Guidelines for Interpretation of an Artwork

Interpretation is the third phase of the criticism process. To interpret an artwork is to explain the meaning of it. Interpretation builds on description and analysis. There are two more sources of information you can use for interpretation, your own knowledge and experience, and art history for background about periods and styles of art, and social conventions relevant to the work in question.

1. Look for clues in your description and analysis to help guide your interpretation, such as dominant elements, repetitions, similarities, lines that direct vision, moody colors, subtle or strong contrasts, and so on. The artist had reasons for including these things. What does it all mean?

2. Describe the expressive quality of the work: happy, sad, serious, lighthearted, calm, chaotic, threatening, and so on.

3. What is happening? Even if the work is nonrepresentational, try to answer this question. Draw on your own knowledge and experiences related to the subject matter, forms, shapes, and colors in the work. Have you seen, read, or studied about situations or things similar to what you see in the artwork? Are there things in the artwork that remind you of things you have experienced?

Metaphors may help to get at the meaning of the work. Is there something in the work that makes you think of another, different thing? For example, the man has a poker face. Her lips are a sealed envelope. The pitchfork is a three-pronged spear.

4. Form a hypothesis about what the work means. A hypothesis is an assumption or guess based on evidence you have collected. It can’t be just personal opinion. When you have generated a hypothesis, ask:
   a) Does evidence from the description and analysis support this hypothesis?
   b) Does evidence based on personal knowledge and experiences support the hypothesis?

5. If your evidence does not support the hypothesis, try another one. It is not unusual to generate more than one hypothesis for an artwork.