

Evaluating Art: The Principles Of Critique

Introduction

Art is a personal endeavor, often a very intimate process for its creator. Dedicated artists invest their thoughts and abilities into what they do, as well as a fair amount of faith and hope in an imagined outcome. This uncertainty and the revealing of our inner worlds make us vulnerable to criticism that will often feel personal, regardless of its intent. Yet the irony is that without criticism or critique, artistic growth is greatly hindered. After all, we're social creatures, and most art is made with the intention of sharing with others. Thus any experienced artist comes to know that the skills of critiquing and being critiqued, as well as the knowledge behind these actions, are perhaps of equal importance as the act of creating.

This atmosphere of group critique is reminiscent of the traditional role of guilds, cooperatives, and collectives, which before modern times were groups of artisans and craftsmen who banded together under accepted principles and ethical standards, to advance themselves with the help of others. We see this less and less today, as modern lifestyles are often atomized, separated under fast-paced competition in order to meet short-term individualistic and materialistic goals.

Yet artists and tattooers, true to our often-rebellious nature, can help revive the cooperative spirit through the practice of group critique, regardless of preferred style or experience level. Those who do this regularly also establish in themselves the habits of skillful self-critique, which is an absolutely crucial component of individual success. No matter the setting, critique is an important stepping-stone to deeper understanding in the journey of mastering any craft or pursuit.

1. PREPARING THE GROUND

Positive Group Dynamics

Where and how we start our critique of others is important. Preparing the ground is something we must do in order to build a proper structure upon it. Setting the right tone in a public environment or amongst peers involves putting personal motives and agendas aside; in other words, we must distance ourselves from "the Ego" and any limited self-interest. Our intention is to foster a safe emotional environment, where participants can feel at ease in revealing their artistic shortcomings, weaknesses, struggles, or confusion. It helps participants relax and let down their guard when we purposely recognize the camaraderie among fellow artists coming together to help each other achieve their goals, in cooperation rather than competition.

The Proper Mindset

Another aspect of preparation is understanding how to ask questions and form conclusions about the art we're looking at. Laying the foundation of a helpful critique means approaching it through a mindset of unbiased evaluation and clinical precision. Dropping the Ego and any desire to prove oneself means letting go of opinions and

vague, esoteric, or emotionally driven impressions. In other words, we must remove our personal feelings about the work or its creator from the equation. Being in this mindset turns every work of art quite simply into a set of visual problems, or challenges, with an array of possible solutions. There are variables that can be adjusted to produce quantifiable results, just like a science experiment. To take this concept one step further, we're analyzing only the product of someone's abilities, and never the actual person. Consciously reminding ourselves of this scientific detachment spares all involved the burden of one-upmanship or hurt feelings.

This mode of thought is often the total opposite of the creative, expressive, and intuitive approach we cultivate while creating art. This is a desirable contrast, one that allows us to choose the way of thinking that's appropriate to the situation at hand. This level of sophistication—the ability to use both sides of our brain, our entire self—will be a major factor in determining how successful we are as artists or tattooers.

The process of critiquing is akin to Reductionism, which is an approach to understanding the nature of complex things by breaking them down, reducing them to the interactions of their parts. For example, we can deconstruct any image by reducing it to its basic elements of color, line, tonal value, composition of shapes, and other criteria. Even the most complex works of the great masters can be viewed with this process, temporarily stripping them of their awe-inspiring mystique to reveal the multitude of surprisingly simple ingredients used in their creation.

So in summary, an artist who wishes to invest their whole self and full potential into their work may learn to create from the holistic/intuitive processes of the right-brain, and simultaneously learn to evaluate their results with the reductive/linear processes of the left-brain. Creation without evaluation leads to stagnation.

Artistic Personalities

Many artists in the critique environment tend to fall into 2 categories, especially when their work is being critiqued. The first category is overconfidence, typified by a reluctance to detach their feelings of accomplishment about their work, from the work itself. This attitude commonly results in the artist disputing the critique of others by stating reasons for all of their artistic choices, unable to see the work from an unbiased perspective, or simply take the criticism as a new way of looking at the work.

The other category is underconfidence, where upon presentation of the work to be critiqued, the artist begins with a list of excuses or apologies about the piece, lamenting what they don't like about it, or what they would have or could have done, "if only...." By doing this, the artist has already attempted to influence the view of others rather than allow them to form their own first impressions.

