Chapter 3

BEING A CRITIC OF THE ARTS

In this chapter, we are concerned with establishing the goals of responsible criticism. The act of responsible criticism aims for the fullest understanding and the fullest participation possible. Being a responsible critic demands being at the height of awareness while examining a work of art in detail, establishing its context, and clarifying its achievement. It is not to be confused with popular journalism, which often sidetracks the critic into being flashy, negative, and cute. The critic aims at a full understanding of a work of art.

You Are Already an Art Critic

Almost everyone operates as an art critic much of the time. Choosing a film or changing the television channel to look for something better implies a critical act. When turning a radio dial looking for good music, we become critics of music. The same is true when we stop to admire a building or a sculpture. What qualifies us to make such critical judgments? What training underlies our constant criticism of such arts as film, music, architecture, and sculpture? Experience is one factor. We have gone to movies, listened to music on the radio, and watched television since before we can remember. We can count on a lifetime of seeing architecture, of responding to the industrial design of automobiles and furniture, of seeing public
sculpture. This is no inconsiderable background, and it helps us make critical judgments without hesitation.

But even though all this is true, we realize something further. Everyone has limitations as a critic. When left to our own devices, we grow up with little specific critical training, even in a society rich in art, and find ourselves capable of going only so far. If we do nothing to increase our critical skills, they may not grow. By learning some principles about criticism and how to put them to work, we can develop our capacities as critics and, in turn, our ability to understand and enjoy.

PARTICIPATION AND THE CRITIC

One reason many of us resist our roles as critics is that we value so highly the participative experience. Criticism interferes with that participative delight. For example, most of us lose ourselves in a good film and never think about the film in an objective way. It “ruins” the experience to stop and be critical, because the act of criticism is quite different from the act of participative enjoyment. And if we were to choose which act is the most important, then, of course, we would have to stand firm behind enjoyment. Art is, above all, enjoyable. Yet the kinds of enjoyment it affords are sometimes complex and subtle. Good critics make the complexities and subtleties more understandable both to themselves and to others. In other words, by reflecting upon our participative experiences, we help deepen our next participation. Thus the critical act is—at its best—an act that is very much related to the act of participatory enjoyment. The reason is simple: A fine critical sense helps us develop the perceptions essential to understanding what’s “going on” in a work of art.

Seeing a film twice, for instance, is often interesting. At first our personalities may melt away, and we become involved and lost in the experience. Competent and clever filmmakers can cause us to do this quickly and efficiently—the first time. But if the filmmaker is only competent and clever, as opposed to being creative, then the second time we see the film, its flaws are likely to be obvious and we are likely to have a less complete participatory experience. However, when we see a truly great film, the second experience is likely to be more exciting than the first. If we have become good critics and reflected wisely on our first experience, we will find that the second experience of any great work of art is likely to be more intense and our participation deeper. For one thing, our understanding of the artistic form and content is likely to be considerably more refined in our second experience and in all subsequent experiences.

Only those works of art that are successful on most or all levels can be as interesting the second time. This presumes, however, a reliable perception of the work. For example, the first experience of most works of art will not be satisfying—perhaps it will not produce the participative experience at all—if we fail to perceive the artistic form to a significant extent. Consequently, it is possible that the first experience of a difficult poem, for instance, will be less than enjoyable. If, however, we have gained helpful
information from the first experience and thus have made ourselves more sensitive to the poem, the second experience will be more satisfying.

One of the first critical questions we should ask concerns whether we actually have had a participative experience. Has the work of art taken us out of ourselves? If it is a good work of art, we should find ourselves lost in the delight of experiencing it. However, as we have been suggesting all along, if we are not so carried away by a given work, the reason may not be because it is not successful. It may be because we do not perceive all or most of what there is to perceive. We may not get it well enough for it to transport us into participation. Consequently, we have to be critical of ourselves some of the time in order to be sure we have laid the groundwork essential to participation. When we are sure that we have done as much as we can to prepare ourselves, then we are in a better position to decide whether the deficiency is in the work or in us. In the final analysis, we must have the participative experience if we are to fully comprehend a work of art.

