

MY CRITERIA FOR JUDGING AWARDS IN AN ART SHOW

By James Warwick Jones
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Judging artwork is very subjective. We all bring our own experiences, education and personal preferences to the process of judging artwork. I was just looking at an article in a magazine from my alma mater, The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Four curators from the Academy were asked to pick the ten most important paintings from their amazing collection of American art. All four curators, only picked two of the same paintings, and two of each also picked two other paintings. All of the other selections were picked only once. I like to think that equally qualified judges, for the same exhibition would agree on maybe half of their selections, but again, it is subjective.

Here are the criteria, ranked by importance, I use when judging a group of artworks for awards; and although the priorities or words might be different, I think most judges would have a very similar set of criteria:

IMPACT- Often times my first impression of an artwork, “Wow, this is really great”, is a very strong indication of how good it is, at least in my opinion. This “impact” is really a combination of all the other criteria that follows: originality, design, content, craftsmanship, style, and presentation. This usually means a piece which I would like to own myself, and could enjoy and appreciate every time I looked at it. “Gee, I wish I had done that!” This first impression usually doesn’t change no matter how many times I study the piece, although I might see another work which has even greater impact and surpasses the first one.

ORIGINALITY: The artwork must be original, and this should go without saying. Most exhibitions or shows would have this as the most important requirement for even entering the competition. That is not to say that the artist might have been inspired in some way by the style, content, or design of another artist or artwork. If it is done creatively, some image might be appropriated and then carried further or presented in a new way, but this is a very gray area to enter. Someone once said the way to be recognized as a great artist is to do something that has never been done before or do something in a better way. Not an easy task.

DESIGN: The success the artist has in utilizing the abstract elements, such as color, line form, etc. and the design principles, such as repetition, contrast, movement, etc into a composition which is both visually exciting and unified is one of the most important (and challenging) aspects of visual art. To me all of the greatest art, whether a realistic painting created three hundred years ago or a conceptual piece created today has to *work* in this way to be great. I can enjoy and appreciate the composition, not matter what the style, medium, period, etc.

CONTENT: For an artist working in a representational or realistic manner, this would be the subject matter, how the subjects are combined, the symbolism, the narrative, the emotions it evokes or the message, if any that it presents. For the non-representational or abstract artist, it is more about the design and visual excitement and possibly the feelings it evokes. Learning to *read* this content comes from education, especially in fine art, experience and being perceptive and sensitive to the artwork.

CRAFTSMANSHIP: Technique would be another way of saying this. Some people might rank this as the most important, and it is certainly something that everyone can appreciate, even if they don't know anything about art, except they know what they like.

For me, compared to the first four items on my list, it really isn't as important in determining how good a work of art is considered. If it plagiarized from another work or if the composition is poor, the technical skill in rendering, for example, can't make up for those shortcomings. Each medium, drawing, painting, ceramics, photography, etc. each has its own character, so the best art usually reflects that character.

STYLE: The best artists develop their own style, *voice*, or way of working. If I see a painting by Cezanne that I have never seen before, whether in a book or in a museum; I almost always recognize it as a Cezanne; by the style in which it is painted. Again this is made up of many elements: the subject matter, the design, the techniques, the color, all of which identify it as by that artist. And again, it is the experience of looking at and studying art which gives us this ability. Some artists work in this same style all their lives. Today it is more common for artists to evolve through several styles or mediums, some very gradually and others making dramatic changes. Obviously you can't determine this style from one artwork, but for most judges, viewing a body of works by the same artists, they usually like to see a consistent style, at least throughout the same medium.

PRESENTATION: This is probably the least important of my criteria and therefore, last on the list. Having said that, everything else being equal, it is important how the artwork is presented. An ornate frame which overpowers a subtle work or a strange colored and poorly cut mat, does harm the impact of the artwork itself. To me, it also says something about the perception, sensitivity and understanding of the artist. Good presentation can also help a lesser artwork look better.

So there you have what I look for in judging works of art. You will have your own criteria, and fact that we agree or disagree is one of the wonderful things about art that makes it interesting.

James Warwick Jones

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