Both of these habits serve to shield the artist from vulnerability—the former as a reaction, the latter as a pre-emptive measure—and in the end these also serve to shield them from the full learning potential of the critique. But as long as the critique environment is supportive and friendly, with everyone involved keeping a strictly logical mindset, these hindrances are easy to address and avoid.

2. LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Knowledge Is Power

One fact can't be denied: the wider your scope of artistic knowledge, and the deeper your study of art history, the better you'll be at critiquing others' works, as well as interpreting others' critiques of your work. This knowledge leads to deeper understanding of concepts, and provides more reference points to compare one's own work to, as well as the critiques of others. However, in the absence of broad artistic knowledge, learning basic formulas for solving the most common visual problems is a great starting point, and will still prove useful in any scenario. Many of these basics will be explained in sections 3 and 4.

The Process of Critique

The best critiques are the result of dialogue, an unfolding conversation between artist and viewer that helps reveal strategies and solutions for improving a piece of art. However, when beginning a critique it's helpful to spend the first few minutes in silent contemplation of the piece, simply absorbing it visually. Our very first impression of an artwork affects us on the base level of instinct or intuition, each of which go a long way in determining our conclusions about it. So it's important to be patient, to look long enough to let the image sink into our consciousness, allowing the mind to sense where the work interests us, and conversely, which qualities are disruptive.

One way to go about this is to purposely abstract the image in your mind, reducing any recognizable subject matter into mere shape, line, and fields of color or tonal value. This can be achieved by squinting or blurring your eyes, turning the piece sideways or upside down, or looking at it from varying distances. Doing so begins the Reductionist process of dissecting the created illusion in order to eventually determine its qualities that succeed or fail.

This purposeful abstraction is easier to do, of course, if the piece is already an abstract. And it follows, then, that the ensuing discussion would most likely only be concerned with that base-level realm of visual qualities and the emotions or impressions they evoke.

After the initial inspection of the work, before any critical determinations are made, it's often necessary to ask the artist what their goals were for the piece—what they wanted the image to communicate to the viewer, and how. Is the piece concerned only with the illusion it creates, or with the meanings behind the illusion? Was the final product arrived at randomly, intuitively, or through very deliberate choices? This question and answer period often expands into a full-blown group conversation, or “dialectic,” which is generally defined as a dialogue between two or more people who wish to establish the truth of a matter with reasoned analyses. Having this dialogue helps the participants compare their first impressions with the artist's intentions, in order to lead all involved to discover the most beneficial strategy for improving the piece.

During a critique it's helpful to adjust or limit our thinking to the paradigm presented by the piece we're currently looking at. For example, if a painting of a red square on a white background, which is intended to be a study in color relationships and geometric shape, is judged by the same criteria as a photorealistic painting of a red barn

on a snowy hill, then the entire critique is bound to be useless. That's why when acting as temporary critics, it's important to communicate with the artist to learn *their* goals and intentions, so that we may "speak their language" and thus be of most benefit to them.

Conversely, when an artist is forced to reflect on and answer questions about the choices made during their creative process, this often reveals to them valuable insights that are often obscured by the complex non-linear nature of that very process.

In other words, "Reasons, not rules, make us stronger." This slogan perfectly illustrates the value of *intention*—of knowing *why* we make our artistic choices, or why others make theirs. Arbitrary, random, or impulsive actions and assumptions are more difficult to draw conclusions about or learn lessons from. But logical or premeditated reasoning provides a structure we can use to determine specific actions to solve visual problems, which is the ultimate purpose of critique. Over time this structure helps an artist accumulate a wide array of strategies to bring any work of art to a successful finished state. Ironically, the structure provided by planning and intentional choices eventually also leads to a sense of familiarity and intuition in the artist, eventually diminishing the need for purposeful rigidity.

An Artist's Work Is Never Finished

The repeated experience of critique often leads an artist to relinquish the "preciousness" of the art they've created, helping them see their work in terms of an organic, constantly unfolding process of improvement rather than as fixed, finite objects encased in the permanence of so-called completion. The fact is that nothing is untouchable nor beyond reconsideration—and unless a permanent varnish has been applied, just about any painting can be skillfully revisited, should insights to improvements be realized later on.

