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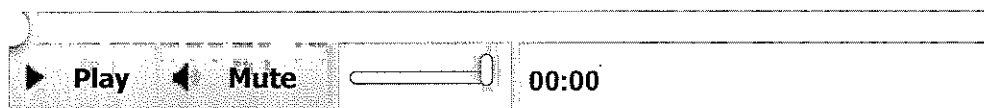
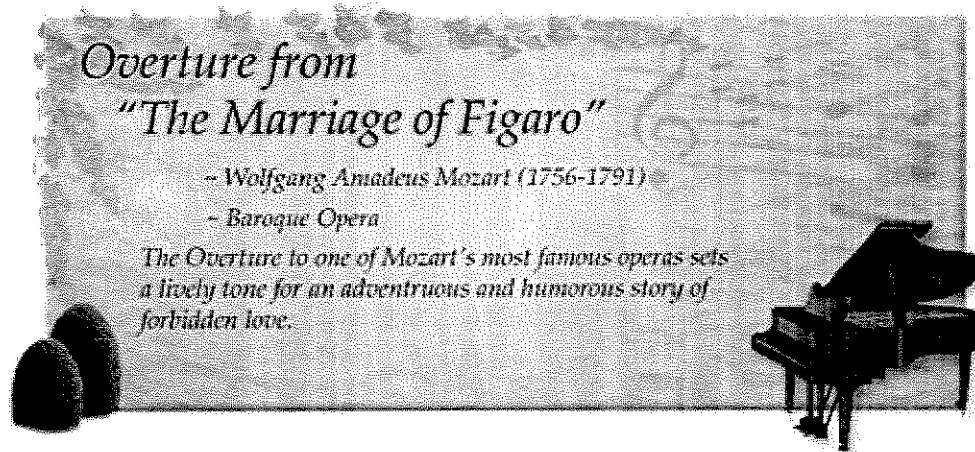
The Visual Arts

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The Marriage of Figaro

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Mozart's prolific career is punctuated by his charismatic operas. The Marriage of Figaro is one of the most often performed operas; its lively music and irreverent humor have delighted audiences for over two centuries. Feel free to click the Play button below and enjoy this piece as you read this week's lecture.



A Closer Look at the Visual Arts

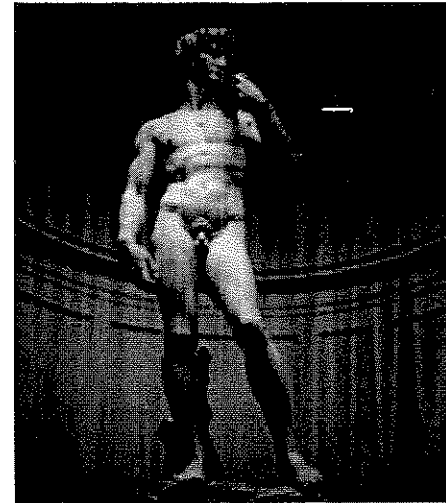
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Art seeks to communicate, and it often communicates ideas that are invaluable to the study of man's intellectual evolution. Over the course of our natural history, mankind has developed methods of self-expression that traverse symbolic and verbal language, which have been categorized (sometimes loosely) as art. W. H. Janson, an art historian, once asserted that, "Defining art is about as troublesome as defining a human being" (p. 9). Indeed, it would be impossible to categorize human beings definitively, so why would we attempt to do so with art, which endeavors to embrace our most complex demonstrations of self-expression? Even in this complicated web of subjective expression, there must be

some objective measures to determine what constitutes a work of art, right?

Art is a term applied to a complex network of aesthetic styles. The rules vary so much from genre to genre that it would be nearly impossible in the limited scope of this lecture to explain all of them. There is, however, one common thread. Across the centuries and numerous genres, art can always be counted upon as a unique and creative form of human expression.

Simply speaking, creativity as it applies to art is the act of generating new ways of communicating ideas. Artists apply their styles and techniques to communicate with the viewers. Originality is the key in any creative endeavor. Although the idea that the artist seeks to communicate might not necessarily be original, the way in which it is communicated should be unique in order for the final product to be considered art. So how does the creative process work? There is no singular creative process. In fact, from a psychological perspective, we really don't know. Artists appear to use a variety of approaches, and as far as we know, creativity may not be duplicated. In other words, there may be other artists who are deemed as talented as Michelangelo (a subjective determination in and of itself), but there will never be another



Michelangelo. The process of creativity may still be mysterious, yet “nonetheless, something happens in which humankind takes chaos, formlessness, vagueness, and the unknown, and crystallizes them into form, design, inventions[,] and ideas” (Sporre, 2004, p. 15).

What we do know is that creativity is an intuitive act. Artists simply follow their instincts to arrive at the finished work. Certainly, many of our most revered artists studied techniques, but without the artistic intuition—creativity—the work is not art. Again, art must be an original expression. This leads to a great, long-raging debate over what constitutes art. Christo and Jeanne-Claude are among the vast cast of artists whose works have not always been accepted among the artistic community as art. Their ephemeral installations are no doubt beautiful, but are they art? In order to be considered so, we must evaluate what they are attempting to communicate. Their recent installation, *The Gates*, sparked yet another debate over whether Christo and Jean Claude's work is indeed art. Some critics view their work as architectural in nature, but they do not necessarily believe it possesses the spark of creative and original genius. Supporters find their work innovative in its attempt to assert an extraordinary perspective in an ordinary setting.

