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WHAT IS ART?

Contemporary definitions of art tend to be convoluted and unhelpful. *The Encyclopedia Britannica's* description is a case in point:

"... a visual object or experience consciously created through an expression of skill or imagination. The term art encompasses diverse media such as painting, sculpture, printmaking, drawing, decorative arts, photography, and installation.

*The various visual arts exist within a continuum that ranges from purely aesthetic purposes at one end to purely utilitarian purposes at the other. Such a polarity of purpose is reflected in the commonly used terms artist and artisan, the latter understood as one who gives considerable attention to the utilitarian. This should by no means be taken as a rigid scheme, however. Even within one form of art, motives may vary widely; thus a potter or a weaver may create a highly functional work that is at the same time beautiful—a salad bowl, for example, or a blanket—or may create works that have no purpose beyond being admired. In cultures such as those of Africa and Oceania, a definition of art that encompasses this continuum has existed for centuries. In the West, however, by the mid-18th century the development of academies for painting and sculpture established a sense that these media were "art" and therefore separate from more utilitarian media. This separation of art forms continued among art institutions until the late 20th century, when such rigid distinctions began to be questioned."*¹¹

It is clear from this convoluted attempt at definition that the term "art" has no clear, graspable meaning. And, just watching what is commonly presented as visual art in modern times, the chaos includes: works that are both figurative, non-figurative, abstract, "realistic" and beyond. The seemingly endless categories include: Impressionism, Surrealism, Cubism, Dada, Fauvism, Abstract Expressionism, Conceptualism, Pop, Tribal, and so on. Not to mention Installation and Performance Art.

I. A Brief Overview of Art History

Artists in Pre-Modern cultures reflected the certainties of their societies. In those times, God(s), heaven, saints and social hierarchies were dominant; not questioned. However, even early-on, I believe that all serious artists approached a work of visual art with some approach to an inner message, or at least intent. And, most or many were interested in being different from their competitors.

It's no longer like the old days, when art consisted almost exclusively of representational landscapes, portraits, classical scenes, and re-creations of religious stories. In those pre-abstract times, art was communicating ideas or emotions that required less deciphering. Over time, artists' visions, meanings, and intent shifted from being largely external to internal. The implications of these two very different modalities of art works are worth examining.

Things began to change in the 11th century with the spread of Trade;

the Printing Press in the 15th century; the Reformation in the 16th century; the Enlightenment in the 17th-18th centuries; and Urbanization in the 19th century. This concatenation of events would change societies, and people, in the way that they viewed themselves and what was considered art. As the centuries wore on, societies became more materialistic, no longer ruled by the structures and certainties of the past. One societal consequence was the gradual shift away from close-knit families and communities, replaced by nuclear families and communities. Individualism and free thought became the norm, and with it, artists became increasingly willing to challenge tradition, and to rely on their subjective feelings and visions.^{2/}

The shift away from the tradition-dominated approaches to visual art led to a sequence of new approaches which accelerated as the 19th century came to an end. Around the turn of the 20th century, as artists peered deeper and deeper inside themselves for inspiration, they also came up with new media and craft techniques. I wonder whether there is such a thing as "Art."

II. Examples of Artist's Intent, Messages Across the Ages.

These brief examples of how artists approached their work show how their overall intent and messages evolved over time.

A. Early Renaissance-15th century

Fra Angelico. Painted religious subjects in a rational, illusionistic space and with all of the solidity of the human body. His religious devotion fused piety and artistic innovation to create deeply moving frescoes and altarpieces.

B. Pre Modern-17th -18th centuries

Rembrandt van Rijn. Depicted natural, realistic figures, portraying their deep human feelings, imperfections, and morality.

Francisco Goya. Relied on subjectivity, imagination and emotion. His war paintings, and many of his portraits, revealed his horrors of war, and corrupt-looking nobility

C. Modern-19th century

Claude Monet. A leading Impressionist, he emphasized the qualities of light and atmosphere in each scene.

JMW Turner. Turning away from details, he focused on painterly effects in presenting swirling clouds and dramatic arrays of color.

D. Contemporary--20th century

Marcel Duchamp. In 1917, he displayed a urinal (dubbed "R. Mutt") as "art." In doing so, he redefined what constitutes a work of art. He despised the art world for its tradition-worshipping, and money-grubbing ways.^{3/} Surely his "ready-mades" were anti-art.

Picasso. Dominated European painting for half a century. He may be the century's most important, inventive artist; a pioneer of Cubism. Also made significant contributions to Surrealism, plus collage, welded sculpture, and ceramics.

E. Post Modern-21st century

Ansel Adams. One of America's most famous landscape photographers. His work is recognized for its dramatic and important subject matter in portraying nature. His technical innovations are also distinct.

Jackson Pollock. The star Abstract Expressionist and the major artist of Action Painting. His work ranges from Jungian scenes of primitive rites to the purely abstract "drip paintings."

Damien Hirst. A conceptual artist, best known for a dead tiger shark suspended in a vitrine of formaldehyde.

Marina Abramović. Leader of Performance Art. Involving viewers as active agents in her performances

III. Commercialization, Media, Museums, and Critics

The combined power of media and money looking for a place to land have profoundly changed the relationship of artists and art to society in general, and to viewers in particular. The attention-grabbing news about millions spent on art generates publicity, which in turn buys fame (and fortune) for key players in the art establishment, including auction houses, galleries, collectors, and self-promotional artists. And, aspiring artists respond in an effort to be noticed.