Often the mental hurdle of going back into a previously "finished" painting for a few more improving touches is the hardest part—much harder than the simple adjustments that take the piece from good to great. Loosening up the rigid protectiveness we often feel over our laborious efforts can result in a more relaxed sense of confidence to simply do whatever it takes to make the art stronger. Even if our sense of closure is so strong that we opt not to revisit the piece in question to make changes, we usually feel less hesitant to apply those new insights to the next piece, making the knowledge gained through critique valuable in the long term as well as the short term.

3. BUILDING THE STRUCTURE

Basic Evaluative Criteria

The following list outlines some basic criteria that form a good starting point for evaluating an artwork. In the interests of ease and clarity of writing, this list refers only to paintings or fine art, but all of its concepts can be applied to fit the tattoo art form in some way.

Color: This is a simultaneously complex and simple subject, since which colors are used, and how they're used, can communicate a vast array of messages and feelings

to the viewer. As a participant in a critique, it's helpful to keep in mind basic color principles like primary, secondary and tertiary, tints and shades, and color relationships such as complementary and analogous. To evaluate a painting on a more complex level, thinking of color in terms of music can be helpful. For example, groups of colors used together may or may not form harmonious families, or "chords." In this metaphor, each individual color represents a single note, and all the color notes of a painting viewed together form its color chord, or overall impression—a visual form of song. Some songs are discordant or unmemorable, while others are timeless and profound; paintings are no different.

Tonal Range: This refers to the contrast of values, or the range from light to dark contained in an artwork. This may refer to actual shades of gray, but more often this actually refers to the tonal value of colors, converted to their corresponding light, medium, or dark tones in the mind's eye. Viewing a painting through this mental filter can help us determine which areas of the painting stand out and which areas merge together or become obscured, without becoming distracted by the emotional or symbolic impacts of the colors used. For example, a painting containing dark purple and pale yellow has a wide tonal range, while one containing only primary reds and greens has a narrow tonal range. A similar concept is chroma, which refers to the relative intensity of a color (Cadmium red surrounded by gray has a high chroma; mixing it with white or gray lowers its chroma; surrounding it with vivid yellows and greens lowers its relative chroma).

Form: This gives the subject matter of a 2-dimensional artwork the appearance of existing in 3-dimensional space. It conveys the illusion of mass, dimension, or some kind of physical architecture through the use of lighting, shadow, color and tonal range. Generally speaking, the deeper an artist's understanding of the laws of optical reality—how the human mind perceives objects in space, as they appear in the physical reality around us—the more convincing their illusions will be. When critiquing a particular piece, it also helps to know whether the artist intends these illusions to be accurate and convincing, or to be a departure from the optical laws of reality.

Composition: This consists of the shapes, lines, and directional movements of an artwork that are formed by the placement of subject matter. In other words, the contents of a painting are composed in a certain arrangement, forming spatial relationships that lead the viewer's eyes around the piece or direct them to an intended space within it. When critiquing the composition of representational art, it's helpful to reduce it to an abstract construction of shapes, colors and lines using the exact process described earlier, in section 2. This helps us see what the painting *is*, rather than be distracted by what it is *of*, in order to deduce how effectively its parts were put together.

Stylization: Style in art refers to the intended distortion of optical reality in order to convey a particular meaning or express a particular feeling. When developed with a sound theory and implemented with skill, stylization can add an interesting layer of symbolism and provide an entertaining treat for the eyes. Cubism is a classic example of this. However, distortions of optical reality in an artwork that arise from poor planning,

misunderstanding of the subject matter, or simply a lack of artistic skill and technique are not a true use of stylization—even though they're often passed off as such. A useful critique will address any distortions or departures from reality and discern their intention (or lack thereof), in order to reveal whether the artist achieved their goals or created unnecessary distractions.

Surface, Mark, and Pattern: Paintings consist of not only a visual illusion, but a physical surface as well. Both the picture and its surface help communicate the purpose of that work of art to the viewer. Characteristics of brushwork and the physical qualities of the media used both contribute to the final look of a painting. Thus, artists who intend their mark-making to aid in the communication of their image will often use paint expressively, letting brushmarks and irregular lumps or streaks of pigment become obvious to the viewer. Conversely, artists concerned solely with the convincing nature of their illusion will work the paint until all obvious brushmarks disappear, minimizing the physical surface of the painting as much as possible. A thorough critique will discover where the artist's emphasis lies, which paint application strategy was employed, and how effective it was in meeting their stated goal.

