

Dean Trisko, essays



The Three Legged Stool

“Dean, when you do all that educated analysis and diagramming, it just sucks the life out of art!” That was some honest classroom feedback I received from an engaged art survey student. He quickly added “I don’t mean to offend you.” I knew he didn’t and I sympathized with his sentiments, though I had to add more analysis—about how analysis can enrich an art experience. Some instructors can’t help digging themselves deeper into an academic quagmire. I can go on too much about the inherent qualities of art, but I know over analysis will “suck the life out of it!”

Analyzing art is not the same as enjoying art. The way the art looks, the techniques the artist used, the references it makes to the broader world—none of those qualities mean it is good art. What analysis helps us do is see how the artist has tried to organize the work. If we enjoy the art, if it speaks to us, that is a personal and subjective reaction. No amount of analysis can force us to enjoy an artwork.

So who needs to analyze art’s organization and structures? Not necessarily the art viewer, though analysis may add to their “appreciation” of the art. But those who seek to make art, particularly new or original art forms, can become better prepared by understanding what makes an artwork function at its best. So I offer a format for describing and analyzing art. Is it the only way? No, I have worked with a number of other structures or paradigms for looking at art. This one just works for me and has helped the department where I work¹ define what we teach in art courses.

I’ll use three terms to describe what goes into making art. I think of these qualities as a three legged stool. The three components exist in almost² artworks. Like a stool, all three legs support and work together. This stool is an odd analogy because one leg may be bigger, stronger or more dominate than the others. Yet usually every artwork will rely on some contribution from these three supports:

- Technical; the skills and processes related to producing art
- Formal; the visual structures behind a well composed artwork, often referred to as the elements and principles of design
- Content and context; the meaning of the piece, how it conveys concepts or ideas. Content refers to what is communicated by looking at art.

With three concepts we can be more specific about the differences between artworks. What makes art analysis difficult is that these three legs often interrelate and affect each other. They are three parts that become one piece, one final thing—an artwork.

In most cases artists do better work when they understand that these concepts exist. Some artists will say they do not focus on the three legs while making a work of art. (More on the difference between creating and analyzing in another essay.) Understanding the three legs helps us communicate with each other about art. I have written a few thoughts on each of these legs of art in follow-up essays.

Notes

¹The Minneapolis Community and Technical College art department. Thanks to Lynn Bollman and Barbara Hager for their contributions.

²There are those who may say visual art forms don't need all three legs. For example, some artists might say their work is only about a concept so it does not need form or their work only features the refinement of a technique. But those types of art will be the unique exception, the outliers in the overview of art.