

How To Improve Your Paintings Using Critiques

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Objective

Uncover the answers to the following questions:

What is a critique?

Why utilize critiques?

What criteria should be considered in giving a critique?

What are the guidelines for critiques we will follow in our workshops?

Preparation

This is not a painting exercise. It is a discussion session that will enable you to critique your own work and work of others in a positive way that will benefit all.

In Class Discussion

The questions above will be addressed, but I thought it would be helpful to give you a brief summary of answers below for future reference. We will also be practicing giving critiques to establish a positive procedure for critiquing. In future workshops you will have the opportunity to bring in a painting you have been working on to have it critiqued. This will be an anonymous process. Participation is encouraged but not required. Hopefully, even those who are somewhat reluctant to participate will see the value of this exercise and submit a painting.

What is a critique?

According to the dictionary, a critique is an analysis, evaluation, assessment, appraisal, appreciation, review, or a criticism.

Why utilize critiques?

This tool will not only help improve our own work but the work of others.

What criteria should be used?

Basically, there are two main categories that should be considered. These categories are the Elements of Design, and the Principles of Design. My understanding of these principles was enhanced by participation in a workshop by Mike Bailey. Mike explained that these Elements and Principles form a matrix with each other. In other words, they are orthogonal to each other. So, for example, when you think about the element color, you should consider how the Principles of Design affect it. Many of us are not trained artists and although we have had lectures on the Elements and Principles in the past, these ideas don't always take hold, so I have included a brief summary here.

Brief Definitions of the Principles

Unity: Sense of cohesiveness or coherence

Harmony: visually satisfying effect of combining similar elements

Dominance: Prevalence of a single Element.

Conflict: an Element that creates tension or irony

Repetition: recurring arrangement of Elements

Variation: variety

Gradation: gradual transitioning from one element to another

Balance : distribution of perceived visual weight of elements to affect one another.

Elements of Design

Line, Size, Shape, Direction, Color, Value, Texture

Since these words are more familiar to us, they will not be defined here. However, we will illustrate these terms in our discussion and examples to clarify their meaning.

Guidelines for Critiques

Critiques can be of 2 types, General and Specific

a) General Critiques

Critiques should always be given in a positive way. Be as concise and specific as possible, referring back to Elements and Principles of Design when you can. The format should be as follows. First make a positive comment, telling us something you like about the painting and why. Then, if you have a suggestion about how the painting could be improved state it and tell us how that would improve the painting. Do not give more than one positive remark and one way to improve. There should always be a positive remark but there doesn't have to be a suggestion on how to improve. Try to use the terminology from the Principles and Elements of Design in your remarks.

b) Specific Critiques

This type of critique will be used if the artist has asked a specific question. This question should be short and attached with a post-it. For example, the question might be how to make their sky more dramatic, or the focus area more apparent, etc. Our response would be to give a compliment but limit our suggestion to that specific problem and not point out something else.

Procedure

On days when we have critiques, there will be a table with a sign indicating Paintings for Critique. Please only submit unmated, unframed paintings that are not in a plastic sleeve. Stack them in a pile. There is no need to identify yourself. If you have a specific question, print it on a Post-it and attach it to the painting. You may pick up your painting after the critiques are finished.

Closing Remarks

Keep in mind that we are not professional artists. Some of us studied art in school for a number of years while others have never delved into the world of art before coming to OLLI. We are all here to learn in an enjoyable way. Keep your remarks upbeat and positive. Also, remember that even if someone offers a suggestion, it doesn't necessarily mean you need to follow it. They may not be aware of the mood or vision you are trying to create with your work. Listen with an open mind but you are the ultimate creative genius behind your work.

Reference: The Watercolour Painter's Question & Answer Book, by Angela Gair