KINDS OF CRITICISM

With our basic critical purpose clearly in mind—that is, to learn, by reflecting on works of art, how to participate with them more intensely and enjoyably—let us now analyze the practice of criticism more closely. If, as we have argued in Chapter 2, a work of art is essentially a form-content, then good criticism will sharpen our perception of the form of a work of art and thus increase our understanding of its content.

CONCEPTION KEY  Kinds of Criticism

Seek out at least three examples of criticism from any available place, including, if you like, Chapters 1 and 2 of this book. Film or book reviews in newspapers or magazines or discussions of art in books may be used. Analyze these examples with reference to the following questions:

1. Does the criticism focus mainly on the form or the content?
2. Can you find any examples in which the criticism is entirely about the form?
3. Can you find any examples in which the criticism is entirely about the content?
4. Can you find any examples in which the focus is on neither the form nor the content but on evaluating the work as good or bad or better or worse than some other work?
5. Can you find any examples in which there is no evaluation?
6. Which kinds of criticism do you find most helpful—those bearing on form, content, or evaluation? Why?
7. Do you find any examples in which it is not clear whether the emphasis is on form, content, or evaluation?

This Conception Key points to three basic kinds of criticism: descriptive, which focuses on form; interpretive, which focuses on content; and evaluative, which focuses on the relative merits of a work. (Historical criticism is a fourth type, which we will cover in Chapter 16.)

Leonardo's painting was one of many on this subject, but his is the first to represent recognizably human figures with understandable facial expressions. This is the dramatic moment when Jesus tells his disciples that one of them will betray him.

**Descriptive Criticism**

**Descriptive criticism** concentrates on the form of a work of art, describing, sometimes exhaustively, the important characteristics of that form in order to improve our understanding of the part-to-part and part-to-whole inter-relationships. At first glance this kind of criticism may seem unnecessary. After all, the form is all there, completely given—all we have to do is observe. But most of us know all too well that we can spend time attending to a work we are very much interested in and yet not perceive all there is to perceive. We miss things, oftentimes things that are right there for us to observe. For example, were you immediately aware of the visual form of e. e. cummings’ “l(a” (Figure 1-7)—the spiraling downward curve? Or, in Goya’s *May 3, 1808* (Figure 2-3), were you immediately aware of the way the line of the long dark shadow at the bottom right underlines the line of the firing squad?

Good descriptive critics call our attention to what we otherwise might miss in an artistic form. And even more important, they help us learn how to do their work when they are not around. We can, if we carefully attend to descriptive criticism, develop and enhance our own powers of observation. That is worth thinking about. None of us can afford to have a professional critic with us at all times in order to help us perceive the art around us more fully. Descriptive criticism, more than any other type, is most likely to improve our participation with a work of art, for such criticism turns us directly to the work itself.

Study Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* (Figure 3-1), damaged by repeated restorations that were usually badly done. Leonardo unfortunately experimented with dry fresco, which usually, as in this case, deteriorates rapidly. Still, even in its present condition, it can be overwhelming.
PERCEPTION KEY  *Last Supper*

Descriptively criticize the *Last Supper* (Figure 3-1). Point out every facet of form that seems important. Look for shapes that relate to each other, including groupings of figures. Do any shapes stand out as unique—for example, the shapes of Christ and Judas? Describe the color relationships. Describe the symmetry, if any. Describe how the lines tend to meet in the landscape behind Christ's head. The descriptions of Goya's *May 3, 1808* (Figure 2-3) might be a helpful guide.

Leonardo planned the fresco so that the perspectival vanishing point would reside in the head of Jesus, the central figure in the painting (Figure 3-2). He also used the concept of the trinity, in the number 3, as he grouped each of the disciples in threes, two groups on each side of the painting. Were you to diagram them, you would see they form the basis of triangles. The three windows in the back wall also contribute to the idea of three. The figure of Jesus is itself a perfect isosceles triangle, while the red and blue garment centers the eye. In some paintings, this kind of architectonic organization might be much too static, but because Leonardo gathers the figures in dramatic poses, with facial expressions that reveal apparent emotions, the viewer is distracted from the formal organization while being subliminally affected by its perfection. It seems that perfection—appropriate to his subject matter—was what Leonardo aimed
at in creating the underlying structure of the fresco. Judas, the disciple who will betray Jesus, is the fourth figure from the left, his face in shadow, pulling back in shock.

