

The Ancient World (c. 30,000–c. 480 B.C.E.)

Europe—The Stone Age (c. 30,000–10,000 B.C.E.); Archaic Greece (c. 600 B.C.E.)

Asia—India: Indus Valley (2600 B.C.E.); China: Han Dynasty (c. 1400 B.C.E.)

The Middle East—Sumerian (c. 3500 B.C.E.); Egyptian (c. 3000 B.C.E.); Babylonian (c. 1800 B.C.E.); Assyrian (c. 1000 B.C.E.); Hebrew (c. 1000 B.C.E.)

America—Mexico: Olmec (1200 B.C.E.)

The Pre-Modern World (c. 480 B.C.E.–c. 1400 C.E.)

Europe—Greek Classicism (c. 480 B.C.E.); Hellenism (c. 300 B.C.E.); Roman Classicism (27 B.C.E.); Early Christian (100 C.E.); Romanesque (1000 C.E.); Gothic (1100 C.E.)

Asia—China: Qin Dynasty (220 B.C.E.), Han Dynasty (200 B.C.E.), Tang Dynasty (580 C.E.), Song Dynasty (960 C.E.); India: Buddhism (c. 300 B.C.E.), Hindu (c. 500 C.E.); Japan: Early Heian (794 C.E.), Kamakura (1185 C.E.)

America—Mexico: Teotihuacan (200 C.E.)

The Middle East—Byzantine (c. 400 C.E.); Islamic (622 C.E.)

Africa—Nok (c. 400 B.C.E.); Ife (1100 C.E.); Djenné (1300 C.E.)

The Emerging Modern World (c. 1400–1800)

Europe—Renaissance (1400); High Renaissance (1475); Mannerism (1520); Reformation (1500); Baroque (1600); Rococo (1700); Neo-Classical (1750); Classical (Music—1750)

Africa—Benin (1400); Mali (1400)

Asia—China: Ming Dynasty (1368); India: Rajput (c. 1600), Punjab Hills (c. 1650); Japan: Imari (c. 1650)

America—Aztec (1400); Incan (1400)

The Age of Industry (1800–1900)

Europe—Romanticism; Impressionism; Post-Impressionism; Aestheticism; Art Nouveau

Africa—Koté; Cameroon

Asia—Japanese Printmaking

America—Kakiutl; Inuit; Tlingit

The Modern and Post-Modern World (1900–Present)

Modern (1900–c. 1960)—Cubism; Expressionism; Fauvism; Futurism; Art Deco; Mechanism; Dada; Abstraction; Surrealism; Minimalism; Absurdism; Realism; Abstract expressionism; Pop art; Op art; Hard edge; Environmental and Ephemeral

Post-Modern (c. 1960–) Neoabstraction; Installations; Digital art—Interactivity; Pluralism

Introduction

WHAT ARE THE ARTS AND HOW DO WE RESPOND TO AND EVALUATE THEM?

If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams.

YANN MARTEL, *Life of Pi*

Thinking Critically

1. Define the term “humanities” and compare it to the “sciences.”
2. Describe the fundamental concerns of art.
3. Outline the basic purposes and functions of art.
4. Compare and contrast formal and contextual criticism.
5. Characterize how to identify and compare artistic styles.

A colleague came into my office and placed on my desk a very expensive book about architecture. “From an appreciative student,” he said.

“Before or after grades?” I replied, jokingly, of course.

He gave me a withering look of displeasure, and after a dramatic pause for effect, he told me “Sam’s” story.

Sam, a construction worker, took my colleague’s course “Introduction to the Arts” as a night student. After the semester ended (and after grades were posted!) Sam brought the book to my colleague. At the time, the book probably cost perhaps as much as a fourth of Sam’s weekly paycheck.

“Why?” my colleague asked Sam.

