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## ART CRITICISM IN THE CLASSROOM

### Defining Art Criticism

Art criticism is one of the four foundational disciplines of Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE), along with art production, art history, and aesthetics. Art criticism is responding to, interpreting meaning, and making critical judgments about specific works of art. Usually art criticism focuses on individual, contemporary works of art.

When initially introduced to art criticism, many people associated negative connotations with the word "criticism." This is understandable; the first definition given for criticism in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* is "the act of criticizing, usually unfavorably." Yet *Webster's* second definition is more appropriate for art criticism: "the art of evaluating or analyzing works of art." Art criticism, in practice, generally is positive.

Any agreement on a simple definition of art criticism is difficult to obtain. In *Practical Art Criticism*, Edmund Feldman writes that art criticism is "spoken or written 'talk' about art" and that "the central task of criticism" is interpretation. Feldman developed a widely used sequential approach to art criticism based on description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment.

Stephen Dobbs, writing in *The DBAE Handbook: An Overview of Discipline-Based Art Education*, state that, through art criticism, people "look at art, analyze the forms, offer multiple interpretations of meaning, make critical judgments, and talk or write about what they see, think, and feel."

Terry Barrett, author of *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*, bases his approach to art criticism on the four activities of describing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing about art. Barrett suggests that, although all four overlap, "Interpretation is the most important activity of criticism, and probably the most complex." Though interwoven with description, analysis, and judgement, interpretation of the meaning of individual works of art is of foremost concern in contemporary art criticism.

*"Critic's descriptions are lively. Critics write to be read, and they must capture their readers' attention and engage their readers' imaginations. Critics want to persuade their readers to see a work of art as they do. If they are enthused, they try to communicate their enthusiasm through their choice of descriptors and how they put them together in a sentence, a paragraph, and an article."*

Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Art:  
Understanding the Contemporary.*  
Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing company, 1994.

### The Role of the Art Critic

In all four disciplines of DBAE the practice of each is based upon the roles of each discipline's practitioner or expert. For art criticism, the role model is the art critic. A professional art critic may be a newspaper reporter assigned to the art beat, a scholar writing for professional journals or texts, or an artist writing about other artists.

Journalistic criticism, written for the general public, includes reviews of art exhibitions in galleries and museums. Most people are familiar with journalistic art criticism because it appears in newspapers, popular magazines, and on radio and television. Feldman suggests that journalistic criticism deals with art mainly to the extent that it is newsworthy.

Scholarly art criticism is written for a more specialized art audience and appears in art journals, such as *Art in America*, *Art Papers*, and *Art News*, as well as presentations at professional conferences or seminars. Scholar-critics may be college and university professors or museum curators, often with particular knowledge about a style, period, medium, or artist.

In both journalistic and scholarly art criticism, the viewer, according to Feldman, "confronts works of art and determines what they mean, whether they are any good, and, if so why."

### **Art Criticism in the Classroom**

Through art criticism activities in the classroom, students interpret and judge individual works of art. Interpretation is the most critical task of art criticism, but we recommend no prescribed order to follow. The work of art itself should guide the approach to inquiry. For example, a non-objective painting initially may be approached through description, while a highly-detailed, symbol-filled realistic painting probably would be best approached first through possible interpretations of meaning.

#### **ART CRITICISM: BARRETT'S PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION**

- Artworks have "aboutness" and demand interpretation.
- Interpretations are persuasive arguments.
- Some interpretations are better than others.
- Good interpretations of art tell more about the artwork than they tell about the critic.
- Feelings are guides to interpretations.
- There can be different, competing, and contradictory interpretations of the same artwork.
- Interpretations are often based on a world view.
- Interpretations are not so much absolutely right, but more or less reasonable, convincing, enlightening, and informative.
- Interpretations can be judged by coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness.
- An artwork is not necessarily about what the artist wanted it to be about.
- A critic ought not to be the spokesperson for the artist.
- Interpretations ought to present the work in its best rather than its weakest light.
- The objects of interpretation are artworks, not artists.
- All art is in part about other art.
- No single interpretation is exhaustive of the meaning of an artwork.
- The meanings of an artwork may be different from its significance to the viewer.
- Interpretation is ultimately a communal endeavor, and the community is ultimately self-corrective.
- Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and to

continue on our own.

Barrett, Terry. (1994). *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company.

