what it expresses about human experience).

**Describe** the expressive mood of the work: sad, happy, serious, lighthearted, calm, chaotic, depressing, ominous, sensual, somber, joyful, angry, aggressive, passive, tense, relaxed, etc.

**Metaphor** may help to get at meaning: In a metaphor, one thing is spoken of as if it is another, different thing, e.g., “He is a bull in a china shop.” “Her voice is music.” “Colors roll across the canvas in thunderous waves.” “The red shape is a loose cannon among misty greens.”

**Hypothesis** (an assumption or informed guess, about the meaning of the work)

### Defense

1. Defend your hypothesis with evidence from your description and analysis.
2. Defend your hypothesis with evidence from other sources such as art history, past experiences the work reminds you of, or presumed purposes: to praise, criticize, predict, record an event, make a political or social statement, ridicule, and so on.

## Evaluation

Based on your analysis in the first three stages, how would you judge the quality or success of the work? Judgment may be affected by the following criteria.

**Craftsmanship**—the degree of skill in use of media and procedures, and how well the medium relates to the subject matter and purpose of the artwork.

**Design Quality**—the degree of visual organization of the materials and elements that make up the work. Consider unity, variety, proximity, balance, dominance, and rhythm.

**Expressiveness**—how well the work expresses its subject, idea, or theme.

**Personal Response**—the extent to which the artwork provokes a personal response, one that could be shared with others.

**Originality**—the degree of uniqueness, imagination, and freshness in the artwork.

**Comparison**—how the work compares with other artworks of similar kind.

## Using the First Three Stages of the Critical Analysis Model

The following examples will provide you with some guided practice in art criticism. This guided practice will help you learn how to gather facts about a work of art before you draw conclusions. Once you have learned the process, you will feel more confident in your ability to discuss and enjoy artworks.

An adequate analysis can be based on completion of the first three stages of the model. Because the last stage, evaluation, is difficult even for art professionals, it will be discussed separately.

### Hemlock in November

**Description.** You will find it easy to describe this work by Charles Burchfield, a well-known Regionalist painter. It is a watercolor of a wooded grove. It includes an evergreen tree identified as a hemlock in the title (fig. 21-2). The hemlock is surrounded by trees that are losing their leaves. The forms of the tree and stump in the foreground appear three-dimensional. These forms are emphasized by warm, dark colors and strong textures. The clearing in the background contains some different varieties of evergreens. It is flooded with white light that filters down through the trees. The painting includes a mixture of warm and cold, transparent and opaque colors. Colors have been tinted and shaded. The space in this painting appears deep because of overlapping, the diminishing sizes of the trees, and aerial perspective.

**Analysis.** The first thing you see in this painting is the hemlock. The hemlock contrasts with the surrounding trees because of its size, textures, green needles, and dark colors. The entire tree is silhouetted against a cool, silvery light. The rhythm of the branches and needles causes a lively upward movement. Due to these factors and its slightly off-center placement, the hemlock is the dominant form in the composition.

Light is everywhere, filtering down through the branches and giving the tree trunks a silvery glow. Clusters of the evergreen's needles reflect the light. The light becomes a background haze into which distant trees disappear. The brown, gold, yellow, and white foreground colors are repeated in the fallen leaves, the leaves on the trees at each side of the picture, and in the

top branches of the hemlock. These colors produce a framing effect around the painting.

The bases of the trees on each side of the hemlock are progressively higher on the picture plane as they go back in the distance. This progression causes a directional flow from the foreground to the background. The triangular shape of the leaf-covered foreground reinforces this flow and leads to a small evergreen shimmering with light.

Relationships between subject and elements can be seen in the artist's use of predominantly cool colors and the transparent gray washes to suggest a cold fall day. Relationships between subject and procedure are seen in the heavy lines, warm colors, and rhythmical brushstrokes applied to the hemlock.

**Interpretation.** Our description and analysis suggest several meanings for *Hemlock in November*.

1. It is about the effects of seasonal change upon the natural environment.
2. It is about the mood of a cold fall day in a wooded grove.
3. It is about the hemlock's defiance of approaching winter.

