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Introduction to Art: Design, Context, and Meaning

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The background of the cover is an abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. It features a mix of colors including earthy browns, muted reds, pinks, and soft blues. The brushstrokes are visible, giving it a sense of movement and depth. In the upper right, there's a more defined, reddish structure that could be interpreted as a stylized building or tower. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

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1

What is Art?

Jeffrey LeMieux and Pamela J. Sachant

1.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recognize various historical arguments about the definition of art and who is an artist.
- Engage arguments that distinguish between art and craft.
- Critically evaluate claims about whether an object is or is not art from multiple points of view.
- Engage questions about who is considered an artist and the role of the viewer.
- Productively speculate about various reasons why people have made and continue to make art.
- Recognize your intuitive understanding of art, and potentially build a broader, more comprehensive view of the nature and definition of visual art, one which incorporates historically and culturally diverse art objects and answers conceptual challenges.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

We live in a rapidly changing world in which images play an important, even central, role. With widespread use of personal electronics, we instantaneously deliver and receive sound, video, and text messages. Corporations and governments worldwide recognize the power of advertising. Art museums worldwide are putting large parts of their collections online. Today we are seeing theater-quality movies made with inexpensive equipment that was unavailable ten years ago. Selfies, personal video, and memes are everywhere. In 1968, artist Andy Warhol (1928-1967, USA) said, “In the future everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.” (*Self Portrait*, Andy Warhol: http://art.newcity.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Warhol_SelfPortrait.jpg) We are seeing that prediction come true with the advent of personal electronics that rival the sophistication of the most advanced professional studios of only twenty years ago. We are surrounded by images, but, for all of our clever technical abilities, the fundamental dynamics of visual art remain the same.



Figure 1.1 | *Blind Homer with Guide*

Artist: Bouguereau

Author: User "Thebrid"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Take a few minutes to look over the accompanying image, *Blind Homer and His Guide*. (Figure 1.1) It was painted in 1875 by a leading member of the French École des Beaux Arts, or School of Fine Arts, William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1925, France), and serves as a good example of the kinds of paintings made in Europe during that time. We might wonder what a painting made more than 100 years ago in a foreign country could have to do with us today.

The French Academic artist Bouguereau's painting is more than a literal presentation of a forgotten moment in ancient history. The painting challenges viewers from every age to go deeper, to see the symbolism behind the history. Homer, who is thought to have lived around 1000 BCE, was the chief poet of the ancient Greeks. Ancient Greek ideas about social roles and the nature of virtue come to us in part from Homer's epic poems the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. In Bouguereau's painting, Homer symbolizes civilization and culture. Homer wanders blindly through a savage wilderness with only a youth to shelter him. In this way, Bouguereau implies that a wilderness can be not only physical but also cultural, and in that sense, all of us wander through a wilderness that threatens the human

spirit found in culture. His painting asks the question, "How are cultural values carried forward?" In Bouguereau's work, the young man has taken responsibility for protecting Homer, who symbolizes the refined wisdom of the past and the foundation of western culture. This image is a call to the youth of Bouguereau's generation (and to ours) to bring precious culture forward safely through an ever-threatening wilderness.

Wherever we find human beings, we find visual art. Works of visual art raise questions not only about our ancestors, but also about the nature of visual art itself. What is art? Who is an artist? Why do artists make art? What is the role of the viewer? Does everything count as art? How have people defined art through time? How do we define art today?

In this chapter, we will examine these questions in more detail. The purpose of this examination is twofold: to increase your awareness of the mechanics of those images and, thus, more effectively understand the visual art that we encounter in our daily lives. Images are powerful. Images are used in our culture in many ways, not all of them benign. When we enhance our visual literacy, we raise our awareness of the powerful images that surround us.

1.3 WHAT IS VISUAL ART?

To explore a subject, we need first to define it. Defining art, however, proves elusive. You may have heard it said (or even said it yourself) that “it might be art, but it’s not Art,” which means, “I might not know how to define it, but I know it when I see it.”

Everywhere we look, we see images designed to command our attention, including images of desire, images of power, religious images, images meant to recall memories, and images intended to manipulate our appetites. But are they art?

Some languages do not have a separate word for art. In those cultures, objects tend to be utilitarian in purpose but often include in their design the intent to delight, portray a special status, or commemorate an important event or ritual. Thus, while the objects are not considered art, they do have artistic functions.

1.3.1 Historic Development of the Idea of Art

The idea of art has developmentally progressed from human prehistory to the present day. Changes to the definition of art over time can be seen as attempts to resolve problems with earlier definitions. The ancient Greeks saw the goal of visual art as copying, or *mimesis*. Nineteenth-century art theorists promoted the idea that art is communication: it produces feelings in the viewer. In the early twentieth century, the idea of significant form, the quality shared by aesthetically pleasing objects, was proposed as a definition of art. Today, many artists and thinkers agree with the institutional theory of art, which shifts focus from the work of art itself to who has the power to decide what is and is not art. While this progression of definitions of art is not exhaustive, it is instructive.

1.3.1.1 *Mimesis*

The ancient Greek definition of art as **mimesis**, or imitation of the real world, appears in the myth of Zeuxis and Parhassios, rival painters from ancient Greece in the late fifth century BCE who competed for the title of greatest artist. (Figure 1.2) Zeuxis painted a bowl of grapes that was so lifelike that birds came down to peck at the image of fruit. Parhassios was unimpressed with this achievement. When viewing Parhassios’s work, Zeuxis, on his part, asked that the curtain over the painting be drawn back so he could see his rival’s work more



Figure 1.2 | Zeuxis conceding defeat: “I have deceived the birds, but Parhassios has deceived Zeuxis.”

Artist: Joachim von Sandrart; engraving by Johann Jakob von Sandrart

Author: User “Fae”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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clearly. Parhassios declared himself the victor because the curtain *was* the painting, and while Zeuxis fooled the birds with his work, Parhassios fooled a thinking human being—a much more difficult feat.

The ancient Greeks felt that the visual artist's goal was to copy visual experience. This approach appears in the realism of ancient Greek sculpture and pottery. We must sadly note that, due to the action of time and weather, no paintings from ancient Greek artists exist today. We can only surmise their quality based on tales such as that of Zeuxis and Parhassios, the obvious skill in ancient Greek sculpture, and in drawings that survive on ancient Greek pottery.

This definition of art as copying reality has a problem, though. Jackson Pollock (1912-1956, USA), a leader in the New York School of the 1950's, intentionally did not copy existing objects in his art. (Figure 1.3) While painting these works, Pollock and his fellow artists would consciously avoid making marks or passages that resembled recognizable objects. They succeeded at making artwork that did not copy anything, thus demonstrating that the ancient Greek view of art as mimesis—simple copying—does not sufficiently define art.



