

How to Get (and Give) Useful Feedback on Paintings

A mistake, in art, is just the name we give to something unexpected that we haven't figured out how to use yet.

Evaluate work in progress under “display conditions”.

Prop it up in good light. Put clean tape or a mat around it. If it's on stretchers, prop it against a solid background.

Don't prime the audience.

No preamble. No “I still need to fix this part”. No “I made a mistake over here”. Shut it.

No value judgments at this stage. Experience/reactions only.

Focus on the experience of viewing the work. Artists need to learn to (emotionally) separate responding to the work and evaluating the work. This is the time to notice your response (or your audience's response).

- Try to encounter the piece with “fresh eyes” and a calm spirit. If you feel frustrated or discouraged, give the painting a timeout. Make it face the wall until you feel calmer.
- Ask these questions:
 - * How does your eye move around the painting?
 - * What do you notice most, or return to often? (especially anything unplanned or surprising)

- * What feelings, thoughts, memories or associations does the painting evoke?
- * How do your reactions and eye movements change as you continue looking?
- * (for the artist only) Is there anything that you especially want to preserve or enhance, even if it wasn't part of your initial plan? Sometimes, watercolor gives you a beautiful gift. Be open to changing the plan to take advantage of it.

Weigh intentions vs. reactions. Clarify your intentions.

Now that you've gathered reactions, you can begin evaluating how successful the work is at this point. Consider the reactions in light of your intentions for the piece. Be open to reconsidering your intentions, in light of the reactions. Use what you've heard to clarify your goals.

You can only judge "how good?", if you can answer the question of what you're trying to achieve. *Then* you can ask how successfully the painting does that, and what (if any) further work you want to do.

Don't lose sight of "what's right with it"! Make plans to keep (or enhance) the things that are working well.

If you start talking only (or mostly) about things that are "wrong" or "need to be fixed", tread cautiously. This is the road to over-working and losing things that made it fresh and interesting.

Once the *artist* is aware of how the painting isn't meeting their intentions, *then* is the time to ask for suggestions (if the viewer is qualified), or go looking for solutions.

Artist: "Everyone seems to find the painting calming, but I was hoping to make it exciting. What would nudge it that way?"

Viewer: "How about brighter yellow over here?"

Artist: “Yeah, I am having a hard time getting a vibrant yellow.”

Viewer: “Are you using professional-grade paint?” “I have a really wonderful bright yellow that I’m using, maybe you’d like to try that?” “How about using some semi-neutral complements nearby to give the illusion that the yellow is brighter?” etc.

Now, we are helping the artist solve a problem, not telling them what to express.

This is really, really hard. I will call you on it. Please call me on it, too! We are all conditioned to pass judgment on everything and everyone all the time. Let’s agree to help each other **not** do that to work in progress. It doesn’t help artists make their own authentic work.

All painting is abstraction. The only question is, what essential bits will you include and what distractions will you leave out?

The long version

The usual (unhelpful) commentary

When friends, family and random passers-by weigh in on your paintings, you typically get one of two types of reactions, neither of which is helpful, even though they are usually well-meaning.

Enthusiastic gushing

“Oh, this is so lovely! You’re so talented!” etc. etc.

This is unhelpful because

1. you will immediately discount it. (*Wow. I have eyes; I can see it’s pretty sucky. They’re just being polite.*)

2. it tells you nothing about what you might want to do the same or differently in the future to achieve *your* creative goals. (*What are they seeing that I'm not? Am I being too critical of "poor drawing" that others are seeing as charming? Or are they just trying not to hurt my feelings?*)

"art critic mode"

"That's pretty nice . . . but you drew the barn wrong." "There's not enough value range." "You left out this building in the photo." "You put this building in the wrong place." "You included this building that isn't in the photo." etc.

This is unhelpful because

1. you will hear it as unkind or unfair criticism of *you* and your artistic prospects, no matter how hard you try to be detached. (And, it *is* unkind and unfair, no matter how well-meaning, since it doesn't even ask what you were trying to achieve before passing judgment.)
2. it tells you nothing about what you might want to do the same or differently in the future to achieve *your* creative goals. (*I was trying to be playful with the perspective and purposely drew the barn kind of wonky. So much for experimenting. or I didn't want that building in the painting, because it's ugly . . . but yeah, I guess it is in the photo, so I suppose I have to put it in . . .*)

Artist Guidelines

- Put up your work (with clean tape, good light and no distractions) and instruct the viewer, "Please don't say anything right away, just look for a minute."
- Don't point out the things you still need to do or problems you think you still need to fix. In fact, don't point out or interpret anything, and don't explain your goals for the painting.
- All you need to say is, "This is still in progress, but I'd just like to know . . .
 - * "How do your eyes move around the painting? Does that change as you keep looking?"

