

Appreciating Art

The following provides a very brief overview on the subject of art appreciation for those entirely new to the subject. This is a complex topic to deal with and it is impossible to have a truly comprehensive discussion on the topic in such a brief essay. The reader is advised to consult more advanced texts to gain further understanding of how to appreciate art more fully.

What is Art?

The word 'art' is often used in our daily lives. However, when we scrutinize the word in depth, defining what is art may not be as straight forward as it appears to be.

In this book, we are dealing with the subject of aesthetic visual arts, which includes painting, sculpture, photography, and so on.

Aesthetic art, in my opinion, is something that expresses an opinion or emotion, in a beautiful manner. A work of art can express not only positive emotions, but also negative emotions like sadness and anger, but these must be done in a beautiful manner. An idea or emotion remains an idea or emotion in the realm of the mind until it is expressed. The expression and subsequent transmission requires a vehicle. In the case of visual arts, possible vehicles could be canvas or paper.

Art is very similar to spoken/ written language. Like art, language is a vehicle for the transmission of ideas. Each genre of art has its own rules and traditions, just like language has grammar and vocabulary. A baby is born with a potential to learn language, but he is not able to communicate in a particular language until he learns to use it. So the language of art needs to be learned too.

The definition of 'beautiful' is a fluid concept. Each generation of artists explores new frontiers and adds to the existing pool of artistic language. For example, if you were to ask someone from the Renaissance period to appraise Picasso's paintings, Picasso's works would most likely be too different from their current understanding of artistic norms for them to fully comprehend and appreciate. Furthermore, new forms and concepts of art have almost never been invented on their own, but rather have evolved from ideas based on previous developments in art. This is why studying existing canons of great art is very important.

How to tell what is good art?

Many people think art is subjective. The answer is: yes, it is. At the same time, however, there are still yardsticks we can use to measure the quality of the art, especially among works that belong to the same genre.

To understand how this works, let us use a simple analogy. If you come from a foreign land and have never eaten *char kway teow* (fried flat rice noodles), the first time you try the dish, you may not be able to tell whether it is good or bad. But after you've tried the dish from ten different stalls, you will probably be able to tell which is better, and you probably would be able to define what qualities make for a good plate of *char kway teow*. Therefore, in order to know good art when you see it, you need to have seen a lot of art - both good and bad - in order to make the comparison.

The fact is that mankind has been producing art for so long that the overall body of knowledge on art has become so complex that ordinary people cannot comprehend the scope of the subject without some form of structured education. Most people, however, continue to attempt to appraise art without investing the time and energy needed to understand the subject first.

The way to learn how to art appreciation is to look at more good art, in particular by familiarising oneself with works of master artists. Over time, you will be able to assess for yourself what is good art and what is bad. It is also a good idea to receive formal instruction from a trained art teacher to cut short the learning curve. Ultimately, the key is to build a database of artistic knowledge and awareness for personal understanding.

The mechanics of expression via art work

If we show some apples to ten persons, and ask them to tell us what are their opinions about the apples, we will probably get ten different answers, although they are all looking at the same apples. The reality is that different people react differently to the same object or events.



Fig 1 Four different ways of expression for the theme 'apples'

Top left : focus on texture and mass

Top right : focus on the lighting in studio environment

Bottom left : focus on the red colour under natural light

Bottom right : abstract interpretation

The artist will have his/her own interpretations of things. In order to present this interpretation, the artist needs to decide on many things, e.g. the medium, the perspective, the composition, colour, etc. After going through a process of decision making and execution, an artwork is produced. Over time, the artist develops a set of unique solutions that he/she is familiar with. This becomes the artist's style. In other words, the artist slowly coins his/her own artistic language. Most artists will start with an established master's language before moulding his/her own identity.

The viewer, on the other hand, needs to reverse engineer and decode the messages hidden inside the artwork. This is why learning the artist's language is important. The viewer decodes the messages based on his/her own experiences and cultural backgrounds. For example, a Chinese may associate white colour with death, while westerners may associate the colour with purity.

Strategy : The five pillars of art appreciation

There are many ways of approaching the subject of art appreciation. Over here I shall introduce to you a set of strategies to get you started. Take note

that this is just one set of strategy, there are many other different ways of dissecting art.

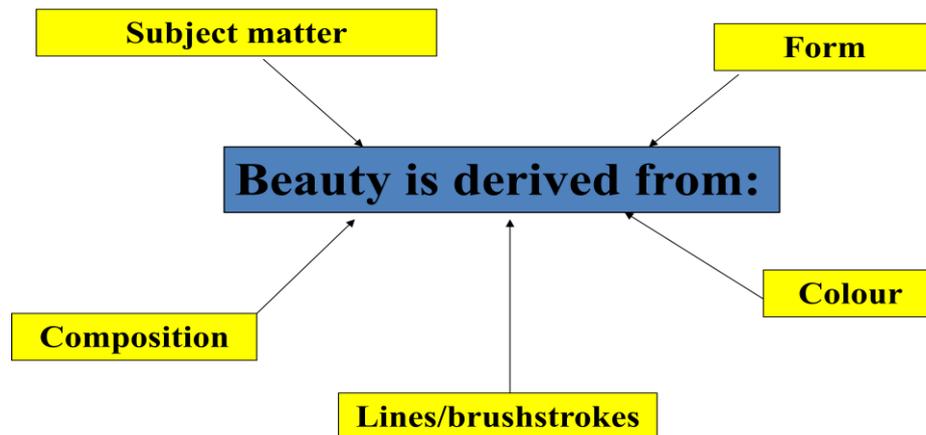


Fig 2 The five pillars of art appreciation

When you look at a piece of artwork, you can appraise the artwork using these five headings:

1. **Subject matter:** What is the subject matter of the art work about? Usually a work of art will have a main theme, which can often be known through its title. Almost anyone can create an idea or a theme in his/her own mind. But what makes an artist unique is in the rest of the four headings, which require technical skills.

2. **Form:** Form generally denotes how accurate the painted objects are presented. Note that there is a difference between inaccurate and exaggeration. Inaccurate is inability to capture forms, whereas exaggeration is conscious distortion to create desired effects.

3. **Colour:** The artist can employ a variety of colour schemes and techniques to achieve certain effects. Colours can contribute to the realism, or can be used to evoke certain emotions.

4. **Lines/brushstrokes:** Lines and brushstrokes are very important elements in both Chinese and Western art. It can be said that most pictures are constructed by lines and colour patches. It may not be immediately obvious, but lines can be very expressive.

5. **Composition:** Composition is the way objects are arranged relative to one another in a visual picture. Although the way things are organised in a picture may look natural, in actual fact much careful considerations are put in to form a good composition. Composition can be used to create balance, sense of depth, or focus on the intended subject matter.

You can start analysing master's works using these five pillars to build up your own 'database' of what is a good painting. Once you have understood the mechanics of a good painting, you can apply them to other paintings.

The above techniques dissect art from a technical perspective. Over here I will like to stress that the ultimate aim of art is not to flaunt technical expertise, but to express emotions in a sublime and beautiful manner. In order to understand high cultured art, it may be necessary to study deep into philosophical, historical and cultural disciplines. This may be even a more daunting task than to understand aesthetic technicalities. Thus what I am suggesting here is a short cut. It is highly unlikely for an artist to be able to express powerful emotions but at the same time is poor in technical skills.