Further Analysis

The following list outlines some of the subtler aspects to consider in the evaluation of an artwork, after the more obvious basics listed above have been accounted for. Once again, this list refers only to paintings or fine art for ease and clarity, but all of its concepts can be applied to the tattoo art form in some way.

Process: This term refers to the *how* of art—literally, to the process by which the piece was created or accomplished. For many contemporary artists, process itself, rather than the finished product, has become the primary focus of their creativity as well as their message to the viewer. This type of artwork often emphasizes concept rather than craftsmanship. This is something to keep in mind as an evaluator of someone else's work, lest we risk making an inaccurate or unhelpful assessment of what we're viewing. But because process isn't often immediately discernable in the finished artwork, it's largely dependent on the dialogue that takes place with the artist during the critique. Andy Warhol is a good example of a contemporary artist whose work placed more symbolic importance on the process by which it was made (mass production-like silkscreen methods) than on its finished state (simplistic graphic reproductions of mundane items like soup cans). Someone who was only concerned with the final appearance of art might miss the entire point if they weren't aware of its creator's intentions or methods.

Symbol and Meaning: Human beings perceive their surroundings and determine how to act through the mental filter of meaning, based on sensory observation. Naturally this phenomenon applies to all artwork, even works that purport not to be concerned with symbolism or conveying any particular meaning to the viewer. In actuality, a work of art is communicating or expressing something, on some level, by the simple fact that it exists and can be observed by others. Therefore a thorough critique will, at some point, address

the communicative aspects of the artwork—whether intended or unintended, effective or ineffective, primary in focus or secondary to the aesthetic.

Description or Expression: An accurate reproduction of a vase simply *describes* that vase in a very factual way, whereas the same vase painted with drastic departures in color, texture, shape, or setting primarily *expresses a feeling* instead. Similar to the red square and red barn example explained in section 2, an abstract painting judged by the criteria of a photorealist painting will always be dismissed as a failure, as its creator was never attempting a literal representation of optical reality in the first place. So it helps to remember that some art is made primarily to describe or replicate optical reality, while other art is made primarily to express feelings or concepts deriving from that reality, such as the Impressionist movement. Similar to the Process concept explained above, a thorough critique will discover whether the artist is more interested in feeling or craftsmanship.

Artistic Problems vs. Technical Problems: Some art succeeds in its concept, planning, and communication to the viewer while falling short in its physical execution. For example, an artist attempting to heighten the illusion of convincing form could destroy this illusion without the knowledge of how to apply a subtle shadow glaze. Alternately, an artist may command extreme control over their materials, able to create any effect they choose, yet the final impact of their work may suffer due to poor planning or ineffective use of subject matter. For example, an artist with a skilled shadow glazing technique might not realize that the addition of a few subtle cast shadows to their piece could drastically heighten the illusion of convincing form they're trying to achieve. Dialogue with the artist during the critique of their work usually reveals which area needs improvement in order for their stated goals to be realized.

Presentation: Sometimes aspects of a painting's overall presentation, such as its frame, substrate, or environment, can have an influence on how it's perceived. In particular, installation artwork relies heavily on presentation, and artists engaged in that medium invest a lot of forethought into this aspect of their work. Although less important in making more traditional 2-dimensional images, when not considered intentionally by the artist, inconsistencies may arise. For example, a very sparse painting may be overpowered by an elaborate frame, or a very small painting may be aided by an expansive mat surrounded by a large frame. Sometimes, the fine details of a photorealist painting are interrupted by the tooth of heavy canvas, indicating that a smooth panel would have been a more effective surface. When the presentation of a piece is pronounced enough to have a dramatic effect on the viewer's perception of the work, it's worth including in the critique, even though the primary focus is usually on the image itself.

Relationships: This is more of a broad concept to keep in mind when evaluating art, rather than a fundamental criterion that can be measured. Relationship refers to how the different elements of a painting come together—interacting and influencing one another. The relationships of elements are more subjective than the most basic fundamentals like color, tonal range, and composition, but in an expertly realized

painting, all of these attributes will work together symbiotically to communicate the artist's desired illusion. No single aspect will drastically interfere with or overpower another—unless intended that way, of course. Some common relationships include the previously discussed color and compositional harmonies. Other relationships include the ways that composition influences color perception, or the way subject matter affects symbolism, or any other combination of factors. In essence, nothing included in an artwork exists in an isolated vacuum: after using the process of reductionism to break down a painting into its parts, it can be just as helpful to widen our perspective and look at the entire work holistically.

