The formalist model of art criticism, introduced by Feldman (1967), is a favorite among art educators due to its simplicity (only four phases: describe, analyze, interpret, judge) and clear objectives. Its analytical phases and judging criteria are easy for students to remember, making it easy for them to use on their own.


But a hammer is not always the right tool for the job. The Feldman model is essentially formalist, meaning it relies upon a set body of rules or criteria that all artworks are compared to. This makes the model problematic when the rules and criteria do not relate easily to the artwork examined. This article proposes a few modifications to the standard formalist model that make it easier to use with a wider range of artworks.

Description of the Feldman Model

The method consists of phases in which the learner examines specific aspects of an artwork. Each phase asks the viewer to regard an artwork from different points of view, specifically different types of artistic qualities (subject matter, elements, principles, and emotions). The first three of the four phases involve cataloging and summarizing these qualities. In the final phase, the learner draws conclusions about the artwork based on the information collected, comparing the work to three categories of art to determine its success.
These categories are key concepts of the method, as they are the criteria used to finally judge an artwork’s success. They are often referred to as Aesthetic Theories or the Theories of Art. They are:

Imitationalism:
Art in which the artist is trying to accurately imitate a subject.

Emotionalism:
Art in which the artist is trying to express emotions, moods or ideas.

Formalism:
Art in which the artist is focused on the abstract qualities of the composition.

The phases of the Feldman method are as follows:

Phase 1—Describe: The learner records relevant information such as the title and artist. Then the artwork is described in terms of what is seen in it (i.e. its subject matter, what’s going on, and the elements of art, such as color, line, and shape.)

Phase 2—Analyze: The learner analyzes what principles of design or compositional ideas are evident. This often focuses on how the principles of art, such as balance, emphasis, harmony, variety, movement, and proportion, are evident in the work.

Phase 3—Interpret: The learner interprets the emotions, moods, symbols, and ideas that are visible in the artwork.

Phase 4—Judge: The learner decides what type of art is being examined by comparing it to the Theories of Art. Once the type of art is determined, students decide how effectively the artwork compares to the criteria for artwork in that aesthetic theory, literally judging the success or quality of the art object.

The Weaknesses of a Formalist Approach

The Feldman/Mittler method is concerned only with the intrinsic or visible aspects of artworks. It does not require any external information, or facts about the artwork that cannot be viewed in the artwork itself. In this manner the method can be described as a Formalist approach, in that understanding the visual elements of an artwork will provide the viewer with an understanding of the artwork’s meaning.

The strength of this approach is that prior learning is not required, allowing everyone to discuss an artwork. Anyone who learns the method can walk through a museum, and with little training and prior knowledge, begin to see connections between art objects and discuss them with some confidence.

The principal weakness of this approach is how poorly it addresses the ceremonial and utilitarian artworks of non-Western cultures and even Western religious and utilitarian art forms. Ceremonial and utilitarian aspects of the object are not addressed by the original Feldman method. For example, an African mask can be judged as a formal work of art because of the apparent emphasis on composition. But to an African native, the mask is important or significant because of its role or function as a ceremonial object. A natural extension of this thinking is that the practical or ceremonial aspects of an artwork are important only in a specific context.

“Pluralistic” methods of art criticism (Blandy & Congdon, 1991), specifically those considered “Contextualist” or adhering to the theory of “Contextualism” (Hobbs & Rush, 1997), do address this idea. This approach holds that assessing the significance or value of an artwork cannot be done without knowledge of its social and cultural context (Hobbs & Rush, 1997). This is considered a “pluralistic” approach, as viewers consider more than their points of view on the object. Such methods obviously require research about the social and cultural contexts of the art object, and when counting the number of minutes in a class period, this required research is their weakness.

More recently, a fourth aesthetic theory called Functionalism or Instrumentalism, has been included with the original three. This category includes artworks that possess or are dominated by ceremonial or utilitarian qualities. Chapman (1978) first described this context-based aesthetic criterion in her book Approaches to Art in Education.

A third weakness of the Feldman method lies in the way its steps overlap each other in relation to the theories that will be used in the Judgment phase. For example, the Elements of Art are cataloged along with subject matter in the...
first phase, then re-examined with the Principles of Design in the second phase. In phase one, the description of what is going on in the image can easily overlap what is expressed by an image. This overlap causes the three initial phases to align less easily with the aesthetic theories examined in the final phase.

Solutions to the previous difficulties are readily available. And in at least a few cases in the literature other art educators have already offered modified versions of the model that are tailored to address specific needs or ideas (Feinstein, 1989; Zeller, 1984).

A Modified Feldman/Mittler Model

This modified model clarifies the phases by giving them discrete objectives. The modified model assesses functional aspects of the artwork (both practical and ceremonial) with at least an eye open to context. Still, the following described method does not require extensive historical research. Rather, it serves to set the stage for such research to help paint a more complete picture of the artwork.

The phases, with the exception of the first, consist of a Catalog (listing what they see) and a Summary (deciding how important those things were).

- **Prepare to Critique:** Record the title, date, the artist's name and culture or geographic attribution if available. Then describe the art object in general terms so that someone who could not see it could visualize its dimensions, materials, and distinguishing features. This includes a description of the imagery and its subject matter.

- **Examine Literal Qualities** (realistic or accurate details) of the art object. Specifically, students list ways they perceive the art object seems to be accurate to its subject. Students summarize by stating which of the literal or realistic qualities appear to be the most important, and how important they are to the overall art object.

- **Examine Functional Qualities** of the art object. Students list aspects of the object appearing to convey the potential of a practical or ceremonial purpose. The learner can theorize as to possible functions based on what they already know about the artwork or similar artworks. Students summarize by stating what the overall function of the art object appears to be and how important that is to the overall art object.