A. Commercialization. The task of viewing and judging what is or isn't "real" art is made even more difficult by the commercialization of art. Revealing the gross commercialization is that in May 2026 alone, Sotheby's, Christies, and Phillips raised an aggregate \$2.5 billion in sales. At Christies, a Jackson Pollock drip painting sold for \$181 million, and \$98.4 million for a Rothko.

B. Media. In our entertainment-mad society, viewers respond to the publicity about the record amounts paid for the latest shock and awe art work. The media hype (fueled in part by paid advertising) converts art sales and deliberately provocative works into newsworthy developments, and from there into fads. Although this seems obvious, the situation is more complicated than this since, as noted earlier, artists are among the most important iconoclasts in society.

While they are influenced by the past, they may also cast a harsh or fresh light on the present. It would appear that, to an important extent, many of today's artists have abandoned that role.

C. Museums. Then there is the emergence of art museums and galleries, which are struggling to compete as entertainment venues in our all-entertainment-all-the-time society by staging one blockbuster show after another. Some museums also offer a full range of entertainment (movies, lectures, cafes, lessons, concerts, gift-shops, performance happenings) to reel in the customers. But, I feel I am being unfair to art museums and those who run them. Even though they shamelessly court customers, and end up showing works of questionable artistic merit, making art museums increasingly popular destinations has an important upside. In contrast to, say, a TV sitcom or the latest horror movie, they do provide opportunities

for people to learn and to broaden their horizons. And—I am being generous here—it's possible that the very confusion one encounters in trying to relate to Modern Art works *could* engender curiosity, a desire to ask questions, to learn more. As noted, to the degree that museums—and the art in them—can play an educational role, I am all for it.

D. Critics. Much of the art criticism I read these days seem to ignore what the artist is trying to communicate—as ideas or feelings--in favor of describing what a work *looks* like; or, say, the techniques used to produce it. Some critics I read tend to produce carefully crafted “criticism” that wraps their comments in cotton wool so as to avoid saying anything very negative, or even positive. Are they unsure what to make of what they are seeing, or are they seeking to avoid annoying those hard working museum directors and curators?

However, maybe I should cut critics some slack. As Phillip Kennicott pointed out in a *Washington Post* review, the works of one of the artists he looked at “. . . transcends intellectualization or interpretations, and this kind of work often flummoxes critics.” ^{4/}

For me, the interesting thing about this observation is that it refers only to an artist who communicates feelings rather than ideas. Don't the artists of ideas flummox critics too, if the artist has no meaningful message? Or, is s/he unable or unwilling to communicate it? And similarly, how would the critics react should s/he not be able to evoke either idea or feeling from a work?

V. Conclusion

Given the chaos, how does the viewer seek to understand/appreciate the messages/meanings? Here are two ways.

A. Seek intent or meaning. I seek to grasp what an artist was trying to communicate, whether an idea or a feeling, or something in between. This approach has helped me to get some idea what I am supposed to be “seeing.” As examples, in the “art as idea” category, I would suggest one of Mel Bochner's “alphabet” paintings, which seek to show the symbolic role of words in our culture. But, even if a work does communicate a serious message which I can “understand,” I don't have to like it, or even consider it to be a great work of art. I am thinking of works such as Duchamp's “Fountain,” Warhol's “Brillo Box,” and Hirst's pickled animals.

B. Seek emotional satisfaction. Being of a skeptical even cynical nature, I tend to be suspicious, even dismissive, of works I don't understand, especially those which seem to be to be over-the-top. To my surprise and pleasure, however, I have run across a number of works which I was able to access through emotional resonance. One of the first such experiences was with a Rothko painting. As I stood before it I was aware of the pulsating inner color, an unearthly orange I think. After a few minutes, as I peered into that glowing center, I imagined that I was entering the painting, and moving past it into a different world. I could recognize nothing but the feeling of transposition into an unknown space. Then the vision stopped, but I felt that something had happened that I had enjoyed and felt good

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about. Other modern artists (some of) whose works I have been able to relate to include Anselm Kiefer, and (to my surprise) even a good deal of early De Kooning. I have no idea which of my two modalities I have used to access selected artists like Kiefer and De Kooning, and with some Land Art works (especially "Lightning Field" and "Spiral Jetty").

I can't explain why these particular works resonate with me, and I suppose it doesn't matter. That I was able to crossover, or combine, these two very different approaches has afforded some pleasure, and has opened up a greater scope for enjoying art.

And this takes us back to my maxim that art is (almost) purely in the eye of the beholder. Because of these developments, art viewing has gotten easier for those who can simply walk up to a work, give it a stare, and decide whether it

resonates in a way they find pleasurable, interesting, or entertaining. Moreover, it would appear that, due to epic changes in western society—and in the art that is produced therein—the personal "what I like" approach to viewing art is in the ascendancy.

In the end, only the viewers and time will decide about the quality of an art work. I also finally realized that, in some magical way, it's the viewer who transforms the art into something personal and unique, whether the artist's intention was to communicate a message, or a feeling, or some combination of the two. And, in transforming the art, the viewer transforms him/her self. I realized, too, that the whole point of art is not "how" it communicates, but whether it speaks to us intellectually or emotionally, or via some combination.

1/ *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/art/visual-arts>

2/ John Berger. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin/BBC

3/ Blake Gopnik. "A Urinal That Shifted What We Consider Art." *The New York Times*. April 12, 2026.

4/ Phillip Kennicott. "Dark Wood, Bright Lights: Two Artist's Varied Visions." *Washington Post*. 4 November 2014