Art, at its core, is a refined form of communication we simply refer to as aesthetics. Aesthetics is the study of beauty, but this is not to say that all art is beautiful. Some art may be intentionally grotesque, but as the antithesis of beauty, we still consider such subjects as under the umbrella of aesthetics. The study of aesthetics is one of the five classical philosophical fields of inquiry. Immanuel Kant is considered one of the innovators of aesthetic study. His *Critique of Judgment* (1790) asserted that art is not simply a matter of the appreciation of beauty but a process of judgment as well. In other words, art may still be a subjective category of study, but the only way to judge art is in an informed manner.

In order to define art, we also must recognize the difference between fine and applied art. Fine art is created with the express purpose of aesthetics; fine art has an express emotional purpose. Sculpture, painting, dance, music, and so forth are all examples of fine art. Applied art may include such categories as architecture, interior design, pottery, textiles, furniture, and so on. The applied, or decorative, arts refer to works that may be created with aesthetics in mind, but the purpose of the end products is most often functional in nature.

Discussing Art

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Art as a commodity of self-expression is only valuable if it is viewed by someone other than the artist, and the relationship between artist and viewer is simple: The artist creates and the viewer interprets. We must be careful, however, to exercise a sage approach in our interpretation of any work of art. Meaning, or intent, is found in the work itself. In other words, justification for any interpretation must be based on knowledge of the artist, the context in which the work was created, and the composition of the work. This is not to say that the viewer's primal response is not important. Very often, artists create work void of any other intent than to evoke a primal emotional response from the viewer, but it is still just that—the viewer's response. Because we are human after all, our response to a given stimulus is influenced by any number of factors, and as individuals, we often respond to the same stimulus in different manners. Art is no exception.

So what then is the relationship between the artist's intent and the viewer's reaction? Just as the artist sometimes creates work to evoke a response, it also is possible that art is created with absolutely no such intent. The cliché "art for art's sake" is a common modernist approach. This does not, however, preclude a reaction from the onlooker. In fact, as humans, we have no other impulse than to respond to what we see. Intent is impossible to determine without a definitive statement from the artist, and as onlookers, we are often forced to respond to and interpret work in the absence of any such statement.

If a painting gives you a feeling of calm, your interpretation should extend beyond the feeling itself and attempt to explore what specifically about the work evokes this feeling. Exploring why is the key to interpretation, but too often, perplexed onlookers find themselves posing the most often asked why question. Let's turn to Janson:

"Why is this supposed to be art?" How often have we heard this question asked – or asked ourselves[,] perhaps – in front of one of the strange, disquieting works that we are likely to find nowadays in museums or art exhibitions? There usually is a tone of exasperation, for the question that implies that we don't think we are looking at a work of art, but that the experts – the critics, museum curators, art historians – must suppose it to be one, [or] why else would they put it on public display? Clearly their standards are very different from ours; we are at a loss to understand them and we wish they'd give us a few clear-cut, simple rules to go by. Then[,] maybe we would learn to like what we see, we would know 'why it is art.' But the experts do not post exact rules, and the layman is apt to fall back on his final line of defense: 'Well I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like.' (p. 9)

In the remaining paragraphs of his essay, Janson does not offer any rubric for answering this question. In fact, it would be foolish to do so, given the numerous variables involved. There is no formula for what

constitutes an artistic rendering, so to some extent, we must rely on our own tastes and attitudes to guide us. What is crucial, however, is that we are open to viewing, appreciating, and discussing all forms of art, whether they meet with our aesthetic sensibilities or not. Only then can we really begin to learn about art.

What should we look for in a work of art? In the visual arts, we can rely on a few basic elements, such as line, color, hue, texture, balance, and so forth, to guide our discussions (see the tutorial below for more on the Elements of Art). Every work of visual art appeals to several, if not all, of these elements. In analyzing them, we can begin to form an appreciation for the artist's work. Take a careful look at *Persistence of Memory* (1931) by Salvador Dali. How would you characterize the line, hue, and dimension of this painting? Your descriptions of each of these elements not only characterize the painting but also contribute to your aesthetic acumen for the work. For example, I may find the hue and colors of this painting pleasing, the line interesting, and the form provocative, but I still do not necessarily have to appreciate the subject of the work itself. *Subject* may be defined as what the painting is about or what it represents, and this element is what we often most react to when we explain why we like or dislike a work of art. The subject of *Persistence of Memory*, although debatable, has been described as objects falling grotesquely organic to the decay of time. Although I might appreciate the composition of the work, I may not necessarily have an affinity for the subject. All of art is subject to our own tastes and emotional responses, whether we are experts or not. Objective interpretation (to as much extent as possible), however, will give us insight to the work itself. In other words, we can appreciate a work of art without also having to like it.

Elements of Art Tutorial

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Elements of Art Tutorial

Elements of Art

This tutorial introduces you to some of the fundamental techniques that create an overall composition in an artistic work. Some of the key concepts covered are line, color, hue, balance, form, and perspective. *Be sure to play with the interactive paintings at the end to aid you with your visualization of these elements!*

[Click to view the tutorial](#) | [View Transcript](#)

This tutorial opens in a new window; please turn off your pop-up blocker to access.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that even though we often are discussing the subject of the work, we may be subconsciously reacting to other elements of the same painting, such as color, line, or texture. The subject is generally the most palpable topic of discussion, and we often are reluctant to question the artist's use of color or hue (for example), perhaps because we don't feel it is having an effect upon us, or we simply do not feel empowered to raise the question. What if the choices the artist made were

different? If Mona Lisa had been wearing any other color than black, how might we have interpreted the painting differently? When discussing art, we must be willing to question the choices the artist made. This is not a matter of criticism, but one of critique! In the judgment process, subjective though it may be, we are required to look at every element of the work in order to arrive at an informed judgment.

Sources

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Sporre, D. J. (2004). *Reality through the arts* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall

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