We will defend the first hypothesis for our example of interpretation. The picture is filled with a cool, hazy kind of light that we associate with cold fall days and the feeling that winter is in the air. The trees have lost or are losing their leaves, which have been transformed from green to the colors of fall. Even the trunks of the bare trees and some of the hemlock's needles have been transformed to a silver-white color by the light. However, the green of the hemlock and the lively upward movement of its branches are a promise of continuing life. These are all effects that we associate with seasonal change.

What description and analysis information would you use to support either of the other hypotheses?



21-2 Ch



21-2 Charles Burchfield, *Hemlock in November*, 1947-66. Watercolor, 42" x 32 1/2" (107 x 83 cm). Private Collection. Kennedy Galleries.



21-3 Robert Stefl, *Illinois Landscape #14*, 1988. Color photograph cibachrome, 11" x 14" (28 x 36 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Burchfield's painting expresses the effects of fall and a seasonal change upon the environment. *Illinois Landscape #14* (fig. 21-3) by Robert Stefl, a contemporary photographer, refers to the effects of winter on the land. Like a painting, a photograph can express ideas and feelings that may be teased out in the process of critical analysis.

### Illinois Landscape #14

**Description.** This photograph by Robert Stefl depicts a gently rolling field lined with rows of corn stubble that pokes through and casts shadows on wind-packed snow. On the horizon are three leafless black trees and several clumps of grass. Warm browns appear in the rows of stubble that extend in rough lines across the field, and in the clumps of grass on the horizon. The distant trees support angular branches that end in a maze of feathery lines. The sky and the snow-covered field are filled with light values of gray-blue and white. There is an illusion of deep space.

**Analysis.** When you first look at *Illinois Landscape #14*, your eyes follow the converging lines of corn stubble. These lines direct your attention to the tree on the right. The branches of the lone tree seem to point toward the two trees on the left. The spaces between the rows of stubble become progressively wider from the left to right. They cause a wave-like flow across the foreground to the widest rows on the right. These rows then direct your eyes back to the lone tree.

The warm browns of the corn stubble and grass contrast with the cold colors in the field and sky. However, the cold colors dominate the warm colors. The linear movement of the rows and one-point perspective direct our attention to the trees and the empty space between them. The silhouetted trunks of the trees and the fragile lines of their branches contrast with the cold gray-blue of the sky. The texture of the snow looks crisp and crunchy to the step.

**Interpretation.** We will hypothesize that *Illinois Landscape #14* expresses the wonder of the trees' survival under very threatening conditions.

The composition of this photograph directs our attention to the trees. The most obvious hardship they must endure is the cold grip of winter, which is evident in the bleakness of the land and the isolation of the

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trees. A second threat comes from man, who continually clears the land for farming. The rows and furrows extend up to and beyond the trees. The trees are the last sentinels of a grove that existed before the field was cleared. They too may feel the axe.