### **Guidelines and Strategies for the Classroom**

Use learning activities and vocabulary appropriate for students' grade levels. Whole class or small group discussions are beneficial as brainstorming and prewriting activities. Allowing students to work in pairs or small groups fosters collaborative learning.

Art criticism strategies for the classroom include comparing/contrasting works of art (see the **Art-O-Gram** Venn diagram), writings based on questions on activity cards, and narratives, poetry, cinquains, and other forms of writing.

Interpretation of works of art may extend to dramatic presentations through reader's theater (students write dialogue for the people in an artwork, then perform the parts with different voices), "living paintings" or tableaux, and sound symphonies (students act out the sounds that are suggested by the artwork). A variety of approaches will lead students to enter and interpret many works of art from multiple perspectives.

We invite you to share for publication your students' art criticism writings resulting from any of the activities included in the newsletter and/or your own innovative strategies for helping students interpret art.

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**GETTY CENTER TO OFFER ArtsEdNet ON INTERNET**

A unique World Wide Web site for arts educators is scheduled to go on-line from the **Getty Center for Education in the Arts** in September, 1995. **ArtsEdNet** is one of only a handful of Web sites worldwide that focus on providing art resources to educators and is the only one designed for educators interested in the comprehensive teaching approach known as discipline-based art education (DBAE).

The new interactive service will allow participants to communicate with each other, access curriculum materials, and exchange information on DBAE, pioneered by the Center for Education in the Arts over the last 12 years. DBAE is now taught in over 400 school districts across the U.S. **ArtsEdNet** also will introduce a wide audience of educators to this approach to teaching art.

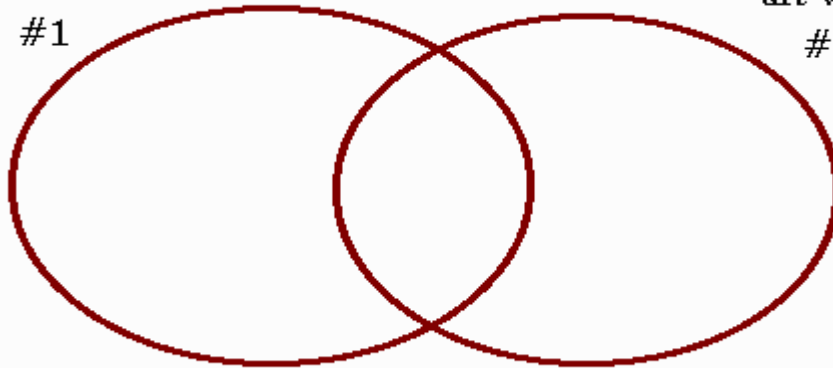
Two innovative services make **ArtsEdNet** stand out among other on-line services for teachers: it offers more than 250 pages of free, well-developed lesson plans and other curricular resources that can be downloaded for use in the classroom; and gives participants a chance to "chat" on-line with recognized artists, historians, and educators in regularly scheduled sessions.

**ART-O-GRAM**

**Compare/Contrast Two Works of Art**

Comparing and contrasting art works is a useful strategy for art criticism. Choose two art works that share a common theme or subject, or two works by the same artist. In the open area of the oval on the left, write words that are true only of art work #1. In the open area of the oval on the right, write words that are only true of art work #2. Where the two ovals overlap, write words that are true of both. On a separate paper, use your words to write a compare/contrast paragraph.

art work  
#1



art work  
#2

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## **NTIEVA PRESENTS SIXTH ANNUAL ELEMENTARY ART INSTITUTE**

For the sixth year, the North Texas Institute for Educators on the Visual Arts presented its annual elementary art institutes for art specialist and classroom teachers. Held June 5-16, 1995, the institutes were simultaneously presented in five different sites in NTIEVA's consortium districts: Dallas, Denton/Pilot Point/Other, Fort Worth, Hurst-Euless-Bedford, and Plano Independent School Districts.

One hundred and ninety-one participants from eighteen districts met together for the first morning of the Institute at D.C. James Learning Center in Dallas for an introduction to discipline-based art education. In the afternoon, district groups convened at five nearby sites for activities in each of the disciplines of art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and art production, approached through the work of artist John Biggers.

Throughout the remaining nine days of the Institute, participants met at their district sites for comprehensive DBAE activities developed around five images from the *ArtLinks* Study Prints. *ArtLinks* is a set of art from the five NTIEVA consortium museums.