4. DECORATING THE INTERIOR

As we've seen, the overall process of critique can be likened to building a house, and moves from general to specific: from setting a friendly and helpful tone, to silent first impressions, to general discussion of intentions, strengths and weaknesses, and concluding with specific problem areas that require individual solutions. This final stage of the evaluation process—the practical and useful advice—is made possible by the steps that preceded it.

Formulating Strategies

After the initial critique and dialogue, the artist may wish to discover some concrete steps to take with the piece in question, in order to solve any problems that were revealed. In truth, the list of potential solutions is nearly infinite. But in my experience of both making and critiquing artwork, I've found that the weaknesses most pieces contain fall into several common categories, and that these common problems have correspondingly common solutions. The following list of basics provides a great starting point for artists and critique participants to expand upon. It's worth noting that many of the following solutions involve the technique of glazing, which means to apply a see-through layer of paint over an existing, dried layer. As with the previous section's lists, this one refers only to paintings or fine art for ease and clarity, but all of its concepts and most of its proposed solutions can be adapted to the tattoo art form.

Common Problems and Solutions

Discordant, distracting, or excessive use of color: Color that's used unskillfully is a very common reason why some pieces of art fall short of being breathtaking or convincing. This can be avoided when strategizing about color choices in the beginning stages of a painting. Picking one neutral or unobtrusive color to use throughout the piece, in every object and area as a foundation over which to lay other colors and glazes, can provide a unifying element. Master oil painters throughout the years have often done this by starting their paintings with a monochromatic layer of dark brown paint, usually Umber or Van Dyke—in essence creating a value study over which to lay their colors. Additionally, simply limiting the palette to a few colors will help you better understand how each color interacts with the others, and help avoid chaotic results.

However, in a work that's already well underway, this problem can be solved by selecting a color from within the piece and applying it as a glaze over the entire surface. This gives all the colors a unifying ingredient, making them more related to each other. Or, the glaze can be applied only to the most offending colors, in order to control or reel in just those areas.

Spaces look flat, lack of atmospheric distance or depth of shadow: This is by far the most common flaw with landscape paintings or works picturing deep spaces. Developing a deeper scientific understanding of how sunlight interacts with Earth's atmosphere to form a haze that lightens distant objects is a great starting point to address this problem. But to fix a piece with colors that have already been well established, a very pale blue-gray glaze is needed, laid thicker or in repeated layers over more distant areas. For deep interior spaces, a gray or gray-tinted glaze applied over the entire area and then rubbed off of closer objects or focal points is often effective to give a sense of murky or dusty air. For deeper and realistically translucent shadows, a very dark glaze of any color or color family can be used, although commonly a cooler color is best, as the human eye tends to perceive them as receding. All of these solutions can be applied to underwater spaces as well, using the appropriate colors.

Objects look flat, lack of form or dimension: Many times this problem stems from an inaccurate representation of the often-tricky properties of foreshortening, where objects become heavily distorted when placed at extreme angles towards the viewer's perspective. If the piece is still in the beginning stages, mistakes in form, dimension, and perspective can be corrected through closer observation of the subject matter, and with the use of measurements or grid systems. If forms are rendered accurately but still look flat during the later stages of a work, the same glazing concepts and techniques used for creating deep spaces can be applied within specific objects or subject matter. One such way is to glaze all the light areas or planes of an object with a light source color, usually one that appears elsewhere in the painting (including white), and to glaze all shadowed areas with an ambient light color and/or a shadow color. Doing this helps the eye correctly perceive the 3-dimensional "architecture" and varying surfaces of an object. If done with the same colors to all the objects of a painting, it helps unify them and place them in the created environment by tinting all of their local colors the same.

Flat tonal range, lack of contrast: This problem can be solved in much the same way as the preceding two sections explained—by adding color glazes to certain areas in order to make them more pronounced, by deepening shadow areas, or by adding white (or a color close to white) to lighted or prominent areas. Light areas and white can be made brighter either with glazes, or with more layers of opaque paint. Doing any or all of these things will serve to separate objects and areas of the composition from each other, as well as create focal points that appear more immediate or prominent.