**Detail, Regional, and Structural Relationships**

The totality of any work of art is a continuum of parts. A small part we shall call a **detail**, a large part a **region**. Significant relationships between or among details or regions we shall call **detail** or **regional relationships**, respectively. Significant relationships between or among details or regions to the totality we shall call **structural relationships**. For example, the triangular figure of Christ, with red and blue garments, in the center of *The Last Supper* (Figure 3-1) is a dominant settling force for the eye, but it contrasts immediately with the other triangular arrangements of the apostles. This is a detail relationship. So, too, the white rectangular table cloth beneath all the figures establishes a powerful element as a visual base. In turn, that white rectangle contrasts with the receding white wall to the right of the composition. Each of the figures in the painting, with their complimentary colors of red, blue, and ochre, compete with the dominant darkness of the upper left segment of the painting. Seeing the many color garments and their natural triangular grouping is a matter of regional relationship. However, seeing the competition of triangular and rectangular shapes implies a structural relationship.

**PERCEPTION KEY Detail, Regional, or Structural Dominance**

Whether detail, regional, or structural relationships dominate—or are equal—often varies widely from work to work. Compare Mondrian’s *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red* (Figure 1-6), Picasso’s *Guernica* (Figure 1-4), and Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm* (Figure 3-3). In which painting or paintings, if any, do detail relationships dominate? Regional relationships? Structural relationships?

Detail relationships dominate *Autumn Rhythm* (Figure 3-2), so much that at first sight, perhaps, no structure is apparent. The loops, splashes, skeins, and blots of color were dripped or thrown on the canvas, which was laid out flat on the floor during execution. Yet there is not as much chaotic chance as one might suppose. Most of Pollock’s actions were controlled accidents, the result of his awareness, developed through long trial-and-error experience, of how the motion of his hand and body along with the weight and fluidity of the paint would determine the shape and textures of the drips and splashes as he moved around the borders of the canvas. Somehow the endless details finally add up to a self-contained sparkling totality holding the rhythms of autumn. Picasso’s *Guernica*, alternatively, is more or less balanced with respect to detail, region, and structure. The detail relationships are organized into three major regions:
the great triangle—with the apex at the candle and two sides sloping down to the lower corners—and the two large rectangles, vertically oriented, running down along the left and right borders. Moreover, these regions are hierarchically ordered. The triangular region takes precedence in both size and interest, and the left rectangle, mainly because of the fascination of the impassive bull (what is he doing here?), dominates the right rectangle, even though both are about the same size. Despite the complexity of the detail relationships in Guernica, we gradually perceive the power of a very strong, clear structure.

**Interpretive Criticism**

**Interpretive criticism** explicates the content of a work of art. It helps us understand how form transforms subject matter into content: what has been revealed about some subject matter and how that has been accomplished. The content of any work of art will become clearer when the structure is perceived in relationship to the details and regions. The examples on the next page (Figures 3-4 and 3-5) demonstrate that the same principle holds for architecture as holds for painting. The subject matter of a building—or at least an important component of it—is usually the practical function the building serves. We have no difficulty telling which of these buildings was meant to serve as a bank and which was meant to serve as a church.

**FIGURE 3-3**

Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*, one of the best examples of his drip technique, is often connected with the improvisations of the jazz music he listened to as he painted.
FIGURE 3-4

The chapel is built on a hill where a pilgrimage chapel was destroyed during the second world war. Le Corbusier used soaring lines to lift the viewer’s eyes to the heavens and the surrounding horizon, visible on all four sides.

FIGURE 3-5

Sullivan’s building, among the first high-rise structures, was made possible by the use of mass-produced steel girders supporting the weight of each floor.

PERCEPTION KEY Sullivan and Le Corbusier

1. Which of these structures suggests solidity? Which suggests flight and motion? What have these things got to do with the function of each building?
2. Which of these buildings places more emphasis on details?
3. Which building possesses the more varied detail?
4. The entrance to the bank is off-center. Would it have been better to have it centralized? There is no centralized entrance to the church. Good or bad?
5. Explain the content of each building.