Figure 1.3 | Left: *The She-Wolf*; Right: *Gothic*

Artist: Jackson Pollock

Author: Gorup de Besanez

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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1.3.1.2 Communication

A later attempt at defining art comes from the nineteenth-century Russian author Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy wrote on many subjects, and is the author of the great novel *War and Peace* (1869). He was also an art theorist. He proposed that art is the **communication of feeling**, stating, “Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them.”¹

This definition does not succeed because it is impossible to confirm that the feelings of the artist have been successfully conveyed to another person. Further, suppose an artist created a work of art that no one else ever saw. Since no feeling had been communicated through it, would it still be a work of art? The work did not “hand on to others” anything at all because it was never seen. Therefore, it would fail as art according to Tolstoy's definition.

1 Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art? And Essays on Art*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 123.

1.3.1.3 Significant Form

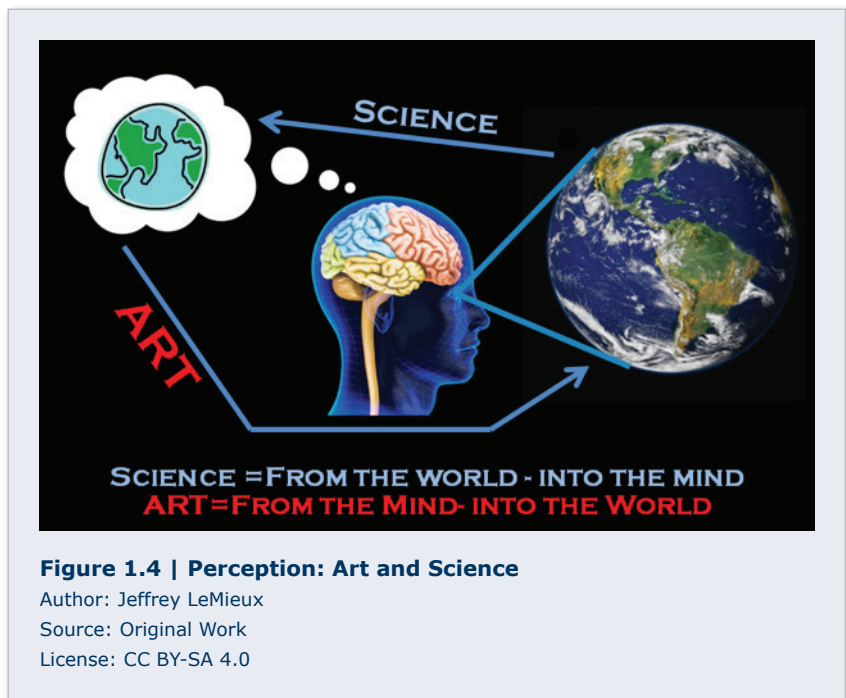
To address these limitations of existing definitions of art, in 1913 English art critic Clive Bell proposed that art is **significant form**, or the “quality that brings us aesthetic pleasure.” Bell stated, “to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour.”² In Bell’s view, the term “form” simply means line, shape, mass, as well as color. Significant form is the collection of those elements that rises to the level of your awareness and gives you noticeable pleasure in its beauty. Unfortunately, **aesthetics**, pleasure in the beauty and appreciation of art, are impossible to measure or reliably define. What brings aesthetic pleasure to one person may not affect another. Aesthetic pleasure exists only in the viewer, not in the object. Thus significant form is purely subjective. While Clive Bell did advance the debate about art by moving it away from requiring strict representation, his definition gets us no closer to understanding what does or does not qualify as an art object.

1.3.1.4 Artworld

One definition of art widely held today was first promoted in the 1960s by American philosophers George Dickie and Arthur Danto, and is called the **institutional theory** of art, or the “Art-world” theory. In the simplest version of this theory, art is an object or set of conditions that has been designated as art by a “person or persons acting on behalf of the artworld,” and the artworld is a “complex field of forces” that determine what is and is not art.³ Unfortunately, this definition gets us no further along because it is not about art at all! Instead, it is about who has the power to define art, which is a political issue, not an aesthetic one.

1.3.2 Definition of Art

We each perceive the world from our own position or perspective and from that perception we make a mental image of the world. Science is the process of turning perceptions into a coherent mental picture of the universe through testing and observation. (Figure 1.4) Science moves concepts from the world into the mind. Science is vitally important because it allows us to understand how the world works and to use that understanding to make good predictions. Art is the other side of



2 Clive Bell, “Art and Significant Form,” in *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1913), 2

3 George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 464.



Figure 1.5 | Portrait of Percy Bysshe Shelley

Artist: Alfred Clint
 Author: User "Dcoetzee"
 Source: Wikimedia Commons
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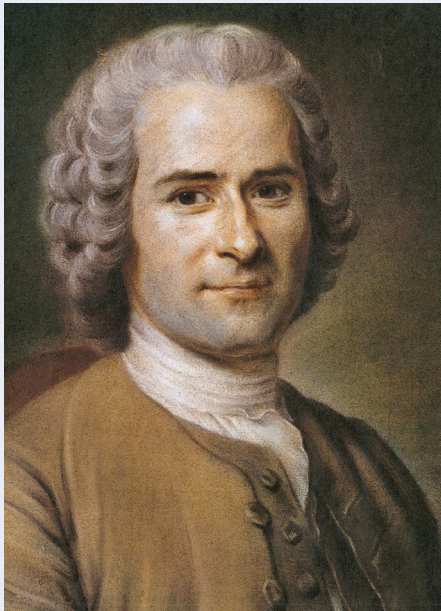


Figure 1.6 | Portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Artist: Maurice Quentin de La Tour
 Author: User "Maarten van Vliet"
 Source: Wikimedia Commons
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our experience with the world. *Art moves ideas from the mind into the world.*

We need both art and science to exist in the world. From our earliest age, we both observe the world and do things to change it. We are all both scientists and artists. Every human activity has both a science (observation) and an art (expression) to it. Anyone who has participated in the discipline of Yoga, for example, can see that even something as simple as breathing has both an art and a science to it.

This definition of art covers the wide variety of objects that we see in museums, on social media, or even in our daily walk to work. But this definition of art is not enough. The bigger question is: what art is worthy of our attention, and how do we know when we have found it? Ultimately, each of us must answer that question for ourselves.

But we do have help if we want it. People who have made a disciplined study of art can offer ideas about what art is important and why. In the course of this text, we will examine some of those ideas about art. Due to the importance of respecting the individual, the decision about what art is best must belong to the individual. We ask only that the student understand the ideas as presented.

When challenged with a question or problem about what is best, we first ask, "What do I personally know about it?" When we realize our personal resources are limited, we might ask friends, neighbors, and relatives what they know. In addition to these important resources, the educated person can refer to a larger body of possible solutions drawn from a study of the history of literature, philosophy, and art: What did the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley say about truth in his essay *Defense of Poetry* (1840)? (Figure 1.5) What did the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau claim about human nature in his treatise *Emile or On Education* (1762)? (Figure 1.6) What did Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675, Netherlands) show us about the quiet dignity of the domestic space in his painting *Woman Holding a Balance*? (Figure 1.7) Through experiencing these works of art and literature, our ideas about such things can be tested and validated or found wanting.