“Because you changed my life,” Sam replied. “Before this course, I poured concrete day in and day out. It was concrete—you know, cement, sand, and gravel—just concrete. After taking this course, I can’t see just bland concrete anymore. Whenever I walk onto a job site, I see patterns, colors, lines, and forms. Whenever I look at a building, I see history. I go to places I’d never dreamed of going before, and I can’t believe how dull my life really was without all the things I now see and hear. I just never knew there was so much out there.”

My colleague said to me, “You know, this construction worker, a real tough guy—a man’s man—had tears in his eyes; he was so taken by what he’d found out about life through art.”

2 Chapter 1: Introduction

Sam's discoveries have happened to other people—countless people—in the past and will happen again and again in the future to people *who choose to let it happen to them*.

Artworks make some people uncomfortable, probably because dealing with an artwork represents stepping into unfamiliar territory. Unfortunately, some artists and a few sophisticates try to keep the arts confusing and hidden to all but a select few. Nonetheless, this book seeks to empower its readers—to access works of art comfortably and with the understanding that art and life intertwine irrevocably. Knowledgeable interaction with works of art makes life better: We see more of what can be seen, and we hear more of what can be heard. Our entire existence grows richer and deeper.

Recognizing the artistic principles and influences all around us makes our world more interesting and habitable. The arts are elements of life with which we can and must deal and to which we must respond every day. We live with the arts because their principles permeate our existence. Specifically, the aesthetic experience provides a way of knowing and communicating in and of itself, separate from other ways of knowing and communicating.

The arts play important roles in making the world around us a more interesting and habitable place. Artistic ideas join with *conventions* to make everyday objects attractive and pleasurable to use. The term *convention* appears repeatedly in this text. A convention is a set of rules or mutually accepted conditions such as the keyboard and tuning of a piano. In addition, Figure 1.1, a scale drawing of an eighteenth-century highboy, illustrates how art and convention combine in everyday items. The maker of the high chest conceived it to fulfill a practical purpose—to provide for storage of household objects in an easily accessible, yet hidden, place. However, while designing an object to accommodate that practical need, the cabinetmakers felt the additional need to provide an interesting and attractive object. If we perceive with discrimination and imagination,

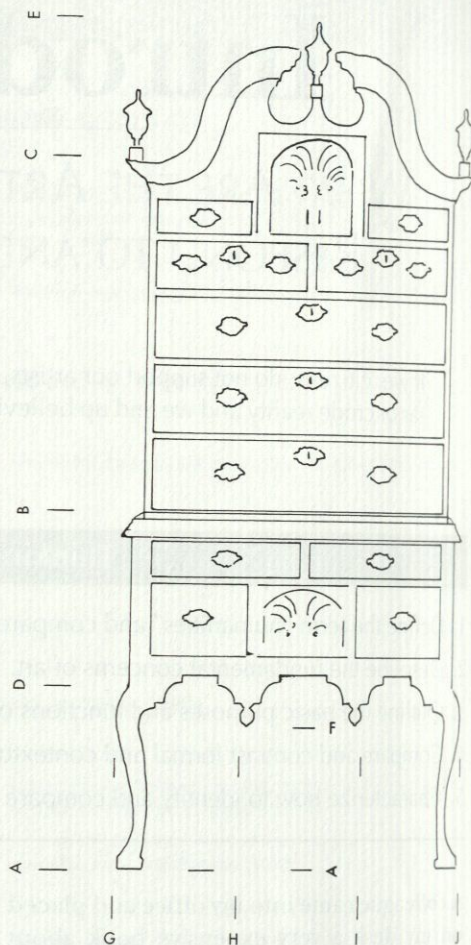


Figure 1.1 Scale drawing of an eighteenth-century highboy.

we enter an enlightening and challenging experience with this piece of furniture.