Form-Content

The interpretive critic’s job is to find out as much about an artistic form as possible in order to explain its meaning. This is a particularly useful task for the critic—which is to say, for us in particular—since the forms of numerous works of art seem important but are not immediately understandable. When we look at the examples of the bank and the church, we ought to realize that the significance of these buildings is expressed by means of the form-content. It is true that without knowing the functions of these buildings we could appreciate them as structures without special functions, but knowing about their functions deepens our appreciation. Thus, the lofty arc of Le Corbusier’s roof soars heavenward more mightily when we recognize the building as a church. The form takes us up toward heaven, at least in the sense that it moves our eyes upward. For a Christian church, such a reference is perfect. The bank, however, looks like a pile of square coins or banknotes. Certainly the form “amasses” something, an appropriate suggestion for a bank. We will not belabor these examples, since
it should be fun for you to do this kind of critical job yourself. Observe how much more you get out of these examples of architecture when you consider each form in relation to its meaning—that is, the form as form-content. Furthermore, such analyses should convince you that interpretive criticism operates in a vacuum unless it is based on descriptive criticism. Unless we perceive the form with sensitivity—and this means that we have the basis for good descriptive criticism—we simply cannot understand the content. In turn, any interpretive criticism will be useless.

Participate with a poem by William Butler Yeats:

THE LAKE ISLE OF INNISFREE
I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

PERCEPTION KEY Yeats's Poem
1. Offer a brief description of the poem, concentrating on the nature of the rhyme-words, the contrasting imagery, the rhythms of the lines.
2. What does the poet say he intends to do? Do you think he will actually do it?
3. What does the poet mean by “the deep heart's core”?
4. To what extent do you sympathize with the poet's desires?

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” is a lyric written from the first person, “I.” Its three stanzas of four lines each rhyme in simple fashion with full vowel sounds, and as a result, the poem lends itself to being sung, as indeed it has often been set to music. The poet portrays himself as a simple person preferring the simple life. The critic will notice the basic formal qualities of the poem: rhyme, steady meter, the quatrain stanza structure. But the critic will also move further to talk about the imagery in the poem: the image of the simply built cabin, the small garden with bean rows, the bee hive, the sounds of the linnet's wings and the lake water lapping the shore, the look of noon's purple glow. The interpretive critic will address the entire project of the poet, who is standing “on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,” longing to return to the distant country and the simple life. The poet “hears” the lake waters “in the deep heart's core,” which is to say that the simple life is absolutely basic to the poet. The last three words actually repeat the same
idea. The heart is always at the core of a person, and it is always deep in that core. Such emphasis helps produce in the reader a sense of completion and significance.

Yeats later commented on this poem and said it was the first poem of his career to have a real sense of music. He also said that the imagery came to him when he was stepping off a curb near the British Museum in the heart of London and heard the sound of splashing water. The sounds immediately brought to mind the imagery of the island, which is in the west of Ireland.

It is important that we grasp the relative nature of explanations about the content of works of art. Even descriptive critics, who try to tell us about what is really there, will perceive things in a way that is relative to their own perspective. An amusing story in Cervantes' Don Quixote illustrates the point. Sancho Panza had two cousins who were expert wine tasters. However, on occasion, they disagreed. One found the wine excellent except for an iron taste; the other found the wine excellent except for a leather taste. When the barrel of wine was emptied, an iron key with a leather thong was found. As N. J. Berrill points out in Man's Emerging Mind,

The statement you often hear that seeing is believing is one of the most misleading ones a man has ever made, for you are more likely to see what you believe than believe what you see. To see anything as it really exists is about as hard an exercise of mind and eyes as it is possible to perform.¹

Two descriptive critics can often "see" quite different things in an artistic form. This is not only to be expected but is also desirable; it is one of the reasons great works of art keep us intrigued for centuries. But even though they may see quite different aspects when they look independently at a work of art, when they get together and talk it over, the critics will usually come to some kind of agreement about the aspects each of them sees. The work being described, after all, has verifiable, objective qualities each of us can perceive and talk about. But it has subjective qualities as well, in the sense that the qualities are observed only by "subjects."