### **FIRST NTIEVA SECONDARY ART INSTITUTE HELD AT UNT**

A DBAE approach to drawing was the focus for NTIEVA's first secondary art institute, held primarily at the **School of Visual Arts** at the University of North Texas in Denton. **Robert Jessup**, coordinator for the SOVA freshman core program at UNT, co-directed the Secondary Art Institute with **Dr. William McCarter**, assisted by NTIEVA staff **Nancy Walkup** and **Kay Wilson**. Twenty-seven participants from nine school districts attended the two-week Institute, held July 10-21, 1995.

The days on the UNT campus were divided into morning studio experiences followed by afternoon lectures and related discussions about art history, art criticism, and aesthetics. Connections were made concerning the significance of drawing in terms of media and the uses of drawing throughout the history of art.

Campus activities were extended by museum visits to the five consortium **museums in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex**. Scheduling provided opportunities to view two drawing exhibitions in Fort Worth - *Landscape in the Age of Rembrandt*, 95 Dutch landscape drawings from the 17th century, at the Kimbell Museum of Art, and *Nature Observed, Nature Interpreted*, 19th century landscape drawings and watercolors, at the Amon Carter Museum.

Because Mr. Jessup is directly involved with the basic drawing program for freshmen, he was able to discuss expectations and suggestions for preparation of entering students at the University. His unique insights were important in discussions of Advanced Placement possibilities with the participants. Similarly, Dr. McCarter's experience with art appreciation and art history for freshmen students was helpful in relating the goals and objectives of the University with that of the Advanced Placement College Board.

Current plans are to repeat the basic format for this successful institute next summer. **NTIEVA** welcomes inquires, questions, or suggestions about next year's secondary art institute.

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### *NIGHT HERON*

#### **About the Artist**

**David Bates** was born in Dallas, Texas, in 1952. He graduated from **Southern Methodist University** in 1975. While teaching part-time at Eastfield College, he began work on his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1976 at SMU. That same year, he had his first one-man gallery exhibition, and in the fall, he was chosen to participate in an independent study program at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

During his time in New York, he was exposed to many personalities, influences, and works of art. At that time, his unique style of figure painting and sculpture was not appreciated by the New York art world, so he experimented with a variety of styles and media. He returned to Dallas in 1977 and completed his graduate degree at SMU. He studied several periods of art history as a part of his program and renewed a lifelong interest in folk art. He admired the folk artists' subject matter drawn from everyday life and surroundings.

Bates first visited Grassy Lake in southwestern Arkansas in 1982. This place immediately began to influence his art.

#### **About the Art**

*Night Heron* gives the viewer a representation of the vegetation of a swampy area and one of the birds that lives in that place. As we look for a broader meaning for this painting, we might consider what the heron, his survival by means of searching for prey, and the abundant vegetation of the place in which he lives can represent to the viewer. The struggle for survival in nature is a story with which humans have always been concerned. As we view this elegant bird, we are reminded of the cycles and systems of the natural world of which we humans are also a part.

*Night Heron* is one of many paintings done by David Bates that focuses on the life of Grassy Lake and other swamps and lakes of Arkansas, Louisiana, and east Texas. Bates is a fisherman and hunter, and the dense vegetation, the shifting light, and the life-and-death struggle evident in these areas captured his imagination.

#### **Additional Information**

The bird in *Night Heron* is from a family of graceful birds with long, sharply pointed bills that extend almost to their eyes. They are similar to cranes in appearance with narrow heads, long slender necks and storklike legs. Herons usually nest and roost in flocks, but they hunt for their food alone. Their nests, built of loose, crude masses of sticks, are found close together in rookeries called heronries. The female lays from three to six eggs, and young herons are helpless for a few weeks before they learn to fly. To search for food, herons stalk along the shores of streams. Sometimes, they stand for a long time with their head drawn between their shoulders as if asleep, while they wait for fish, frogs, or small reptiles. When the heron spots its prey, it makes a lightning dart to catch the victim in its spearlike beak.

#### **About the Time and Place**

Bates' work has been described as a form of Regionalism because his works are often about specific geographical and cultural subjects. His paintings of people, the landscapes, and the activities of these places are done with warmth, good humor, and enthusiasm. He has also done paintings of snakes, fish, alligators, and dogs. David Bates like dogs. He did a very affectionate portrait of his own dog, Emmy.



