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Brian D. Cohen , Contributor
Artist, educator, writer

What Can't Be Said About a Work of Art

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Who shall put his finger on the work of justice and say, 'It is there?' Justice is like the Kingdom of God "it is not without us as a fact, it is within us as a great yearning. — George Eliot

I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat. — A. E. Housman

You can try to put your finger on the work of art. It is possible to say how it works, maybe even why it's good, but something essential will always, mercifully, elude you.

Rationalization and reification seem to be the fate of every inspiration, of law, religion, or art. Jesus was arguably illiterate, and didn't write a word down, except maybe in the sand, but that didn't stop 13th C medieval scholars from entertaining frightening literal, specific, and dictatorial questions of Christian dogma. Jesus would not have known what they were talking about.

Today's theologians of art have PhD's in Hermeneutics. What they study and dispute is as moot as angels on the head of a pin. Should the experience of art really be as difficult, as arcane, as that?

Even if you can figure out what makes a work of art work, which I believe is a learned and important skill on a par with analyzing a work of fiction or poetry, you don't own the formula for making good art. You can't work backwards. You can't reverse-engineer good art from an inferred set of rules.

One of my favorite paintings is Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. It is so disturbing, so repugnant, so incongruent and defiant, yet it appears in every textbook as the definitive emblem of Cubism. Much has been said about the painting, yet it is as recalcitrant and inexplicable over 100 years later as the moment it was painted. You can point to the painting and say "Cubism is there" and you've said something about that painting, except everything.



8' x 7' 8", Museum of Modern Art, New York. Reprinted

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