In the case of interpretive criticism, the subjectivity and, in turn, the relativity of explanations are more obvious than in the case of descriptive criticism. The content is "there" in the form, and yet, unlike the form, it is not there in a directly perceivable way. It must be interpreted.

Interpretive critics, more than descriptive critics, must be familiar with the subject matter. Interpretive critics often make the subject matter more explicit for us at the first stage of their criticism, bringing us closer to the work. Perhaps the best way initially to get at Picasso's Guernica (Figure 1-4) is to discover its subject matter. Is it about a fire in a building or something else? If we are not clear about this, perception of the painting is obscured. But after the subject matter has been elucidated, good interpretive critics go much further: exploring and discovering meanings about the subject matter as revealed by the form. Now they are concerned with helping us

grasp the content directly, in all of its complexities and subtleties. This final stage of interpretive criticism is, undoubtedly, the most demanding of all criticism.

**Evaluve Criticism**

To evaluate a work of art is to judge its merits. At first glance, this seems to suggest that *evaluative criticism* is prescriptive criticism, which prescribes what is good as if it were a medicine and tells us that this work is superior to that work.

**PERCEPTION KEY** Evaluative Criticism

1. Suppose you are a judge of an exhibition of painting and Figures 2-17 through 2-25 in Chapter 2 have been placed into competition. You are to award first, second, and third prizes. What would your decisions be? Why?
2. Suppose, further, that you are asked to judge which is the best work of art from the following selection: cummings’ “I(a” (page 13), Cézanne’s *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 2-4), and Le Corbusier’s church (Figure 3-4). What would your decision be? Why?

It may be that this kind of evaluative criticism makes you uncomfortable. If so, we think your reaction is based on good instincts. In the first place, each work of art is such an individual thing that a relative merit ranking of several of them seems arbitrary. This is especially the case when the works are in different media and have different subject matters, as in the second question of the Perception Key. In the second place, it is not clear how such judging helps us in our basic critical purpose—to learn from our reflections about works of art how to participate with these works more intensely and enjoyably.

Nevertheless, evaluative criticism of some kind is generally necessary. As authors, we have been making such judgments continually in this book—in the selections for illustrations, for example. You make such judgments when, as you enter a museum, you decide to spend your time with this painting rather than that. Obviously, directors of museums must also make evaluative criticisms, because usually they cannot display every work owned by the museum. If a Van Gogh is on sale—and one of his paintings was bought recently for $82.5 million—someone has to decide its worth. Evaluative criticism, then, is always functioning, at least implicitly. Even when we are participating with a work, we are implicitly evaluating its worth. Our participation implies its worth. If it were worthless to us, we would not even attempt participation.

The problem, then, is how to use evaluative criticism as constructively as possible. How can we use such criticism to help our participation with works of art? Whether Giorgione’s painting (Figure 2-17) or Modigliani’s (Figure 2-19) deserves first prize seems trivial. But if almost all critics agree that Shakespeare’s poetry is far superior to Edward Guest’s, and if we have
been thinking Guest's poetry is better, we would probably be wise to do some reevaluating. Or if we hear a music critic whom we respect state that the music of the Beatles is worth listening to—and up to this time we have dismissed it—then we should indeed make an effort to listen. Perhaps the basic importance of evaluative criticism lies in its commendation of works that we might otherwise dismiss. This may lead us to delightful experiences. Such criticism may also make us more skeptical about our own judgments.

If we think that the poetry of Edward Guest and the paintings of Norman Rockwell (see Figure 14-6) are among the very best, it may be helpful for us to know that other informed people think otherwise.