We will examine works of visual art from a diverse range of cultures and periods. The challenge for you as the reader

is to increase your ability to interpret works of art through the use of context, visual dynamics, and introspection, and to integrate them into a coherent worldview. The best outcome of an encounter with art is an awakening of the mind and spirit to a new point of view. A mind stretched beyond itself never returns to its original dimension.

1.3.3 The Distinction of Fine Art

From our definition of art proposed above, it would seem that craft and fine art are indistinguishable as both come from the mind into the world. But the distinction between craft and art is real and important. This distinction is most commonly understood as one based on the use or end purpose of an object, or as an effect of the material used. Clay, textiles, glass, and jewelry were long considered the province of craft, not art. If an object's intended use was a part of daily living, then it was generally thought to be the product of craft, not fine art. But many objects originally intended to be functional, such as quilts, are now thought to qualify as fine art. (Figure 1.8)

So what could be the difference between art and craft? Anyone who has been exposed to training in a craft such as carpentry or plumbing recognizes that craft follows a formula, that is, a set of rules that govern not only how the work is to be conducted but also what the outcome of that work must be. The level of craft is judged by how closely the end product matches the pre-determined outcome. We want our houses to stand and water to flow when we turn on our faucets. Fine art, on the other hand, results from a free and open-ended exploration that does not depend on a pre-determined formula for its outcome or validity. Its outcome is surprising and original. Almost all fine art objects are a combination of some level both of craft and art. Art stands on craft, but goes beyond it.



Figure 1.7 | *Woman Holding a Balance*

Artist: Johannes Vermeer

Author: User "DcoetzeeBot"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain



Figure 1.8 | Quilt

Artist: Lucy Mingo

Author: User "Billvolckening"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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1.3.4 Why Art Matters

American physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer is considered a “father of the atomic bomb” for the role he played in developing nuclear weapons as part of the Manhattan Project during World War II (1939-1945). (Figure 1.9) Upon completion of the project, quoting from the Hindu epic tale *Bhagavad Gita*, he stated, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” Clearly, Oppenheimer had read more than physics texts in his education, which fit him well for his important role during World War II.

When we train in mathematics and the sciences, for example, we become very powerful. Power can be used well or badly. Where in our schools is the coursework on how to use power wisely? Today a liberal arts college education requires students to survey the arts and history of human cultures in order to examine a wide range of ideas about wisdom and to humanize the powerful. With that in mind, in every course taken in the university, it is hoped that you will recognize the need to couple your increasing intellectual power with a study of what is thought to be wisdom, and to view each educational experience in the humanities as part of the search for what is better in ourselves and our communities.

This text is not intended to determine what is or is not good art and why it matters. Rather, the point of this text is to equip you with intellectual tools that will enable you to analyze, decipher, and interpret works of art as bearers of meaning, to make *your own* decisions about the merit of those works, and then usefully to integrate those decisions into your daily lives.

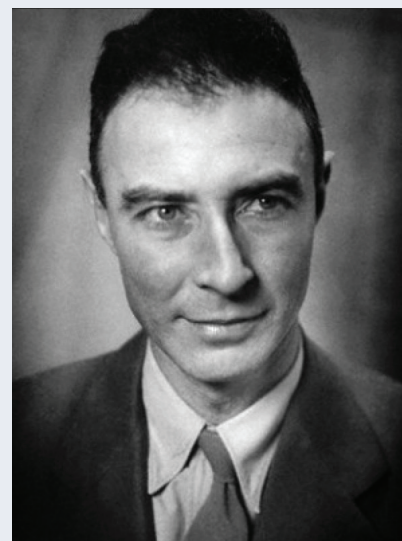


Figure 1.9 | J. Robert Oppenheimer

Author: Los Alamos National Laboratory

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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1.4 WHO IS CONSIDERED AN ARTIST? WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN ARTIST?

In much of the world today, an artist is considered to be a person with the talent and the skills to conceptualize and make creative works. Such persons are singled out and prized for their artistic and original ideas. Their art works can take many forms and fit into numerous categories, such as architecture, ceramics, digital art, drawings, mixed media, paintings, photographs, prints, sculpture, and textiles. Of greater importance, artists are the individuals who have the desire and ability to envision, design, and fabricate the images, objects, and structures we all encounter, use, occupy, and enjoy every day of our lives.

Today, as has been the case throughout history and across cultures, there are different titles for those who make and build. An artisan or craftsperson, for example, may produce decorative or utilitarian arts, such as quilts or baskets. Often, an artisan or craftsperson is a skilled worker, but not the inventor of the original idea or form. An artisan or craftsperson can also be someone

who creates their own designs, but does not work in art forms or with materials traditionally associated with the so-called Fine Arts, such as painting and sculpture. A craftsperson might instead fashion jewelry, forge iron, or blow glass into patterns and objects of their own devising. Such inventive and skilled pieces are often categorized today as Fine Craft or Craft Art.

In many cultures throughout much of history, those who produced, embellished, painted, and built were not considered to be artists as we think of them now. They were artisans and craftspeople, and their role was to make the objects and build the structures for which they were hired, according to the design (their own or another's) agreed upon with those for whom they were working. That is not to say they were untrained. In Medieval Europe, or the Middle Ages (fifth-fifteenth centuries), for example, an artisan generally began around the age of twelve as an apprentice, that is, a student who learned all aspects of a profession from a master who had their own workshop. Apprenticeships lasted five to nine years or more, and included learning trades ranging from painting to baking, and masonry to candle making. At the end of that period, an apprentice became a journeyman and was allowed to become a member of the craft guild that supervised training and standards for those working in that trade. To achieve full status in the guild, a journeyman had to complete their "masterpiece," demonstrating sufficient skill and craftsmanship to be named a master.



Figure 1.10 | Gudea

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

We have little information about how artists trained in numerous other time periods and cultures, but we can gain some understanding of what it meant to be an artist by looking at examples of art work that were produced. *Seated Statue of Gudea* depicts the ruler of the state of Lagash in Southern Mesopotamia, today Iraq, during his reign, c. 2144-2124 BCE. (Figure 1.10)

Gudea is known for building temples, many in the kingdom's main city of Girsu (today Telloh, Iraq), with statues portraying himself in them. In these works, he is seated or standing with wide, staring eyes but otherwise a calm expression on his face and his hands folded in a gesture of prayer and greeting. Many of the statues, including the one pictured here, are carved from diorite, a very hard stone favored by rulers in ancient Egypt and the Near East for its rarity and the fine lines that can be cut into it. The ability to cut such precise lines allowed the craftsperson who carved this work to distinguish between and emphasize each finger in Gudea's

clasped hands as well as the circular patterns on his stylized shepherd's hat, both of which indicate the leader's dedication to the well-being and safety of his people.