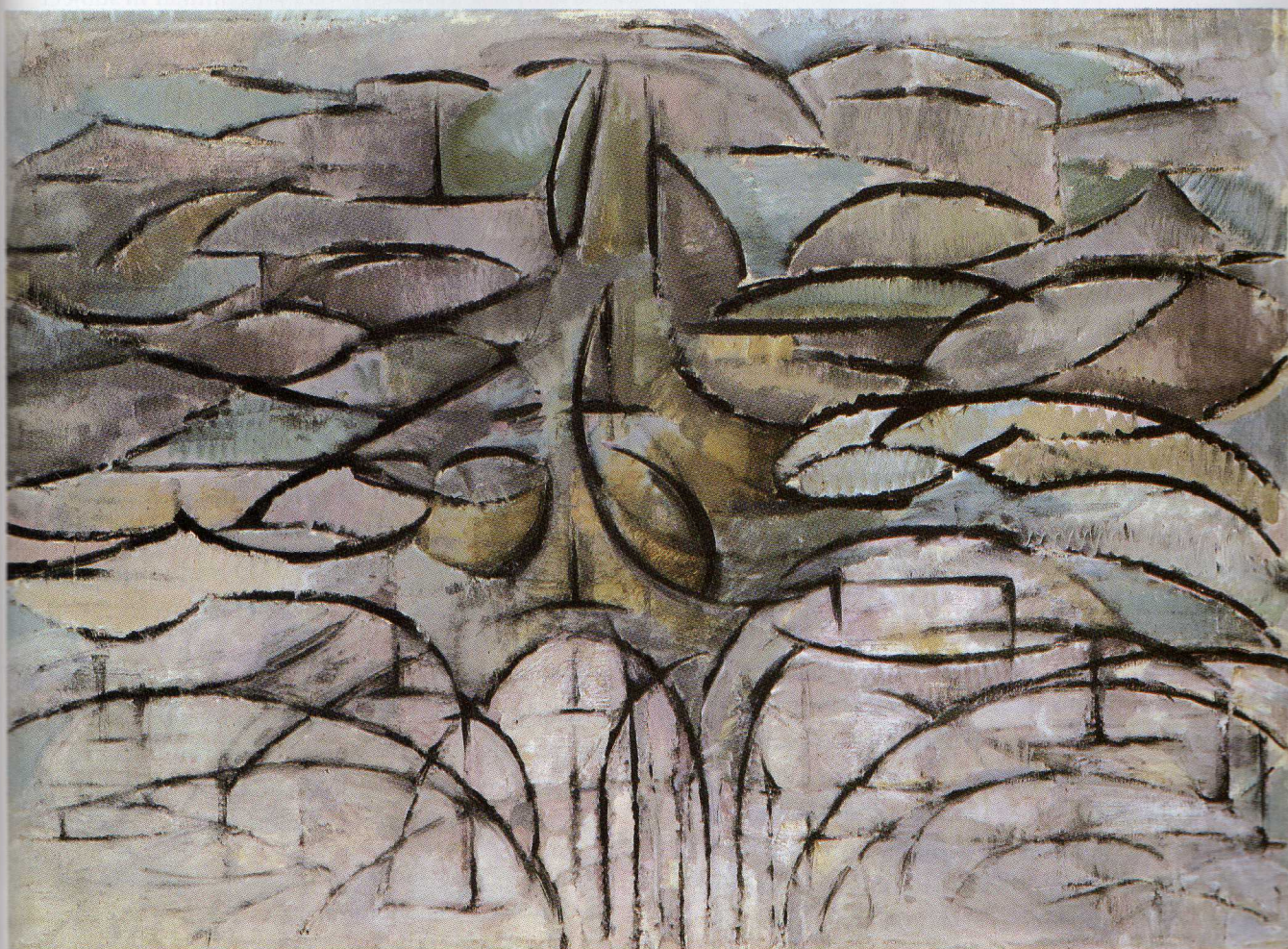
Before you read the title of figure 21-4, can you guess what the subject matter is? Abstract works of art may change the form of the object to emphasize qualities that you normally might not see. Even though a work is not representational, you can respond to its visual forms. The critical analysis process can help you explain the organization of abstract works and propose meanings for them.

### Flowering Apple Tree

**Description.** This oil painting by Mondrian, a major figure in the Modern movement, consists of lines and primarily geometric shapes, rather than recognizable objects. The lines vary in thickness and intensity. They are mostly curved or arched. Some are horizontal and

vertical. The colors are dull grays, blue-greens, and brownish hues with black line. The outlined shapes are flat, and some are leaflike. There is a minimal sense of spatial depth and no perspective depth, which you can see in *Hemlock* and in *Illinois Landscape #14*.

**Analysis.** You can identify similarities and contrasts in this work. The orderly, repeated lines create rhythmical movements up, down, left, and right on the surface of the painting. The vertical lines in the lower central area direct your attention to the enclosed leaflike shapes. An area in the center, with lines radiating from it, tends to be a focal point, creating a feeling of formal balance. The two-dimensional shapes and the colors are all at about the same value level, making the composition appear relatively flat. One-half of the painting is approximately the same as the other, so the work is basically symmetrical.



21-4 Piet Mondrian, *Flowering Apple Tree*, 1912. 30 3/4" x 41 3/4" (78 x 106 cm). Collection Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

**Interpretation.** *Flowering Apple Tree* is about the rhythm, movement, and balance that can be found in the structure of a tree. The title indicates that the painting is based on a tree. Knowing that, we can relate the central vertical and upward curving lines to a tree trunk and branches, and the outlined shapes to leaves. Since there is no definite tree form in the work, we can concentrate on the rhythmical movements caused by the lines and shapes.