- * “What are you noticing most or returning to most often?”
- * “What thoughts, feelings, memories, associations, or questions arise as you look at the piece or particular areas of the piece?”
- Try to separate yourself from the piece. You’re asking for reactions to the work in progress, not a judgment on you as an artist. Remind yourself. As often as necessary. You \neq your work.
- If the viewer starts offering value judgments or “corrections”, ask questions to guide the conversation back to reactions. “You drew this part wrong.” “When did you encounter that, as your eyes were moving around the painting? What was your experience up to that point? What happened when you decided it was drawn incorrectly? Then where did your eyes go next?” “This color is too bright.” “When did you notice that, as your eyes were moving around the painting? What was your experience up to that point?” etc. ¹

Responder Guidelines

- Be honest.
- Report your *reactions* without making value judgments.
- Don’t insert yourself into someone else’s creative process. (Don’t give advice or say things motivated by what *you* would do with this painting.)
- Recognize that it’s a gift of trust to be shown work in progress. Not trust that you’ll “say something nice”, but trust that you’ll respect the artist’s sovereignty over their own work. Honor that.

¹If a viewer seems consistently unable/unwilling to give reactions and experience, instead of searching for “flaws” or “things you need to fix” (or simply gushing praise), you may choose not to ask that viewer for reactions on work in progress anymore. You have a right to decide what you want to express with your art and what standards you will use to judge its success. If someone can’t or won’t respect that, you also have a right to ignore their commentary. Luckily, most people who care about you *will* respect your right to make creative choices. It’s just hard to break the habit of “giving constructive criticism”, so keep reminding and guiding the conversation back to reactions and experience.

No value judgments from viewers.

You don't get to say (aloud) "good" or "bad", "right" or "wrong" because you don't know what the artist is trying to achieve. Often, they don't either, at the early stages. Let them find out without *you* diverting them. Don't tell someone what painting you would paint; ask questions and offer reactions that they can use to help them figure out how to paint the painting *they* want to paint.

IMPORTANT: This includes "just saying something nice" or "being encouraging". If the artist was just saying to herself, "Ugh, that blue in the corner might need to go . . ." and then you gush "Oh, I love what you did with this blue in the corner!", now she can't help second-guessing her instinct to get rid of it. If she keeps it, was it because she decided it works after all, or because she feels uncertain and wants approval? If she ditches it, was it because it didn't serve her intentions, or because she'll be damned if she's gonna let you tell her what to do? It will never again be the artist's *clean* creative decision.

Instead, offer specific reactions

"This blue in the corner makes me think of cool calm water. I find it soothing." Then the artist is free to say to herself, "Okay, I'm keeping that in mind for when I want to create a soothing mood, but I want this painting to be dramatic, so yeah, I think I want to take it out."

No value judgments disguised as "personal preferences".

Rephrase "like", "dislike", "love", "hate". We often use these words as stand-ins for "good" and "bad". Push yourself to find more specific words.

Instead of: "I like what you did with these colors."

Better: "I'm attracted to this area because these are some of my favorite colors."

Artist: "Okay, interesting; but this is just one person's favorite colors, so I can still change them if I feel the piece needs it."

Even better: “I’m attracted to this area because these vibrant oranges and yellows make me think of the the taste of citrus fruit, and then these little splashes and dots of the same color remind me of the spray of juice and aroma when you break the peel. It makes me feel happy and energized.”

Artist: “Great! That’s what I was hoping for in this painting of oranges and lemons. And I’m relieved to hear that reaction to the drips. Maybe they actually work for me instead of wrecking things. Maybe I should consider adding a few more splashes and drips so it looks intentional.”

or Artist: “Citrus? What? This is a portrait. That’s a wacky reaction, although the “happy and energized” part fits my subject. They didn’t even say anything about the person, it’s all about citrus! I’m going to show this to a few more people and see if that citrus thing comes up again.”