Evaluative criticism presupposes three fundamental standards: perfection, insight, and inexhaustibility. When the evaluation centers on the form, it usually values a form highly only if the detail and regional relationships are tightly organized. If they fail to cohere with the structure, the result is distracting and thus inhibits participation. An artistic form in which everything works together may be called perfect. A work may have perfect organization, however, and still be evaluated as poor unless it satisfies the standard of insight. If the form fails to inform us about some subject matter—if it just pleasures or interests or excites us but doesn't make some significant difference in our lives—then, for us, that form is not artistic. Such a form may be valued below artistic form because the participation it evokes, if it evokes any at all, is not lastingly significant. Incidentally, a work lacking representation of objects and events may possess artistic form. Abstract art has a definite subject matter—the sensuous. Who is to say that the Pollock (Figure 3-3) is a lesser work of art because it informs only about the sensuous? The sensuous is with us all the time, and to be sensitive to it is exceptionally life-enhancing. Finally, works of art may differ greatly in the breadth and depth of their content. The subject matter of Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* (Figure 3-3)—the sensuous—is not as broad as the subject of Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 2-4). Yet it does not follow necessarily that the Cézanne is a superior work. However, the depth of penetration into the subject matter is far deeper in the Cézanne, we believe, than in the photograph of the mountain (Figure 2-5). The stronger the content—that is, the richer the insight on the subject matter—the more intense our participation, because we have more to keep us involved in the work. Such works resist monotony, no matter how often we return to them. Such works apparently are inexhaustible, and evaluative critics usually will rate only those kinds of works as masterpieces. Notice how unimportant it is how you ultimately rank these works. But notice, also, how evaluation is inescapable.

One of the most popular and controversial art shows of recent times was *Sensation: Young British Artists*, originally viewed at the Royal Academy of Art in London in 1997. Three hundred thousand viewers went to see art that was described as shocking by a number of commentators. The show moved on to Hamburg, Germany, where it was a signal success, and then on to the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 1999, where it faced intense
negative criticism from churchmen and politicians. The museum put up a sign restricting the show to those over seventeen (the British Academy restricted it to those over eighteen).

Rudolph Giuliani, mayor of New York at the time, did not see the show but was horrified by complaints from William Donahue, president of the Catholic League, and cut off funding to the museum. He later restored it, but not until protesters accused him of censorship. Some of the complaints were aimed at Damien Hirst's animals preserved in formaldehyde, such as his two pigs in Figure 3-6. They are real pigs, and one of them is sliced in half lengthwise. But the most shocking work of art was by Chris Ofili, a young black painter whose *Holy Virgin Mary* (Figure 3-7) alarmed religious New Yorkers because elephant dung was part of the mixed media that went into the painting.

**PERCEPTION KEY** The *Sensation* Show

1. Musician and artist David Bowie said *Sensation* was the most important show since the 1917 New York Armory show in which Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (Figure 2-22) created a scandal, protest, and intense controversy. Most art that was once shocking seems tame a few years later. To what extent do any of these works of art still have shock value?

2. Should politicians like the mayor of New York punish major museums for showing art that the politicians feel is offensive? Does such an act constitute a legitimate form of evaluative art criticism? Does it constitute art criticism if, like ex-mayor Giuliani, the politician has not seen and experienced the art? Would you agree that punishing museums for shows constitutes a form of censorship?

3. The *Sensation* show was described as shock art. Damien Hirst's use of real pigs in formaldehyde produced a shock in most audiences. Why would it have been shocking? To what extent is shock an important value in art? Would you agree with those who said Hirst's work was not art at all? What would be the basis for such a position?

(continued)
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FIGURE 3-7

This is another example of shock art, by Ofili, a British artist noted for works referencing his African heritage. Audiences were alarmed when they discovered one of the media was elephant dung, a substance common in African art, but not easily accepted by Western audiences.

4. Would Chris Ofili’s painting be shocking if people were unaware that he painted some of it with elephant dung? Would people be less alarmed if they knew that in Africa such a practice in art is relatively common? Does any of this matter in making a judgment about the painting’s success as a work of art? What matters most for you in evaluating this painting?

5. Government officials in totalitarian states invariably censor the arts. They typically approve only of realistic, idealized portraits of the “happy life” under their rule. What do you make of an American elected official condemning modern art, punishing a public museum, and urging everyone to boycott the show?