The everchanging light, water, trees, and wildlife of the lakes of Arkansas and east Texas fascinated David Bates, and even as he returned to see familiar subjects and sites, each experience was a fresh one. Speaking about this series of works, Bates says:

*"My work in the last few years has been a process of allowing myself to paint subjects that I really cared about - finding my own place that is special to me. My Grassy Lake pictures are more than a series of paintings for me. They represent the ongoing life of an ancient lake swamp in which I am privileged to participate."*

#### Additional Resources

The Birds of North America by John James Audubon

[John James Audubon](#)

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**ART CRITICISM AND THE WORK OF**

**DAVID BATES**

In addition to having students engage in critical discussion and writing activities, it is beneficial to share with your students art criticism written by "professionals." Statements by artists about their own work also helps students understand the artist's motivation and/or intentions.

The following critical comments come from a variety of sources: the artist, a museum director, and an art critic writing for a newspaper.

**The Grassy Lake Paintings**

*"I was rendered speechless, which is no easy chore. It was like a dream, a place of strange beauty and complex compositions that changes completely from sunrise to noon. I knew I had found something I couldn't learn in school or from other art and artists."*

David Bates' comments on his first visit to Grassy Lake

*"Bates' paintings of Grassy Lake...are indeed a memorable portrait of a particular place and its inhabitants. He has arrived at a masterful technique that he tailors to his subjects with increasing sensitivity. Bates feels there is at least another 40 years of paintings to be drawn from this familiar terrain. In the meantime, he has translated his own experience into works of art that transcend regional boundaries."*

Marla Price, Director,  
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 1988

**Bates' Most Recent Work**

*"David Bates has an established reputation as one of the area's finest painters, but for more than a year he has worked mostly with a foundry in Washington state, creating bronze sculptures. An earlier group of sculpture has been shown in San Francisco, but his Running Dog...is the finest piece to make it to Dallas."*

*Cast from a combination of scrap materials that include lumber, torn cardboard, and heavy-gauge wire, this dog fits neatly both into a tradition of assemblage sculpture and into the themes and images Mr. Bates explores in his paintings.*

*His dog at first appears heavy and static, but as one examines it, it takes off. Its stiff wooden legs are caught in a moment of rapid movement, and its multiple tails use a technique familiar from both futurist art and comic books to depict its ecstatic wagging."*

Charles Dee Mitchell, "Gallery's 'Link' showcases Texas Talent," *The Dallas Morning News*, June 18, 1995

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## **ART CRITICISM ACTIVITY: WRITING AS AN ART CRITIC**

### **Introducing Journalistic Art Criticism**

Journalistic art criticism is usually practiced by reporter/critics writing descriptive and persuasive reviews of art exhibitions in museums and galleries. These reviews appear in newspapers and popular magazines, on radio and television. They are written for the general public and deal with art as a category of news. The background, training and/or knowledge about art varies greatly among this type of critic. Some are reporters assigned to the art beat, some have extensive training, knowledge, and experience in criticizing art.

In *Practical Art Criticism*, Edmund Feldman states that journalistic critics provide basic information, confirm the existence of an art world, generate controversy about art issues, and disseminate the notion that art experiences are worth having. Since most students are familiar with newspapers, the role of the journalistic art critic in writing for the newspaper audience may be used as a model for student art criticism activities.

### **Student Writing Activity**

Ask each student to choose a work of art (use study prints) as a focus for writing. Tell students that they are writing a piece about the work for publication in the local newspaper (they can also pretend that the work is on display in their locale).

The writing should be positive and persuade the reader to go see actual work. When the writing assignment is complete, have students share their writings with the class.

### **Alternative Student Writing Activity**

If possible, take students to a local museum or gallery to see an exhibition. Ask students to take notes in the museum; the critical review may be written back in the classroom. A museum visit allows students to see original work and write about an entire exhibition, rather than just a single work of art.

### **Extension**

If your class has access to computers, the writings may be composed and/or published as a class newspaper or newsletter. Many word-processing programs have a newsletter template.

Working on the computer further underscores the role of the journalistic art critic, provides an opportunity to practice graphic design and layout skills, and furnishes a vehicle to promote parent/teacher awareness of classroom

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***THE ARTLINKS INQUIRER: A REPRODUCIBLE PAGE FOR STUDENTS***

**NTIEVA Inaugurates New Feature**

Beginning with this issue of the NTIEVA Newsletter, a regular feature will be a reproducible, one page newsletter for your students. The first one, based on *Parson Weems' Fable*, from the *Amon Carter Museum* in Fort Worth.