Although the sculpture of Gudea was clearly carved by a skilled artisan, we have no record of that person, or of the vast majority of the artisans and builders who worked in the ancient world. Who they worked for and what they created are the records of their lives and artistry. Artisans were not valued for taking an original approach and setting themselves apart when creating a statue of a ruler such as Gudea: their success was based on their ability to work within standards of how the human form was depicted and specifically how a leader should look within that culture at that time. The large, almond-shaped eyes and compact, block-like shape of the figure, for example, are typical of sculpture from that period. This sculpture is not intended to be an individual likeness of Gudea; rather, it is a depiction of the characteristic features, pose, and proportions found in all art of that time and place.

Objects made out of clay were far more common in the ancient world than those made of metal or stone, such as the *Seated Statue of Gudea*, which were far more costly, time-consuming, and difficult to make. Human figures modeled in clay dating back as far as 29,000-25,000 BCE have been found in Europe, and the earliest known pottery, found in Jiangxi Province, China, dates to c. 18,000 BCE. Vessels made of clay and baked in ovens were first made in the Near East c. 8,000 BCE, nearly 6,000 years before the *Seated Statue of Gudea* was carved. **Ceramic** (clay hardened by heat) pots were used for storage and numerous everyday needs. They were utilitarian objects made by anonymous artisans.



Figure 1.11 | Panathenaic Prize Amphora with Lid

Artist: Nikodemus

Source: The J. Paul Getty Museum

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Among the ancient Greeks, however, pottery rose to the level of an art form. But, the status of the individuals who created and painted the pots did not. Although their work may have been sought after, these potters and painters were still considered artisans. The origins of pottery that can be described as distinctively Greek dates to c. 1,000 BCE, in what is known as the Proto-geometric period. Over the next several hundred years, the shapes of the vessels and the types of decorative motifs and subjects painted on them became associated with the city where they were produced, and then specifically with the individuals who made and decorated the pots. The types of pots signed by the potter and the painter were generally large, elaborately decorated or otherwise specialized vessels that were used for ritual or ceremonial purposes.

That is the case with the *Panathenaic Prize Amphora*, 363-362 BCE, signed by Nikodemus, the potter, and attributed to the Painter of the Wedding Procession, whose name is not known but is identified through similarities to other painted pots. (Figure 1.11) The Panathenaia was a festival held every four years in honor of Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, Greece, who is depicted on the **amphora**, a tall, two-handled



Figure 1.12 | *Pear Blossoms*

Artist: Qian Xuan

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

jar with a narrow neck. On the other side of the storage jar, Nike, the goddess of victory, crowns the winner of the boxing competition for which this pot—containing precious olive oil from Athena’s sacred trees—was awarded by the city of Athens. Only the best potters and painters were hired to make pots that were part of such an important ceremony and holding such a significant prize. While the vast majority of artisans never identified themselves on their work, these noteworthy individuals were set apart and acknowledged by name. The makers’ signatures demonstrated the city’s desire to give an award of the highest quality; they acted as promotion for the potter and painter at that time, and they have immortalized them since. It must not be forgotten, however, that the prize inside the pot was considered far more important than the vessel or the skilled artisans who created it.

China was united and ruled by Mongols from the north, first under Kublai Kahn, in the period known as the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). The hand scroll painting *Pear Blossoms* was created with ink and colors on paper around 1280 by Qian Xuan (c. 1235-before 1307, China). (Figure 1.12) After the establishment of the Mongolian government, Qian Xuan abandoned his goal of obtaining a position as a scholar-official, as the highly educated bureaucrats who governed China were known, and turned to painting. He was part of a group of artists known as scholar-painters, or literati. The work of scholar-painters was desirable to many admirers of art because it was considered more personal, expressive, and spontaneous than the uniform and realistic paintings by professional, trained artists. The scholar-painters’ sophisticated and deep knowledge of philosophy, culture, and the arts—including calligraphy—made them welcome among fellow scholars and at court. They were part of the elite class of leaders, who followed the long and noble traditions within Confucian teachings of expressing oneself with wisdom and grace, especially in the art of poetry.

Qian Xuan was one of the first scholar-painters to unite painting and poetry, as he does in *Pear Blossoms*:

All alone by the veranda railing,
teardrops drenching the branches,
Although her face is unadorned,
her old charms remain;
Behind the locked gate, on a rainy night,
how she is filled with sadness.
How differently she looked bathed in golden waves
of moonlight, before the darkness fell.

The poem is not meant to illustrate or describe his painting of the branch with its delicate, young foliage and flowers; rather, the swaying, irregular lines of the leaves and the gently unfurling curves of the blossoms are meant to suggest comparisons to how quickly time passes—delicate blooms will soon fade—and evoke memories of times past.

In thirteenth-century China, as has been the case throughout much of that country's history, the significance of a painting is closely associated with the identity of the artist, and with the scholars and collectors who owned the work over subsequent centuries. Their identities are known by the **seals**, or stamps in red acting as a signature, each added to the work of art. Specific subjects and how they were depicted were associated with the artist, and often referred back to in later works by other artists as a sign of respect and acknowledgment of the earlier master's skill and expertise. In *Pear Blossoms*, as was often the case, the poem, and the calligraphy in which the artist wrote it, were part of the original composition of the entire painted scroll. The seals appended and notes written by later scholars and collectors continued adding to the composition, and its beauty and meaning, over the next seven hundred years.

When James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903, USA, lived England) painted *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Black: Portrait of Theodore Duret* in 1883, he was making references back to the makers' marks Chinese and Japanese potters used as signatures on their ceramics in the monogram he adopted for his work: a stylized design of a butterfly based on his initials. (Figure 1.13) Whistler began



Figure 1.13 | *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Black: Portrait of Theodore Duret*

Artist: James Abbott McNeill Whistler

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

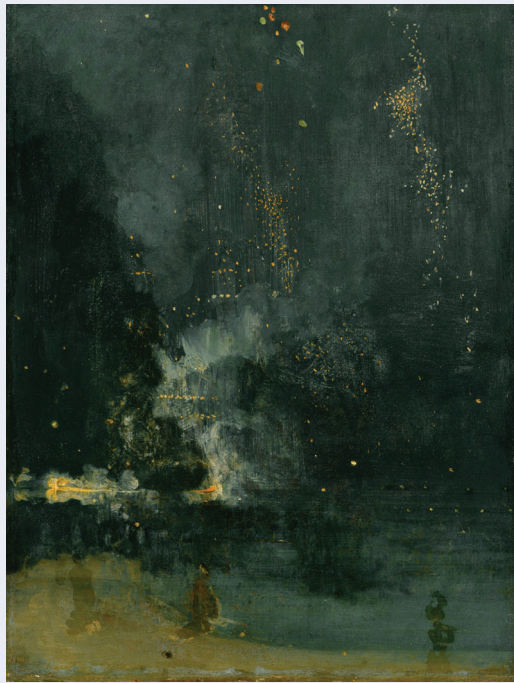


Figure 1.14 | *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*

Artist: James Abbott McNeill Whistler

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

signing his work with the recognizable but altered figure of a butterfly, which often appeared to be dancing, in the 1860s. He had begun collecting Japanese porcelain and prints, and was tremendously influenced by their colors, patterns, and compositions, which reflected Japanese principles of beauty in art, including elegant simplicity, tranquility, subtlety, naturalness, understated beauty, and asymmetry or irregularity.