First of all, a convention that dictates a consistent height for tables and desks controls the design. So the lower portion of the chest, from point A to point B, designs space within a height that harmonizes with other furniture in the room. If we look carefully, we can also see that the parts of the chest contain a sophisticated and interesting series of proportional and progressive relationships. The distance from A to B is twice the distance from A to D and is equal to the distance from B to C. The distances from A to F and C to E bear no recognizable relationship to the previous

dimensions but are, however, equal to each other and to the distances from G to H, H to I, and I to J. In addition, the size of the drawers in the upper chest decreases at an even and proportional rate from bottom to top.

Another example of how art infiltrates life appears in the Volkswagen shown in Figure 1.2. Here repetition of form reflects a concern for unity, one of the fundamental characteristics of art. The design of the Volkswagen used strong repetition of the oval. The latest reincarnation of the VW Beetle also has repetition of circular form. We need only to look at the rear of the Bug to see variation on this theme as applied in the window, motor-compartment hood, taillights, fenders, and bumper. Later models of the Volkswagen differed from this version and reflect the intrusion of conventions, again, into the world of design. As safety standards called for larger bumpers, the oval design of the motor-compartment hood flattened so a larger bumper could clear it. The rear window was enlarged and squared to accommodate the need for increased rear vision. The intrusion of these conventions changed

the design of the Beetle by breaking down the strong unity of the original composition.

Edwin J. Delattre gives us another view of the relationship of the arts and life when he compares the purpose for studying technical subjects to the purpose for studying the humanities or the arts. "When a person studies the mechanics of internal combustion engines, the intended result is that he should be better able to understand, design, build, or repair such engines, and sometimes he should be better able to find employment because of his skills, and thus better his life. . . . When a person studies the humanities [the arts], the intended result is that he should be better able to understand, design, build, or repair a life—for living is a vocation we have in common despite our differences.

"The humanities provide us with opportunities to become more capable in thought, judgment, communication, appreciation, and action." Delattre goes on to say that these provisions enable us to think more rigorously and to imagine more abundantly. "These activities free us to possibilities that are new, at least to us, and they unbind us from portions



Figure 1.2 Volkswagen Beetle (1953).

Source: Paul Debois/Alamy Images.

of our ignorance about living well. . . . Without exposure to the cultural . . . traditions that are our heritage, we are excluded from a common world that crosses generations.”* The poet Archibald MacLeish is more succinct: “Without the Arts, how can the university teach the Truth?”

The information in this text helps us understand the elements that comprise works of art, which we can respond to and which make our experiences and our lives more rewarding.

USING THIS TEXT

Before engaging in discussions about art, however, let’s note two issues about this text: (1) finding art examples on the Internet and (2) using the pronunciation prompts.

WORLD WIDE WEB

Throughout the body of this text you will find URLs to connect with the World Wide Web. These serve as springboards for further investigation. On one hand, they lead to actual artworks, and these can further illustrate the principles discussed and illustrated in the text. On the other hand, many of the Web sites yield more detailed information about artists, styles, periods, general history, and so on.

In addition to the specific Web addresses listed in the text, some general sites can provide a wealth of additional information. A vast reference for visual art and architecture resides at Artcyclopedia at <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/index.html>. An excellent source for architecture is Great Buildings Online at <http://www.greatbuildings.com/>. Music tends to be problematic because difficulties in securing production rights to performances have not, as yet, been solved by Web providers of classical music.

*Edwin J. Delattre, “The Humanities Can Irrigate Deserts,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 11, 1977, p. 32.

Classical Music Archives at <http://www.classicalarchives.com/> contains a vast instrumental, digitally synthesized music library. A good source for literature and drama texts resides at Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org>. Again, the problem of rights leaves the site vacant with regard to contemporary works. Finally, Pearson Education, the publishers of this book, has a wealth of materials and cyber links available through their Web site (<http://www.pearson.com>), and users of this text should explore the avenues this resource provides.