The idea for this feature was suggested by experimentation with creating art-based newsletters on the computer for and/or by students in the 1995 NTIEVA Summer Elementary Institutes. Both Fort Worth ISD and Hurst-Eules-Bedford ISD initiated this effort during their institutes.

Though the sample was created by teachers, we hope it will serve as a model for student-generated newsletters. Newsletters for and by students can be one or more pages in length and contain student writing and art work. Type size can be enlarged according to the age and reading ability of your students.

Providing the opportunity for students to create their own newsletter about art is beneficial for many reasons. Students can conduct research and begin writing individually or in small groups. They can write and edit directly on the computer or transfer edited pencil and paper writings to the computer.

Black and white art work can be copied and sized on a copy machine and pasted to the printed newsletter. If you have access to a scanner, the art work can be imported to your computer document. Students can also create images directly on the computer with drawing or painting software. Students learn and practice computer skills in the "desktop publication" of the newsletter. Practice in working collaboratively and shared pride in the finished product are additional benefits. Districts that are connected through computer networks can also share the newsletter on-line.

**Possible Features for Student Newsletters**

- a focus on one work of art or the work of one artist
- a specific style or time period
- artist biographies
- artist quotes
- quotes from art critics
- narrative writing about art work
- cinquains and other forms of writing
- questions about art work
- vocabulary lists
- related production activities

**Sharing Your Efforts**

As you or your students develop similar newsletters in your classroom, please share them with us so that we may publish them in the *NTIEVA Newsletter*. Also let us know any special topics or themes you would like us to use in developing this reproducible page.

**STUDENT WRITINGS ABOUT PARSON WEEMS' FABLE**

For this activity, fifth grade students of Suzi Reid from Eastern Hills Elementary in Fort Worth examined and discussed reproductions of Parson Weems' Fable. After class discussion, the students were asked to respond to the painting in writing.

### **Writing #1**

The meaning of *Parson Weems' Fable* is telling a story about George Washington. George Washington cut down a cherry tree. While doing this his father caught him. He asked, "Did you cut down this tree?" George Washington said, "Yes, I did." The moral of the story is to always tell the truth. You will get in more trouble if you tell a lie.

The artist Grant Wood was very successful in telling the story. Instead of painting a picture of George Washington as a kid, he painted the picture of George Washington off of the one dollar bill. He knew we would not know it was George Washington if he painted him as a kid.

He painted a black cloud over the painting to show us this was a bad time. The cloud showed that George Washington was getting into trouble for cutting the cherry tree. It also showed that slavery was a very bad thing.

### **Writing #2**

This painting is called *Parson Weems' Fable*, and it was painted by Grant Wood. I think this painting tells its meaning very well. The meaning is that little George Washington told the truth, he did not tell a lie.

The artist was successful at communicating the meaning. For example, he put the grown-up George Washington's face in the little boy's face so we could know it was him. The tree was bent and cut slightly to show that the boy had cut it. The little boy was pointing to the axe to show that he had used it. I think that it was a great painting with a great moral to it.

### **Writing #3**

Grant Wood is the artist who painted *Parson Weems' Fable*. The fable was about George Washington cutting down a cherry tree. George Washington did not really chop down a tree; the story was used to attract audience's attention. To me, the meaning of the painting is you should always be truthful.

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**The *ArtLinks* Inquirer**

**A Student Newsletter of the North Texas Institute for Educators on  
the Visual Arts, Fall 1995**

**The Painting**

*Parson Weems' Fable*, painted by **Grant Wood** in 1939, illustrates the famous story of George Washington and the cherry tree. The artist painted the face of George Washington as an adult on the body of a boy. His face is the portrait we see on the one dollar bill, based on the famous portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart.

*Why do you think the artist Grant Wood chose to use the adult face of George Washington?*

The painting shows a man, a parson named Mason Locke Weems, pulling back a curtain on a scene. We see George's father gesturing as if to ask why the tree has been cut.

**The Artist**

Grant Wood was born in Iowa in 1891. He taught art in public schools and later became a university professor. Grant Wood wanted to paint a series of American historical myths or fables. *Parson Weems' Fable* was to be the first in the series, but Grant Wood died in 1942. The second painting was to have been about Pocahontas and Captain John Smith.

*How do you imagine it would have looked?*

**Activities**

Write and illustrate your own fable or legend. As a class project, write and present a play about *Parson Weems' Fable*.

by Janie Epland, Sharon Flores, and Suzi Alost Reid  
Eastern Hills Elementary, Fort Worth