Whistler was among numerous American and European artists in the second half of the nineteenth century who felt compelled to break away from what they believed were the inhibiting constraints in how and what art students were taught and in the system of traditional art exhibitions. For Whistler and others, such restrictions were intolerable; as artists, they must be allowed to freely follow their own creative voices and pursuits. In adopting Japanese principles of beauty in art, Whistler could pursue what he called “Art for art’s sake.” That is, he could create art that served no other purpose than to express what he, as the artist, found to be elevating, harmonious, and pleasing to the eye, the mind, and the soul:

Art should be independent of all claptrap—should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like. All these have no kind of concern with it; and that is why I insist on calling my works “arrangements” and “harmonies.”⁴

Setting the artist apart in this way, as someone with special qualifications and sensibilities at odds with the prevailing cultural and intellectual standards, was far from the role played by a scholar-painter such as Qian Xuan in thirteenth-century China. The work Qian Xuan created was in accord with prevailing standards, while Whistler often thought of himself and his art as conflicting with the conventions of his day. Continuing one notion or categorization of the artist that had been present in Europe since the sixteenth century (and, later, the United States), Whistler was the singular, creative genius, whose art was often misunderstood and not necessarily accepted.

That was indeed the case. In 1878, Whistler won a lawsuit for libel against the art critic John Ruskin, who described Whistler’s 1875 painting, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, as “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.” (Figure 1.14) By around 1880, in the aftermath of that rancorous proceeding, Whistler often added a long stinger to his butterfly monogram, symbolizing both the gentle beauty of his art as well as the forceful, at times stinging, nature of his personality.

4 James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (New York: Frederick Stokes & Brother, 1908), www.gutenberg.org/files/24650/24650-h/24650-h.htm

1.5 THE ROLE OF THE VIEWER

An artist or craftsperson has an audience in mind when creating a work of art. Sometimes the audience is the artist. Most of the time, however, the audience—the viewer—is someone else. It may be an individual or a group of people the artist personally knows, or people the artist knows will be viewing the work in a specific context or with a certain purpose. The artist may also consider what meaning or impact the work of art will have for people who view it at an unknown time or place in the future, perhaps with little information about the artist or the work itself. Or, the artist may feel the need or desire to express an emotion and have no concern for how the viewer will react to the work, or even if the viewer will understand the work and why it was created.

As the viewer of a work of art, then, we are often aware that we do not have full knowledge of what the artist intended or, at times, even what the artist depicted. Not having that information, however, is not necessarily frustrating nor does it dampen our enjoyment of the piece. Instead, we may find the colors vibrant, or the subject intriguing, or the composition relaxing; in other words, we may simply enjoy looking at the work of art without feeling the need for particulars about it or the artist. But, there are other times when it is helpful to have some information about the artist or artwork for us to better understand and appreciate what we are looking at.

Sites exist around the world where images were painted or inscribed on cave walls during the Upper Paleolithic Period, c. 40,000-12,000 BCE. The majority of the images are of animals, but outlines of hands, human figures, instruments such as bows and arrows, and designs such as spoked wheels or parallel lines can also be found. They possess a number of notable features, including the fact that these images were painted over tens of thousands of years on every continent except Antarctica. Despite significant differences, the types of subjects depicted during all that time and in all those places are remarkably similar. But, as they were made during the pre-historic period, that is, before humans kept written records, all we know about them is what we can interpret by looking at the images themselves and by studying other objects we have found from the same places and time periods.

Scholars have put forth numerous ideas about why the images were made and what they could mean. The animals depicted include horses, bulls, bison, and deer, all of which were hunted during that span of approximately 30,000 years. For that reason,



Figure 1.15 | Replica of the Pech-Merle de Cabrerets Cave painting

Author: User "HTO"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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some scholars hypothesize the paintings acted as a form of **sympathetic magic**, expressing the hope or giving thanks for a successful hunt by depicting the animals hunted. If the images were associated with such activities, crucial for the survival of those who created them, then their makers, as scholars further speculate, were **shamans**, or spiritual leaders of the group. A shaman is an individual with the power to interact with the physical world and the otherworld of spirits in order to maintain harmony between the two, predict the future, cast spells, and cure the sick.

Venturing into a cave, where all light from the outside world quickly disappears, is akin to a journey into another realm of existence. The images painted, seen only by fire, would have flickered and danced on the walls as if they depicted visitors from another world. We do not know who saw the paintings other than those who created them, but in the *Panel of Spotted Horses* within the Chapel of Bison in the Pech-Merle de Cabrerets Cave, France, the handprints also present are evidence that there were others who viewed them. (Figure 1.15) The prints were made by placing a hand on the wall and blowing paint around it, perhaps through a hollow, reed-like object. Are they meant to identify or document those who were present, to indicate their hoped-for powers as hunters or their inclusion as part of a shamanistic experience? We do not know, but even with the little information we have as viewers today, we can nevertheless enjoy the painting's beauty and mystery.



Figure 1.17 | Diagram of the Labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral

Author: User "Ssolbergj"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Figure 1.16 | Labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral

Author: User "Maksim"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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A **labyrinth**, or maze, such as the one in the floor of the nave of Chartres Cathedral (1194-1250), France, is another example of an image or object found in a number of places, but about which we have little information. (Figure 1.16) A labyrinth is similar to a maze but generally has only one intricate and twisting path to the center. (Figure 1.17) There are labyrinths in the floors of numerous medieval Gothic cathedrals in Europe that were built in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. The labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral was built in the thirteenth century and, at 42.3 feet in diameter, it fills the width of the

nave, or central area of a church. While there is documentation that clergy performed dances during Easter celebrations upon labyrinths found in other cathedrals in France, no such records exist regarding Chartres. What it does seem to have in common with other labyrinths, however, is being used as a path to **circumambulate**, or walk, by visitors to the church who were on a **pilgrimage** or journey of faith. As was true of many Gothic churches, Chartres Cathedral held a **relic**, an object thought to have belonged to or been part of a holy person's body, in this case, a garment believed to be the tunic worn by the Virgin Mary when she gave birth. Pilgrims traveled to Chartres to venerate this relic as a demonstration of their religious devotion. While there, pilgrims and other visitors might follow the stones of the labyrinth while in prayer or a state of meditation; the inevitable outcome of the complex and turning path leading to the center mirrors the certainty that prayer will lead the believer to God. The repetitive and focused movement of walking while absorbed in prayer enhanced the devotional experience for the worshiper—who was also the viewer of the labyrinth—on both a physical and a spiritual level.