- **Examine the Formal Qualities** of the art object. Students list the ways that the Elements of Art are being organized by use of the Principles of Design. Students summarize by stating which of the design qualities appear to be the most important and how important they are to the overall art object.

- **Examine the Expressive Qualities** (emotions, moods, and symbols) and ideas being conveyed or expressed by the work, as well as the possible meaning of the artwork itself. Students list their emotive responses to the work in terms of what they feel and how the artwork expresses that. Students summarize by stating which of the emotive qualities or ideas appear to be the most important, and how important are they to the overall art object.

- **Determine Relevant Theories.** Students summarize the findings of the first four phases, determining which aesthetic theory or theories are most relevant to the work (Imitationalism, Functionalism, Formalism, Emotionalism). In the final Conclusion, students consider which theory or theories were the most important and discuss that in terms of what they think the artist was trying to accomplish.

For those familiar with the original Feldman method, some other differences may be visible. First, expressive qualities can also be ideas. The emphasis on ideas as content expressed by artworks allows the viewer to better address more contemporary and postmodern works.

Second, in the final phase, users avoid the idea of judging artistic success in the initial absence of contextual information. Instead they simply focus on how the artwork relates to the four theories. Students are encouraged to consider how an artist from a culture or time period may combine the objectives of multiple theories in their artworks, that combination being distinctive of the work or perhaps of the artist or the culture. The purpose is not to judge, but to initially analyze the artwork using the familiar framework of the theories. This initial analysis is not complete until students compare it to information about the object as a part of its historical and cultural context.
A Sample Critique:  
**The Elephant Helmet Mask**

The following is a re-creation of how fifth-grade students might critique an African mask using the modified model. Each bulleted item is a comment typical of elementary education students when examining an artwork like this one for the first time. These students would have to be trained in the definitions of the qualities and the theories and provided with handouts that guided them through the phases.

**Prepare to critique:**

*Elephant Helmet Mask*, created sometime between 1950-1970

Created to be worn by a member of the Aka society of the Bamileke people of Southwestern Cameroon, Africa.

- This looks like a hat that pulls down over your face, but with eyes, a nose, and a mouth like a face. It has big circle 'Mickey Mouse' ears on the sides.
- It has lots of beads all over it, all the color is the beads, and they are sewn on some black cloth.
- The beads are mostly white, and they make lines and shapes in a pattern.

1. **Describe Literal Qualities:**
   - The big round ears look a little like an elephant's ears, but they look more like a cartoon mouse ears. And the nose part looks kinda like an elephant nose, but it's too fat and square.
   - It has a face like a person, but that doesn't match the big ears. And that face doesn't look like a face in a mask—it's not very real.

**Summary:**
- The literal qualities make it look a little like an elephant or a cartoon mouse, and maybe a little like a person's face. But these are not very real looking. The literal qualities are weak.
In the absence of contextual information, these students would have walked away from this fascinating art object thinking it to be about its design qualities.

2. Consider Functional Qualities:
- This could be worn to keep your face warm.
- It could hide your face from someone if you didn’t want them to see it.
- It might scare somebody.
- It could be a mask like a ceremony mask. If it is, then all those things could be part of the ceremony.

Summary:
- These seem to be some symbols, but it was hard to agree on what they were. The emotive qualities seem to be average. But they might be stronger if we knew what the ears and the face are supposed to be.

5. Choose Theories and Judge Their Importance:
- The artist doesn’t spend a lot of time on details that would make it look like an elephant. So that part must not be very important to them. It looks like this mask definitely has a function, but it is hard to tell what that is. The artist spent a lot of time on the design of the mask, and that part of it is easy to see. And the artist does seem to be using symbols, but what they mean is hard to figure out, unless it is things about an elephant.

Conclusion:
- The artist seemed to work the hardest on the design of the Elephant Helmet Mask, so the design seems to be very important to this artwork. But it might be that the symbols and function are just as much or more important.

Students would engage with the historical and cultural context of this art object to answer their own questions about the functionality and the symbolism. In doing so, they would discover that the mask does represent an elephant, which the Bamileke people consider to be the king of the Cameroon Grassfields and a symbol of strength and power. Only members of the Aka Elephant society wore the masks during funeral, harvest, and other important ceremonial dances. The beads on the mask symbolize wealth, and only rich nobles of the Bamileke people were allowed into the society as only they could afford to make a mask like this. The geometric patterns of the beads were symbolic of a leopard’s coat, and the leopard was a symbol of the Bamileke king, whom the Aka society served (Huth, 1997; Rapchak & Johnson, 1999).

The realizations or affirmations that come about from comparing the initial analysis to the historical and cultural information are the golden moments this model is intended to produce. Educators should notice however that in the absence of contextual information, these students would have walked away from this fascinating art object thinking it to be about its design qualities. This is the danger of any formalist model—even a modified formalist model—practiced without the support of contextual or historical information.

Summary
The Feldman method and model of art criticism continues to serve as a simple, useful method of accessing artworks. The modified Feldman model described here is more of a fine tuning than a true modification. The changes align the phases better with the qualities they examine and with the final phase. Shifting the final phase’s emphasis from evaluating artworks to understanding them in all the aesthetic theories makes the method more palatable to those with strong contextual priorities.
No doubt, many of these modifications and ideas are already in practice. Good teachers modify what they have so that it satisfies the needs of their students. Evidence of the viability of the Feldman method is in its adaptability and the useful framework it provides.

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REFERENCES


Did you know only 16 states license or certify art teachers based on specific arts standards? Or that only about half of our nation's elementary schools have art teachers, only 60% of public secondary schools require arts as a part of graduation requirements, 35% of the higher education institutions computing GPAs count arts grades, and that only 5% of states conduct statewide assessments in the arts?

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