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How to benefit from and be part of a critique

In art, a *critique* is a discussion of evaluation of a piece of art. At some point, every artist will be critiqued. Whether it's by an actual art critic, a friend, a fellow artist, instructor, or just someone who walks into your show, people will always tell you what you're doing right and what you're doing wrong.

Critiques aren't bad. Critiques aren't necessarily good either—it's what you DO with them that makes the difference.

Structured, group critiques are a great way for artists to get feedback about their art. There are even some online communities where you can get feedback on your art from artists around the globe. But the truth is, the best critiques in the world won't help if you have the wrong attitude going into it—and even rude or unwanted critiques can be helpful if you're willing to listen.

So with that in mind, here are some suggestions for getting the most out of an art critique.

How to take criticism

1. Separate your own emotions from your art. They're not critiquing YOU, they're critiquing a painting or a drawing - NEVER you. It might feel that way at first, after you've poured your heart and soul into a work of art only to have it picked apart—but, it's not your flaws they're pointing out.

Every artist remembers being a very depressed, very young eighteen year old during their first few weeks of college when it seemed like every drawing, design, or idea presented got shot down. You have to make a choice—every artist does. Either learn to distance your emotions or just stop learning.

Becoming a better artist means opening yourself up to the honest assessment of your peers. It's worth it, but you have to choose to accept criticism before you'll be able to move on.

2. Take notes during the critique. If it's a long critique with, say, ten other people, you won't be able to remember everything that each person said without writing some of it down. Jot down a quick note for each separate thing mentioned, and then later when you're by yourself you can really take the time to review the critique. It helps people be more constructive about what they say since they know you're paying attention and that you care about their opinion.

3. Don't worry when people don't "like" your artwork. You'll often come across people who just don't enjoy your art. There might be nothing for you to improve on, no mistakes you made; they just don't like it - and that's OK. Opinions vary. You won't be able to reach everyone with your art, and the best you can do is put your art out there and explain it so at least there's no confusion. People not liking your art isn't the end of the world.

4. Decide whether you agree or disagree. Ultimately a critique is just advice from other people, and like all advice, some of it will be bad.

Separate the good from the bad, and take only what you can use from it. You don't have to change your style, or way of thinking, or subject matter just because someone else has a different opinion. In the end, you'll grow the most as an artist by listening to others, weighing the merits of what they're saying, and then choosing your own path, whatever that may be.

How to give criticism

1. Take a look through the artist's eyes. If you're going to be critiquing another artist's work, it helps to know where they're coming from.

In general, it is difficult to get a sense of an artist from just one or two paintings, so see several if you can, before critiquing. Having the artist explain what was intended helps too.

If what they're saying and what you're seeing doesn't mesh, then that gives you a place to start. If their intent IS coming through, think about ways to help enhance their vision even more.

2. Don't nit-pick the little stuff. Oddly shaped ears, squarish trees, or an off-color sky. . . Sometimes it's helpful to point out those flaws, but if there are really a lot of them, focus on the big picture instead. With technical issues like those, suggest spending more time in preliminary sketching or mention the importance of having a strong light source that shows detail. Sure, listing each flaw might help the artist fix this painting, but what about the next one? You can't always be there. It's much better to help them improve their technique or process ONCE than fix the end-results a hundred times.

Of course, if the artist asks for a nit-picky critique (and some will) then go ahead. It might not be the best way to help, but at least you know they won't mind.

3. Start positive and end positive. Always make sure to start off by saying something nice. Even if it's difficult, find something to say. After that, be as honest as possible—without being brutal—and then close with another encouraging, positive statement.

Artists can occasionally be sensitive about their art (that's sarcasm) so it just makes sense to cushion the blows a little bit.

4. Never be vague. There's nothing worse than a vague critique. They usually sound a little bit like this: "There's something about your painting that's not right. . . I don't know what, it's just, you know. . . Something." You need to make substantive comments.

5. And finally, keep it short. I've never yet been in a group critique where time wasn't a factor. Say your piece and be done.

*Remember, the point of a critique is to help artists improve.
If you aim for that you won't go to far wrong.*