John Haberle (1856-1933, USA) was a painter who was born and spent most of his life in New Haven, Connecticut. He was well known for his *trompe l'oeil* works such as *A Bachelor's Drawer*: paintings that were so realistic they “fooled the eye.” (Figure 1.18) Precisely rendering objects on a two-dimensional surface as if they were in three-dimensional space, he was able to create an illusion of reality that was meant to draw in his viewers, who were briefly unaware of the trick he was playing upon them. Quickly recognizing the painting was in truth an uncannily accurate semblance of actual objects, the viewer then became a participant in the artist's game of deception.



Figure 1.18 | *A Bachelor's Drawer*

Artist: John Haberle

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

The various objects in *A Bachelor's Drawer*, including photographs, paper currency, theater ticket stubs, newspaper clippings, a thermometer, and a hair comb, that appear to be haphazardly fixed to a wooden drawer front are visually interesting because they are so life-like. Once the viewer shifts focus to look at these everyday and commonplace items—the sorts of things you take out of your pocket at the end of the day, often intending to throw them away—and think about what they are, we also wonder what they might mean. And, that is exactly what Haberle intended his viewers to do.

The artist even rewards his viewers for their close attention to the many details in his painting by placing some important ones in the center: several fragments of newspaper articles, including one stating, “A New Haven artist has plunged himself into trouble by making too perfect greenbacks in oil.” Viewers who knew Haberle’s work would probably have been aware the statement was true. Haberle frequently depicted paper currency in his paintings, in spite of having been warned to stop doing so by the U.S. Secret Service, which was formed in 1865 to stop the distribution of counterfeit money. Those who appreciated his work knew Haberle took pleasure in making it clear he was ignoring that demand.

A Bachelor's Drawer, painted 1890-1894, would turn out to be the artist’s last *trompe l’oeil* painting of currency, though, as the exacting work had strained his eyes to the point that he could no longer paint such fine detail. Some of the other objects Haberle included, and the title of the work itself, seem to be referring to the end of an era. The pamphlet titled “How to Name the Baby,” prominently displayed in the upper right, partially covers the postcard showing a finely-dressed dandy with his dashing moustache that is placed directly above a discreetly covered photograph of a nude woman. They all lead down to a small photograph that appears to be stuck in the bottom (painted) frame, which is a portrait of the artist. Was he the bachelor who once had the freedom to attend the theatre, but is now taking up the life of a young father? This trail of clues is typical of the dry humor in Haberle’s work, here turned on himself, with an open invitation for his viewers to share the joke with him.

1.6 WHY DO WE MAKE ART?

Some of the earliest evidence of recognizable human activity includes not only practical things like stone tools and fire pits, but also decorative objects used for personal adornment. For example, these small beads made by piercing sea snail shells, found at the Blombos Cave on the southeastern coast of South Africa, are dated to the Middle Stone Age, 101,000-70,000 BCE. (Figure 1.19) We can only speculate about the intentions of our distant ancestors, but it is clear that their lives included the practice of conceiving and producing art objects. One thing we appear to share with those distant relatives is the urge to make art.



Figure 1.19 | Blombos Cave *Nassarius kraussianus* marine shell beads and reconstruction of bead stringing

Author: Marian Vanhaeren and Christopher S. Henshilwood

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL "MAP" SYMBOLS

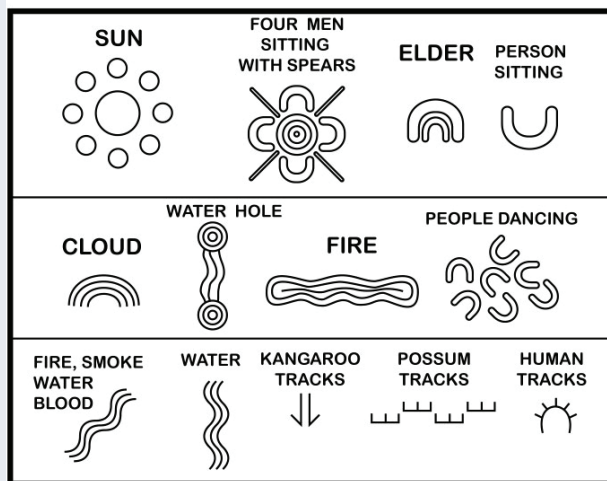


Figure 1.20 | Australian Aboriginal "Map" Symbols

Author: Jeffrey LeMieux

Source: Original Work

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A culture can be defined as a group of people who agree about what is important. Today many different human cultures and sub-cultures co-exist; we can find in them a broad range of ideas about art and its place in daily living. One main goal of Australian Aboriginal artists, for example, is to "map" the world around them. (Figure 1.20) In this painting on bark, pictorial symbols tell the story of the great hunter snake in colors such as red for desert sand and yellow for the sun. (Figure 1.21) In a similar way, though with different materials, Buddhist sand paintings known as **mandalas** present a map of the cosmos. These circular diagrams also represent the relationship of the individual to the whole and levels of human awareness. (Figure 1.22)

The need to make art can be divided into two broad categories: the *personal need* to express ideas and feelings, and the *community's needs* to assert common values. In the following sections, we'll look at some of these motivations to more clearly understand and identify artist intent in the works of art that we encounter.

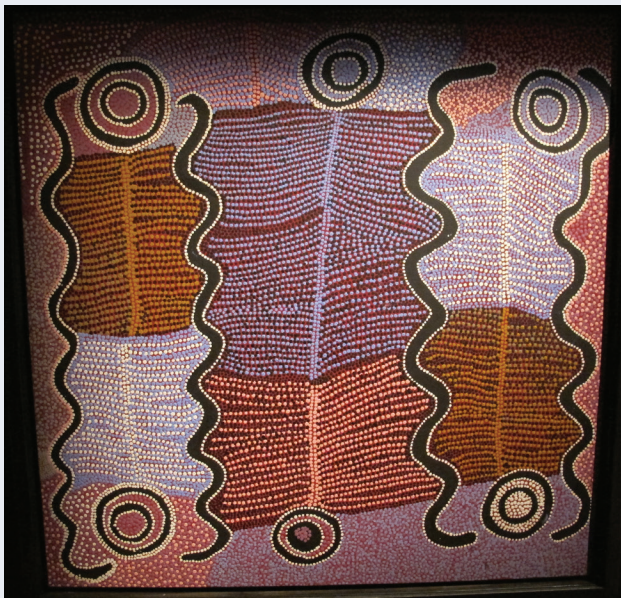


Figure 1.21 | Sand Painting

Author: Sailko

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: CC BY-SA 3.0



Figure 1.22 | Wheel of Time Kalachakra Sand Mandala

Artist: Losang Samten

Author: Steve Osborne

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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We should recognize that every person has lived a unique life, so every person knows something about the world that no one else has seen. It is the job of artists today to tell us about what they have come to know—individually or as part their community—using the art material or medium most suited to their abilities. While copying the works of others is good training, it is merely re-working what has already been revealed. Originality, however, is more highly valued in contemporary art. Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986, USA) explained her view on this matter when she wrote: (Figure 1.23)