Excessive tonal range, lack of subtlety: When a painting looks too dramatic, with harsh extremes of dark and light, it can be recalibrated in two ways. The least appropriate light areas can be glazed with a mid-tone value or a darker color that appears elsewhere in the piece, or darker areas can be glazed with a mid-tone or a lighter color

from within the piece. These solutions narrow the tonal range either downwards (darker) or upwards (lighter), increasing the sense of unity and subtlety within the work.

Confusing composition, too much information, lack of focal point: When confronting the problem of an overly complex representational piece, often the first step in arriving at a solution is to abstract it. This is done by viewing it upside-down or from a distance in order to discern light and dark areas, movement and patterns of color and line. In forcing our eyes to interpret the information in a different way, areas of natural prominence may suggest themselves out of the chaos.

The most straightforward solution to an unruly composition is to create an order of importance that the viewer can easily interpret. In the beginning stages of a work, this can be accomplished through universally understood hierarchies of information, like the relative sizes of subject matter and their placement relative to the center of the composition. However, in a painting utilizing unconventional design principles, or in a further state of completion, this needs to be accomplished through more subtle adjustments of color. Using glazes like the ones discussed in the sections above, the colors of certain objects or areas can be limited, or parts of the composition can be obscured in shadows or atmospheric haze (less tonal range), or by blurring/blending subsequent layers of paint.

A slightly more radical solution, which must usually be accomplished in the planning stages of a work, is to simply eliminate part of the picture altogether by cropping the subject matter. When working from a figure or still life, parts can be blocked out with hands or a piece of paper with a square hole cut out of the center. This can help narrow down the view to the most compositionally interesting area. Or, when working from digital photos, experimenting in a photo-editing program with its cropping tool can help determine the area of most interest. Taking these steps often eliminates distracting or redundant areas that may not help communicate the overall idea, and therefore, are no longer necessary to the painting.

What all this means is that often the problems of an artwork can be solved through a strategy of limitation. Setting intentional limits to one or more artistic aspects or qualities of a piece allows an artist to hone in on certain strong points of their original idea or concept—pursuing quality, not quantity—thus increasing their chances of success. Another way to understand this concept is to think in terms of a numbered rating system, where the artistic qualities of color, tonal range, and design complexity each have a maximum value of 5, yet the total value for the painting cannot exceed 8. Therefore, if many intense colors are used, bringing a total of 5 to that aspect, then tonal range and design complexity combined can only total 3. This strategy can keep a piece of art focused, under control, and able to effectively communicate its intended message.

Inaccurate reproduction of optical reality: It goes without saying that in a realistic work of art, imitating the way subject matter appears in real life is of utmost importance. Arguably, this is important in any work that aims to present the viewer with a convincing, believable illusion of some kind or another. When a painting falls short of this standard, there are a few simple and obvious steps to take. The first is to consult reference material, usually in the form of photographs, live models, or still lifes. Carefully and patiently studying these in minute detail hones observational abilities—and

when in doubt, acquiring more/different/better reference materials is the next logical step. Going even further, it often helps to complete some quick, rough studies of the subject matter in order to master its properties before attempting or completing the final work.

Of course, the ultimate understanding of how the human eye and brain perceive optical reality is rooted in the study of physics and other scientific disciplines. As an artist it's actually quite beneficial to have a basic understanding of how sunlight illuminates our world, in essence making it the true source of all visual art. Once a few basic formulas are well understood, recreating lifelike illusions in art—and critiquing problems that arise in doing so—becomes much easier.

For example, it helps to know the basic color equations involved in the way that white light from the sun scatters amidst the molecules of Earth's atmosphere, causing it to appear blue and the sun to appear yellow or orange. When this light hits an object, it scatters in a scientifically predictable fashion depending on that object's local color, thus causing a series of increasingly complex interactions between object, atmosphere, and surrounding objects, before finally reaching the human eye.

This is why cast shadows are often perceived as cool, why objects exhibit direct light sources and reflected under-lighting, and on and on. Focusing on developing their creativity leads many artists to overlook the fact that this type of knowledge goes a long way in solving problems that occur in realistic representational art.

Inaccurate human figures and lifeless, fake, or waxy skin: The human figure is an incredibly complex form, composed of many subtle curves, angles and a myriad of differing proportions between its parts. Naturally, this makes it difficult to accurately reproduce in art, and many figures are made less believable due to mistakes in size, shape and proportion. Avoiding these obstacles to convincing anatomy involves much figure drawing practice, and learning to spot them in a critique requires an understanding of basic physiology, muscle mass and skeletal structure. Completing some studies of problem areas, or consulting an anatomy book, skeletal model, or live model can solve problems with the shape and form of a figure that are discovered early on.

