

Guidelines for Interpreting a Painting

Introduction

When looking at a painting, our eye should move from general features to details. The first reading should be global: the work should be regarded in its entirety, taken in at a glance, to see if it instills in us a desire to take a more in-depth look. If so, we should then focus our attention on the details, carefully examining the way in which the painting was executed.

A work of art should be suggestive. It should raise questions and create uncertainty, offering an endless series of interpretations that maintain the viewers interest and attention. Does it provoke in us an emotional as well as a physical response? Does it address issues that are fundamental, universal and inherent to all human beings? We should take into consideration the historical, social and cultural context of the painting, and reject any preconceived notions we might have about it, allowing for a fluid communication to be established between it and ourselves. A work of art is not biased; it in itself is open to dialogue and cannot survive in a closed system.

At first, in order to establish said dialogue, we should give our undivided attention to the forms and color that we encounter in the painting, without yet needing to know anything about its history or author, or anything else that might distract us. The work itself will tell us its story, showing us the characters of the era it belongs to. If we are open to it, it can transport us to its origins and reveal to us its secret mysteries through color, form and composition.

Basic Principles of Composition

Is the division of the picture plane balanced? Balance in the picture plane is achieved through the harmonic positioning of two or more forms of different sizes. Theoretically, if all of the forms are the same, the composition will be unbalanced. Nature gives us examples of this phenomenon: different masses attract or repel one another, depending on their size and the distance between them, as is demonstrated by the planets in the solar system.

How is the structure of a composition established?

The basic structure of a painting is supported by lines which are not visible. Analyzing from the general to the specific, the painting is organized first around these lines, which determine the basic rhythm of the work, and to a lesser extent around visible details. What we see first, on the surface, we should analyze last. So, first, we should look for the basic rhythms upon which the composition is constructed, and which define the movement of the painting. These may be vertical, horizontal, diagonal, J-, S-, or X-shaped, or geometric in form (rectangular, triangular, etc.). They should

direct our eye across the picture plane, guiding us towards the focal point, in order to *close* the composition. This movement gives depth to the work by establishing a particular rhythm, whether it be fast, slow, delicate or abrupt.

Color also constitutes part of the composition; it reinforces the main point of interest and at the same time creates rhythmical movement across the picture plane. We should ask ourselves: How does the artist direct our attention through the use of color? Bright colors tend to catch our attention first, determining in part our response to the painting.

Through color and shading contrast is achieved, allowing us to distinguish the different grounds. Contrast is essential; without it, without light and color, it would be impossible to interpret a painting. When considered as elements that create contrast, light and color are one and the same. Harmony is created by the positioning of forms of different colors, lending expression to the painted surface.

How does the painter express content through form?

All of the elements of a painting are interrelated. Form defines and delimits shapes, contrast, volume, and color, and at the same time depends on them, because without them it can't be perceived. But when all is said and done, it is contrast, as weak as it may be in any given work, which keeps a painting together and functioning. All of the pictorial elements play their part in creating contrast, and contribute to the work as we know it on the picture plane.

In a work of art there is nothing extraneous, and nothing is missing. The painter's particular way of using the materials is what determines his or her style, directly influencing the psychological interpretation we make of the image. All artists produce, intentionally or unintentionally, images which reflect the way they view the world, and this can be seen in the way they use the painting surface, materials and format; in the steadiness of their hand as reflected by the brushstroke, in their unconscious preferences when organizing the elements; in the themes they choose to represent.