It was in the fall of 1915 that I first had the idea that what I had been taught was of little value to me except for the use of my materials as a language—charcoal, pencil, pen and ink, watercolor, pastel, and oil. I had become fluent with them when I was so young that they were simply another language that I handled easily. But what to say with them? I had been taught to work like others, and after careful thinking I decided that I wasn’t going to spend my life doing what had already been done. . . . I decided I was a very stupid fool for not to at last paint as I wanted to and say what I wanted to when I painted.⁵

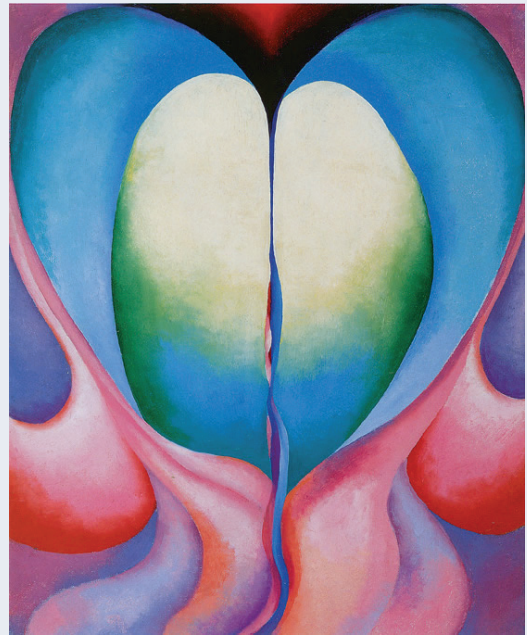


Figure 1.23 | Series 1, No. 8

Artist: Georgia O’Keeffe

Author: User “Prosfilaes”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

1.6.1 The Personal Need to Create

Many works of art come out of a personal decision to put a feeling, idea, or concept into visual form. Since feelings vary widely, the resulting art takes a wide range of forms. This approach to art comes from the individual’s delight in the experience. Doodling comes to mind as one very basic example of such delight. Pollock’s Abstract Expressionist works, also known as action paintings, are much more than doodles, though they may resemble such on the surface. (Autumn Rhythm-Number 30, Jackson Pollock: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/488978?=&imgno=0&tabname=online-resources>; Number 10, Jackson Pollock: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/jackson-pollock/number-10-1949>) They were the result of many levels of artistic thought but on a basic level were a combination of delight in the act of painting and in the personal discovery that act enabled.

Some art is intended to provide personal commentary. Artworks that illustrate a personal viewpoint or experience can fulfill this purpose. *Persepolis*, a graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi (b. 1969, Iran) published in 2000, recounts her experiences and thoughts during the 1979 Iranian revolution, and

5 O’Keeffe 1976, unpaginated.

is an example of such personal commentary. (*Keys to Paradise: <https://imaginedlandscapes.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/pi-102.jpg>*) Satrapi is a leading proponent of the graphic novel, a new approach to art making. In an ironic critique of how different parts of Iranian society were affected by war, Satrapi compares the contorted figures of Iranian youth dying in a combat zone explosion with the dance movements at her high school celebration.

Artworks can be created thus as a means of exploring one's own experience, a way of bringing hidden emotions to the surface so that they may be recognized and understood more clearly. The term for this process is **catharsis**.

Cathartic works of art can arise from perceptions of grief, good, evil, or injustice, as in *The Raft of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault (1791-1824, France), which was an indictment of the French government of his day following the sinking of a ship. (Figure 1.24) When Whistler, on the other hand, became a proponent of “Art for art’s sake,” he was rejecting outside influences such as contemporary artistic and social standards in order to “purify” art of external corruption. (see Figure 1.18) The idea of removing influence from the creation of art is a modern one. Much of the art made before the nineteenth century was produced with the support and under the direction of religious, political, and cultural authorities in the larger community.



Figure 1.24 | *The Raft of the Medusa*

Artist: Jean Louis Théodore Géricault

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

1.6.2 Communal Needs and Purposes

Across history and geography, we see religious and political communities that remain stable despite constant pressure from both internal and external sources. One way in which communities maintain stability is in the production of works of art that identify common values and experiences within that community and thus bring people together.

Architecture, monuments, murals, and icons are visible guides to community participation in the arts and often use image-making conventions. A **convention** is an agreed upon way of thinking, speaking, or acting in a social context. There are many kinds of conventions, including visual conventions. A good example in visual art would be a conventional sense of direction. In Western cultures, text is generally read left to right. Therefore, when they look at artwork, Western viewers tend to “enter” a picture on the upper left and proceed to the right. Objects that appear on the left

side of an image are thought to be “first,” while ones that appear on the right are thought to be “later.” Since Asian texts follow a different convention, and tend to be read right to left, an Asian viewer would unconsciously assume the opposite.

Architecture, especially of public buildings, is an expression of a community’s values. Courthouses, libraries, town halls, schools, banks, factories, and jails are all designed for community purposes, and their shapes become strongly associated with their function: the architectural shapes be-

come conventions. The use of older styles of architecture can be as references to the values of previous cultures. In the United States, for example, many government buildings are designed with imposing stone facades using classical Greek and Roman columns that symbolize strength and stability. Federal government buildings such as the United States Capitol and the Supreme Court (Figure 1.25) were designed so that the community would associate ancient Greek and Roman ideals of virtue and integrity with the activities inside those more modern buildings.



Figure 1.25 | U.S. Supreme Court Building

Photographer: US Government Employee

Source: Architect of the Capital

License: Public Domain



Figure 1.26 | The Bauhaus Building in Dessau, Germany

Author: User “Mewes”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

Many twentieth-century architects, however, have followed the guiding principle of American architect Louis Sullivan (1856-1924, USA), that “form follows function.” In his design of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius (1883-1969, Germany) rejected superfluous decoration and focused instead on the efficient and functional use of space and material. (Figure 1.26) The leading school of art, craft, and architecture in Germany from 1919-1933, the teachings of the Bauhaus, or “construction house,” have strongly influenced domestic and industrial design internationally since that time.



Figure 1.27 | Colleoni on Horseback

Artist: Andrea del Verrocchio
 Author: User "Waysider1925"
 Source: Wikimedia Commons
 License: CC BY-SA 3.0



Figure 1.28 | Burghers of Calais

Artist: Auguste Rodin
 Author: User "Razimantv"
 Source: Wikimedia Commons
 License: CC BY 3.0

Communities can remind citizens of public virtues by commemorating the individuals who displayed those qualities in **monuments**. Since ancient times, they have commonly been statues of such individuals placed on pedestals, columns, or inside architecture. The *Equestrian Statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni* by Andrea del Verrocchio (1435-1488, Italy) is a good example of this type of monument. (Figure 1.27) Created for the city of Venice, Italy, during the Italian Renaissance, the sculpture of Colleoni on horseback shows him as the bold and victorious warrior he was. But *The Burghers of Calais* by Auguste Rodin (1840-1917, France) and *Vietnam War Memorial* by Maya Lin (b. 1959, USA) are monuments that violate that long-standing norm. Rodin placed the burghers, or leading citizens, on ground level to humanize the six men who offered themselves as sacrifices to save their city; he did so in order to bring their internal struggles down to the viewer's eye level. (Figure 1.28) Lin's memorial is below ground level, and displays the names of the approximately 58,000 Americans who died in the Vietnam War. (Figure 1.29) These choices reflect the belief that the Vietnam War was initially conducted "beneath the surface," that is, unknown to most Americans, and to remind visitors that its cost was paid by real individuals, not anonymous soldiers. These two works of art are unconventional and original in their conception and execution.