By the way, the bit about the drips and splashes is an example of why it’s best for the artist *not* to say anything to “prime” the viewer. So many times, the artist is thinking, “My brush made these dang drips and splashes and now it’s wrecked!” If you lead off with pointing it out and interpreting it, you’ll never find out that viewers either never noticed it at all, or that it actually helped to achieve your goals for the painting. I’ve seen this happen many times: when the artist finally can’t stand it anymore and points out the huge flaw they assume everyone is too polite to mention, viewers respond, “Huh. I never even noticed that until you pointed it out,” or sometimes, “But, I really *liked* that bit!”

What about “negative” reactions?

Keep in mind that what we call “negative” emotions—anger, fear, disgust, shame, unease—are sometimes the artist’s goal. Or, they may interfere with the artist’s goal. It’s appropriate to share them. Just try to choose words that own them as *your* reactions and not disguised value judgments.

Instead of: “I don’t like these colors.”

Better: “This area with all the browns and greyed yellows repels me. I don’t like looking at it, but my eye keeps coming back to it.”

Even better: “This area with all the browns and greyed yellows repels me. They make me think of dirt and decay and rot. And yet, I keep coming back to look at it. Those colors, together with the broken window pane, seem to tell a story of sadness and loss.”

Artist: “Great! That’s the story I’m trying to tell. It’s so sad that my grandmother’s farmhouse is all run down now.”

or Artist: “Hmmm. I want a sense of nostalgia, but not sadness. It’s an old run-down house, but the sunlight bouncing off the broken window and the wildflowers reflected in the glass show that even old, broken things still have their own beauty.”

If, as the artist, you’re not getting the reaction you hoped for, it’s a good idea to check in with a few more people. Everyone brings their own unique history and associations to the work, and sometimes the first person you ask just connects with the piece in an idiosyncratic way.

Do you see how the “negative” feedback is useful to the artist, either way? As long as the artist can hear the *reaction* without feeling like the viewer is pushing for one direction or another.

What about things that are just “wrong”?

What if the perspective is off on the barn, or the person’s head is too big for their body, or an area is overworked and the colors look dead.

First, ask yourself: When did you notice and why? Was it part of your first impression? Or did you only discover it when you went in with your “critical eye” looking for “things to fix”? How did your eye move before and after noticing?

Then,

Instead of: “It’s bugging me that the perspective is off on that barn.”

Better: “I didn’t notice right away, but as I looked at the painting more, I realized the barn looks strange to me because the perspective is off.”

Even better: “My eye starts in the meadow and goes back along the path to the tree line and then along the tree line to the barn. I get stuck there, because the roof looks strange, so my eye spends some time wandering around the barn trying to figure that out. The rest of the painting seems to be drawn in perspective, so having that one wonky angle jumps out at me. Eventually, my eye moved over to the tree on the right and then back to these weeds in the foreground. But I keep returning to that roofline. I’m finding it distracting.”

Or,

Instead of: “I noticed this person in the distance has an awfully big head.”

Better: “My eye starts on these bright, white clouds, and then follows the white of the surf to the beach. Then I go left along the beach looking at the people, to the distant point, and then back along the horizon with the smaller clouds. Then I sort of follow the same path, noticing some of the smaller details. The fresh, clean washes and confident brushstrokes appeal to me. They make me feel like I can almost see the artist’s hand and the color settling on the page. About the fourth time around, I noticed this one person way over here in the lower left corner who has a really big head.”

Even better: Does the speck with the big head matter? Do you think you would have ever noticed or cared if you encountered the piece “in the wild” without the artist asking for feedback? If not, maybe don’t even mention it. If it *is* a distraction, you could say, “This one person over here seems to have a really big head. Once I noticed, it drew my eye and distracted me.”

After you hear the feedback

You might know exactly what you want to do next to move the painting along.

You might decide to ignore this person’s reaction unless you keep hearing from others, too.

If you’re getting the same unintended reactions from more than one person, and you don’t have a clear idea of what you want to do to change the piece, this is the time to look for advice and assistance (maybe from the viewer, if they’re qualified, or maybe from other sources).

“I wasn’t really going for that sad mood. I wanted you to notice the beauty of the sunlight and the reflected flowers. But I’m afraid if I make the colors too bright, it won’t look like a reflection in dusty glass. Any ideas what I might do to change the mood?”

“I don’t want the perspective to be puzzling on that barn, but I drew it six times and I can’t seem to get it right. I need to pull out that book with the chapter on perspective.”

“I know about that guy with the big head, but I’m afraid that if I try to “fix” it, I’ll only call attention to it and make it *more* distracting. Does anyone know some good tricks for minimizing small flaws like this without just making things worse?”