*The Polish Rider* (Figure 3-8), featured in “Experiencing: The Polish Rider,” until recently was attributed to Rembrandt. But in 1982 a group of five scholars, members of the Rembrandt Research Project, “disattributed” the painting. Studying subtleties such as brushwork, color transitions, transparency, shadowing, and structuring, they concluded that Willem Drost, a student of Rembrandt, was probably the artist. In the Frick Museum in New York City, *The Polish Rider* no longer draws crowds. Another work, presumably by Rembrandt had been expected to sell for at least $15 million. It too was disattributed and was sold for only $800,000!
EXPERIENCING The Polish Rider

1. Does knowing *The Polish Rider* was probably painted by Willem Drost instead of Rembrandt van Rijn diminish your participation with the painting? Does the fact that it was painted by a student negatively affect your evaluation of the painting?

2. Should a work of art be evaluated completely without reference to its creator?

3. How should our critical judgment of the painting be affected by knowing it was once valued at millions of dollars and is now worth vastly less?

One of the authors, as a young adult, saw this painting in the Frick Museum and listened to a discussion of its merits when it was thought to be by Rembrandt. Today the painting is neglected partly because its value is thought to be less, not because it is less excellent than it was. Questions about monetary value for works of art have been intensely debated in the last three or four centuries because the modern age has produced individuals who can, like Charles Kane in the film *Citizen Kane*, amass huge collections at great expense and then, like Henry Clay Frick, create great museums when they die. Art critics do not feel a painting is better because it is worth more money. Evaluative judgments are made on the basis of observation and sometimes by comparing works of art.

One school of thought holds that paintings are to be evaluated wholly on their own merit without reference to the artist who created it. *The Polish Rider*, for instance, would still be held in great esteem if it had not been assumed to be by Rembrandt. But another school of thought holds that a painting is best evaluated when seen in the context of other paintings by the same artists, or even in the context of other paintings with similar style and subject matter.

Because in modern times artworks have sometimes been investment opportunities for wealthy people, the question of value has become a financial question even more than an aesthetic question. The result is that some works of art have been grossly overvalued by art critics who are swayed by the dollar value, not the artistic value. We believe art must be valued for its capacity to provide us with insight and to promote our participation, not for its likelihood to be worth a fortune.

4. Which school of thought do you belong to: those who evaluate a painting all by itself, or those who consider the reputation of the artist? (continued)

FIGURE 3-8

Long thought to be a painting by Rembrandt, *The Polish Rider* is now credited to one of his gifted students. The Frick removed it from a prominent place after Julius Held determined that it is probably the work of Willem Drost.
5. Prices for art soared enormously beginning in the 1980s. Many artists less renowned than Rembrandt have commanded high prices. Gustave Klimt's portrait, Adele Bloch-Bauer I (Figure 3-9) was sold in 2006 for $135 million. What would seem to make this painting so valuable in terms of money? Do you feel its artistic value is great or slight?

FIGURE 3-9
Gustave Klimt, Adele Bloch-Bauer I. 1907. Oil and gold on canvas, 54 x 54 inches. Private collection.

This is one of two portraits Klimt did of the wife of a wealthy sugar industrialist, Adele Bloch-Bauer, the only person Klimt painted more than once. The painting took three years to complete. After World War II, it was restored to the Bloch-Bauer estate following a lengthy legal battle.

SUMMARY

Being a responsible critic demands being at the height of awareness while examining a work of art in detail, establishing its subject matter, and clarifying its achievement. There are three main types of criticism: Descriptive criticism focuses on form, interpretive criticism focuses on content, and evaluative criticism focuses on the relative merits of a work.

Good critics can help us understand works of art while also giving us the means or techniques that will help us become good critics ourselves. They can teach us about what kinds of questions to ask. Each of the following chapters on the individual arts is designed to do just that—to give some help about what kinds of questions a serious viewer should ask in order to come to a clearer perception and deeper understanding of any specific work. With the arts, unlike many other areas of human concern, the questions are often more important than the answers. The real lover of the arts will often not be the person with all the answers, but rather the one who asks the best questions. This is not because the answers are worthless but because the questions, when properly applied, lead us to a new awareness, a more exalted consciousness of what works of art have to offer. Then when we get to the last chapter, this preparation will lead to better understanding of how the arts are related to other branches of the humanities.