## Evaluation

So far, our examples of critical analysis have covered the first three stages of the critical analysis outline. Often, these stages are enough to allow you to explain and understand a work of art. However, evaluation is a step that can let you estimate the quality or lasting importance of an artwork. We will use *Hemlock in November* to illustrate the process of evaluation.

**Craftsmanship.** Craftsmanship is demonstrated by the artist's skillful control of washes. The washes effectively suggest the changing light in a heavy growth of trees. To suggest deep space, Burchfield used contrasts of opaque and transparent colors and aerial perspective. The forms are crisp and the colors are fresh—a favorable characteristic of watercolor.

**Design quality.** Our analysis of *Hemlock* indicated that all of the parts are effectively organized around the dominant evergreen tree. The stronger the design of an artwork is, the less aware we are of individual parts, and the more we can focus on the meaning of the work.

**Expressiveness.** This area of evaluation involves a judgment about the strength of human feelings aroused by the work of art. Sometimes our reactions to an artwork are based on what it reminds us of. Our feelings are related more to that experience or event than to the art form. A successful work should arouse feelings that come from the work itself. The artist organizes symbols and forms to express human feelings that are connected to some experience. For example, assume that *Hemlock in November* is about the effects of seasonal change upon the natural environment. How successful do you feel the painting is not only in arousing your feelings about seasonal change, but in providing you with fresh insights about this theme?

**Originality.** Originality is closely associated with expressiveness, and involves a judgment about the uniqueness or freshness of an artwork. Is the hemlock tree in Burchfield's painting an unusual interpretation? Or is it what you would expect to see in a calendar or greeting card picture of the same subject? Have you seen similar approaches to lighting, color, and form in other pictures representing late fall? Are there unique qualities here?

**Comparison.** Comparing an artwork with historical examples is more a task for art professionals such as museum directors and art critics than it is for nonprofessionals. Well-known works that have stood the test of time provide touchstones for judging the quality of other works with similar subjects in similar styles.

*Pine Trees with Setting Sun* (fig. 21-5) by Vincent van Gogh is a work that has many similarities to *Hemlock in November*. Although the paintings were done with different media (the van Gogh is oil, the Burchfield is watercolor), they are similar in subject and style. Both are landscapes with trees as a principal subject. Both emphasize the vertical. Both emphasize the effects of light, and both employ lively brushwork and exaggeration—seen particularly in the trees—to make the picture vivid.

Art professionals would probably prefer the van Gogh for a number of reasons. The brushwork is more animated. It seems to come from within the forms and to enliven the whole picture. The painting also contains more variety. Notice the asymmetrical composition and the different directions of the branches. Note especially the way in which the diagonal and horizontal branches of the near tree provide a counterpoint to the vertical emphasis. Despite its variety, the van Gogh is at least as well organized as the Burchfield.

Still, on the grounds of craftsmanship, design quality, and expressiveness, you might prefer the Burchfield. This is your right. However, imagine you are a museum director with a large budget to spend on art, and can afford the best. You no doubt would select the van Gogh over the Burchfield for a number of reasons not seen in the works themselves. Some things that professionals consider before purchasing an artwork are:

1. how well-known the artist is;
2. the importance of the artist's achievements;

21–5 Vincent van Gogh, *Pine Trees with Setting Sun*. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam.



3. the importance of the artwork in the history of art;
4. the recognizability of the artist's style;
5. the demand for the artist's work;
6. the probable lasting value of the work;
7. the opinions of other curators, art dealers, collectors, and investors; and
8. the freshness of treatment of an idea, a medium, a style, or a technique.

Given these reasons, the van Gogh wins easily. Consider reason 8, for example. Van Gogh pioneered an expressionistic style in the late 1880s when such a style was not popular. For all of his efforts, he received almost no recognition during his lifetime. His style was too fresh for the times. But in the early part of this century, his work became celebrated. Van Gogh influenced and paved the way for artists like Burchfield in this century. Reasons 1, 2, and 3 also weigh heavily in the choice of the van Gogh over the Burchfield.