Beyond problems with anatomy, unconvincing or lifeless skin is another very common shortcoming in figurative art, especially among beginners. The first step in solving this problem is to understand it on a basic scientific or physical level. When looking at a human being, what we're really observing is light passing through partially translucent layers of skin cells, faintly illuminating the red blood that is flowing underneath, thus producing the wide range of pinks, reds, and ochres that comprise flesh of a light-skinned person, and the range of warm browns that comprise the flesh of a dark-skinned person. It often seems counterintuitive or wrong to mix so much red into a paint mixture for skin, but that's usually what's needed to bring a vibrant, lifelike quality to a stale, frozen-looking figurative work. To correct this problem after the painting has already dried, a thin blood-colored glaze can be applied to all ruddy or thin-skinned areas of the figure such as noses, cheeks, around eyes, joints, hands and feet.

It's also important to keep in mind that flesh has a subtle reflective quality and is therefore affected greatly by its surroundings. For example, a blue sweater next to the skin or a green wall next to a figure will result in skin tones with hints of blue or green in the appropriate areas. Oftentimes, slightly exaggerating the intensity of these reflected colors can help liven up a lifeless figure.

Of course, being able to spot all these types of figurative problems in a critique involves the same type of background knowledge and areas of study discussed in the previous section about optical reality.

Harsh paint handling, lack of delicacy or softness: Some artists intend their work to have an energetic sense of immediacy and spontaneity, which they achieve through the use of bold, un-manipulated brushstrokes and rough patches of opaque paint. But in any piece meant to impart a refined feeling of softness and subtlety to the viewer, obviously these paint qualities can be a hindrance. In all but the most extreme cases, this problem can be remedied by applying one or more glazes mixed with zinc white plus a chosen color, to all or part of the painting. This will help develop a dappled and misty softness in the piece while preserving details—which the wet glaze can be completely scrubbed off of, if necessary. Another solution in paintings without much surface texture or uneven paint buildup is to soften the edges of objects in the composition with a combination of scumbling and glazing. This is done by mixing a fairly precise match of both the color of the object to be softened and the color that surrounds it, and carefully applying those mixes to the borders of those colors in the painting. Then, using a blending brush in quick, light, back and forth or circular movements, the fresh paint can be slightly blended together to produce a softer edge.

Everything is problematic: Sometimes, a piece of art is just poorly conceived and executed on all levels. So many problems exist that the piece cannot be salvaged—all of the necessary solutions would require a return to the very beginning of the artistic process. Although rare, this is obviously caused by impatience and a lack of proper planning, lack of a clear goal, lack of experience with the chosen subject matter or medium, or all of the above. It takes discipline and some courage by the artist to swallow their pride, go back to the beginning, and approach the project more logically and patiently—or to attempt a simpler project altogether. But doing so can be rewarding, and is ultimately necessary in the quest for artistic improvement. A thoughtful and compassionate critique, containing specific advice on how to solve the various problems encountered, can provide a great head start for the artist determined to try again and avoid the same mistakes.

Conclusion

Simply put, being an artist who's truly dedicated to improvement is an immense task and a never-ending journey of education, practice, and reflection. There are many areas of study and fields of knowledge to draw from, so a generous amount of honesty with ourselves—to recognize what it is we don't yet know—is required for progression. With this open and forward-looking attitude, every stage of our progress and achievement can be a temporary stop before accomplishing something even greater and more masterful; there just may be no limits to what human ingenuity and creativity can achieve. But we must always be willing to stop and examine, to take a discerning look at what's been done, in order to know how and where to continue onward. In other words, we must learn the powerful art of self-critique, and share the critique experience with our fellow artists.

May we all ascend to the heights of our fullest potential.

“Every step of the journey requires problems to be solved, and what comes after a thousand solutions is something approaching the divine.” —Edward Povey

APPENDIX I: Key Terms and Concepts

Analogous Colors: those that appear next to each other on a color wheel, typically producing a harmonizing effect when used together in an artwork.

Complementary Colors: those that appear opposite of each other on a color wheel, typically producing a vibrating or brightening effect when used together in an artwork, or a neutralizing gray when blended together.