Since ancient times, **murals**, paintings on walls, have been created in both public and private places. Ancient Egyptians combined images with writing in wall paintings to commemorate past leaders. Some of these murals were intentionally erased when the leader fell out of favor. Roman murals were more often found inside homes and temples. The Roman mural located in a bedroom of the Villa of P. Fannius

Synistor was unearthed in Pompeii, Italy. (Figure 1.30) It depicts landscape and architectural views between a row of (painted) columns, as if viewed from inside the **villa**, or country house.

The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519, Italy, France) and the Sistine Chapel ceiling by Michelangelo (1475-1564, Italy) are murals from the Italian Renaissance. They were created for a wall in a refectory, or dining hall, of a monastery (Figure 1.31) and for the ceiling of the Pope's chapel. (Figure 1.32) Both depict crucial scenes in the teachings of the Catholic Church, the leading European religious and political organization of the time. Because many people at the time were illiterate, images played an important role in educating them about their religious history and doctrines.



Figure 1.29 | Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall

Artist: Maya Lin

Author: User "Mariordo"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: CC BY-SA 3.0



Figure 1.30 | Cubiculum (bedroom) from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscotrecase

Author: Rogers Fund

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

More modern examples of murals can be found around the world today. Diego Rivera (1886-1967, Mexico) was a world-renowned artist who executed large-scale murals in Mexico and the United States. His *Detroit Industry* murals consist of twenty-seven panels originally installed at the Detroit Institute of Arts. (Figure 1.33) The two largest panels depict workers manufacturing a V8 engine at the Ford Motor Company factory. Other smaller panels show advances in science, technology, and medicine involved in modern industrial culture, portraying Rivera's belief that conceptual thinking and physical labor are interdependent. These works are now considered a National Landmark. *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* designed by Judith Baca (b. 1946, USA) and executed

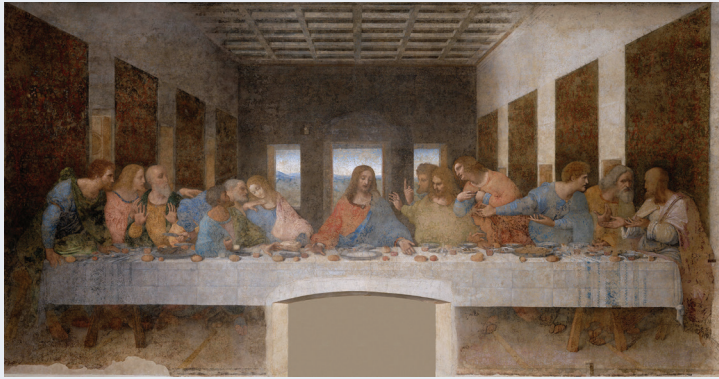


Figure 1.31 | *The Last Supper*

Artist: Leonardo da Vinci
 Author: User "Thebrid"
 Source: Wikimedia Commons
 License: Public Domain



Figure 1.32 | *The Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel*

Artist: Michelangelo
 Author: Patrick Landy
 Source: Wikipedia
 License: CC BY 3.0



Figure 1.33 | *Detroit Industry, North Wall*

Artist: Diego Rivera
 Author: User "Cactus.man"
 Source: Wikipedia
 License: Public Domain

by hundreds of community members is thirteen feet high and runs for more than one half mile through the city. (*The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, Judith Baca: http://sparcinla.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/great-wall_m.jpg) Its subject is the history of Southern California “as seen through the eyes of women and minorities.”⁶ The mural is part of a larger push in Los Angeles to adorn public spaces with murals that inform and educate the populace.

The term **icon** comes from the Greek word *eikon*, or “to be like,” and refers to an image or likeness that is used as a guide to religious worship. The holy figures depicted in icons are thought by believers to have special powers of healing or other positive influence. An icon can also be a person or thing that symbolically represents a quality or virtue. A good example is the image of St. Sebastian. St. Sebastian was a captain of the Roman guard who converted to Chris-

6 Joyce Gregory Wyels, “Great Walls, Vibrant Voices,” *Americas* 52, no. 1 (2000): 22.

tianity and was sentenced to death before a squad of archers. (Figure 1.34) He survived his wounds, and early Christians attributed this miracle to the power of their religion. (He was later stoned to death.) In the late Middle Ages during widespread plague in Europe, images of St. Sebastian were regularly commissioned for hospitals because of the legend of his miraculous healing and the hope that the images would be curative.

An example of a non-religious or **secular** icon might be the bronze bust of the famous football coach Knute Rockne at Notre Dame University in Indiana. (Figure 1.35) The nose of the bronze sculpture is bright gold because many consider it good luck to rub it, so it receives constant polishing by students before exams.



Figure 1.35 | Knute Rockne

Artist: Nison Tregor
 Author: Matthew D. Britt
 Source: Flickr
 License: CC BY-SA-NC 3.0



Figure 1.34 | The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian

Artist: Giacinto Diana
 Source: Artstor.org
 License: Public Domain

We have touched only briefly on the questions of what art is, who an artist is, and why people make art. History shows us people have defined art and artists differently in various times and places, but that people everywhere make art for many different reasons. And, these art objects share a common purpose: they are all intended to express a feeling or idea that is valued either by the individual artist or by the larger community.

1.7 KEY TERMS

Architecture: the design and construction of buildings or other complex structures.

Artworld theory of art: an approach to defining art as whatever the artworld says it is.

Catharsis: the process of releasing pent up emotion resulting in personal change.

Circumambulate: to “walk around”—a ritual practice of circling a sacred site, following a set path either inside or outside of a structure.

Communication theory of art: an approach to defining art as a transfer of feeling from artist to spectator.

Convention: group consensus about the way something is usually done.

Icon: a person or thing regarded as representative of something, often religious.

Institutional theory of art: another name for the Artworld theory of art.

Labyrinth: similar to a maze, but generally has only one intricate and twisting path to the center.

Mimesis: an approach to defining art as a copy of perceived reality.

Monument: a statue or other structure meant to commemorate a famous person or event.

Mural: a work of art executed directly on a wall.

Relic: an object thought to have belonged to or been part of a holy person’s body.

Secular: lacking in religious or spiritual content, not bound by religious rule.

Significant Form: an approach to defining art as what we notice.

Symbolism: the use of images to represent ideas or qualities.

Trompe l’oeil: art so realistic that it “fools the eye.”

Zeuxis and Parhassios: an ancient Greek myth about two competing painters who vie for the title of greatest artist by copying reality most faithfully