Chroma: The perceived intensity (colorfulness, brightness, vibrancy) of a specific color, relative to the brightness of other colors around it.

Critique: the act of evaluating or criticizing through unbiased and logical reasoning.

Dialectic: a dialogue between two or more people who wish to establish the truth of a matter with reasoned analyses.

Foreshortening: to reduce or distort parts of a represented object that are not parallel to the picture plane, in order to convey the illusion of three-dimensional space as perceived by the human eye, according to the rules of perspective.

Glaze: any transparent layer of paint over a dried layer, allowing the original layer to show through, creating an optical combination of both layers together.

Guild: an organization of persons with related interests or goals, such as merchants or artisans, formed for mutual aid and protection, or to maintain standards.

Holism: an approach to understanding the nature of complex things or complete systems by focusing on the entirety of events, interactions, or relationships, rather than with the analysis of, or dissection into, parts.

Intention: a predetermined goal that one means to carry out, a purpose or aim that guides an action.

Optical Reality: the exact and unbiased information of the visual world, as determined by the way in which the human eye and brain function, in a process that operates according to predictable and calculable laws of light, physics, and human biology.

Reductionism: an approach to understanding the nature of complex things by breaking them down, reducing them to the interactions of their parts.

Scumble: an opaque (and usually lighter) color brushed over a dried layer, sometimes allowing the original layer to partially show through.

Shade: any color mixed with black.

Strategy: a plan, method, or series of maneuvers for obtaining a specific goal or result.

Tint: any color mixed with white.

APPENDIX II: The Basic Critique Structure

1. **Prepare the ground:** Set a positive and friendly group atmosphere of support. Put feelings and opinions aside and enter into a scientific, analytical mindset.
2. **Lay the foundation:** Silently absorb the work, then engage the artist in Q & A about their artistic choices and intentions.
3. **Build the structure:** Go through a list of artistic criteria by which to measure successful or troublesome elements of the work, continuing to engage in Q & A with the artist if needed.
4. **Decorate the interior:** Based on the knowledge of the group and a list of common problems and solutions, propose specific steps to take to solve problems within the work.

APPENDIX III: Checklist of Evaluative Criteria

1. **Color** (which ones, how and why they're used)
2. **Tonal Range** (value and contrast, colors viewed as grayscale)
3. **Form** (illusion of 3-dimensionality)
4. **Composition** (spatial arrangement of subject matter)
5. **Stylization** (unique and purposeful distortions of optical reality)
6. **Surface, Mark, and Pattern** (physical characteristics of paint application)

7. **Process** (method of how the work was accomplished or created)
8. **Symbol and Meaning** (ideas or concepts the work conveys)
9. **Description or Expression** (accurately depicting reality, or expressing feelings)
10. **Artistic vs. Technical** (flaws in vision or planning, or in execution and technique)
11. **Presentation** (appearance of the overall work within its environment)
12. **Relationships** (interaction of all attributes to create a total viewing experience)

APPENDIX IV: Checklist of Common Problems & Solutions

1. **Discordant Color:** begin with a unifying color; glaze with a unifying color.
2. **Lack of Atmospheric Depth:** understand how Earth's atmosphere works; pale blue glazes over distant objects; light gray glazes over murky interior spaces; dark glazes over shadowed areas.
3. **Objects Lacking Dimension:** check foreshortening; glaze with light source color, ambient color, and shadow color.
4. **Lack of Contrast:** heighten brightness or chroma of prominent focal points; dark glaze on shadow areas; glaze or scumble highlighted areas with white or very light color.
5. **Too Much Contrast:** glaze extreme light and/or dark areas with mid-tone value or color from within the piece.
6. **Confusing Composition:** abstract the piece; create an order of importance; crop the image; set intentional limits to certain attributes.
7. **Inaccurate Realism:** revisit the reference; complete quick studies; understand basic laws of physics and the equations of light and atmosphere.
8. **Incorrect Anatomy and Lifeless Skin on Figures:** understand principles of physiology, muscle mass and skeletal structure; understand laws of biology and the properties of light on skin; incorporate reflected colors into skin tones; apply a thin, blood-color glaze over all ruddy or thin-skinned areas of figures.
9. **Lack of Softness:** apply a series of thin misty glazes using zinc white as a base; soften the edges of individual objects with a new, blended layer.
10. **Catastrophic Failure:** start over with more thorough planning and careful steps; apply any lessons and advice learned during the critique.