PRONUNCIATION

The study of art brings us face to face with many challenging terms (many of them in a foreign language) and names. To assist acquaintanceship, a pronunciation guide follows each term or name not pronounced exactly as it appears. This guide has two features. First, it uses familiar English consonant and vowel representations rather than International Phonetics. The system used in this book sometimes looks awkward. For example, the long I sound (which comprises a diphthong of ah and ee), such as in *die*, *eye*, and *by*, is indicated by the letter Y when the syllable stands alone or precedes a consonant. The letter Y prior to a vowel maintains its yuh sound, as in *young* (yuhng). The letter G, when sounded “hard” as in *go* or *guard*, is presented as GH. Again, it appears odd in some cases, such as ghoh-GHAN (Gauguin). Nonetheless, when one remembers that GH equals a hard G sound, the appearance yields to successful pronunciation.

Principal stress in a word or name is indicated by capitalization. For example, the pronunciation of *fable* would be indicated as FAY-buhl. Typically, words comprising three or more syllables also have at least one syllable of secondary stress. These are not indicated in this text. More often than not, if the primary stress is identified, the secondary stresses fall almost automatically into place.

Here is a guide to the system used in this book:

A	cat	Ih	bit
Ah	cot	Ihng	sing
Aw	awe	Oh	foe
Air	air, pair	Oo	food
Awr	core	Ow	wow
Ay	bay	Oy	boy
Eh	bet	Uh	bug
Ee	see	U	wood
Gh	go	Zh	pleasure
Ye	ye	Z	zip

We should note that pronunciations, like definitions, can be complicated and arguable issues. I have used standard encyclopedia and dictionary pronunciations as my guides, but this does not guarantee universal agreement. Some names may be commonly Anglicized, whereas I provide a pronunciation agreeable to the native tongue—and vice versa.

OVERVIEW

For centuries, scholars, philosophers, and aestheticians have debated without general resolution a definition of “art.” The challenging range of arguments encompasses, among other considerations, opposing points of view that insist on one hand that “art” must meet a criterion of functionality—that is, be of some societal use—and, on the other hand, that “art” exists for its own sake. In this text, we survey rather than dispute. Thus, in these pages, we will not solve the dilemma of art’s definition. For example, we might define “art” as *one person’s interpretation of reality manifested in a particular medium and shared with others*. Such a definition, while agreeable to some, finds objection from others for various reasons, among which is the fact that it is completely open-ended and does not speak to quality. It allows anything to qualify as “art” from the simplest expression of *art brut*, naïve art, or “outsider art” such as drawings by children or psychotics to the most profound masterpiece. Such are

the tantalizing possibilities for disagreement when we actually try to define art. We can, however, examine some characteristics of the arts that enhance our understanding.

Art has, and has had, a profound effect on the quality of human life, as the pages of this text will assist us to understand. Its study requires seriousness of purpose. Having said that, however, we must not confuse seriousness of purpose in the study of art with a sweeping sanctification of works of art. Some art is serious, some art is profound, and some art is highly sacred. On the other hand, some art is light, some humorous, and some downright silly, superficial, and self-serving for its artists. Which is which may be debatable, but eventually we will desire to make judgments, and once again this text will help sort out the details.

THE ARTS AND WAYS OF KNOWING

Humans are a creative species. Whether in science, politics, business, technology, or the arts, we depend on our creativity almost as much as anything else to meet the demands of daily life. Any book about the arts comprises a story about us: our perceptions of the world as we have come to see and respond to it and the ways we have communicated our understandings to each other since the Ice Age, more than 15,000 years ago (Fig. 1.3, cave chamber at Lascaux).

Our study in this text focuses on vocabulary and perception. First, however, we need to have an overview of where the arts fall within the general scope of human endeavor.

We live in buildings and listen to music constantly. We hang pictures on our walls and react like personal friends to characters in television, film, and live dramas. We escape to parks, engross ourselves in novels, wonder about a statue in front of a public building, and dance through the night. All these situations involve forms called “art” in which we engage



View the **Closer Look** of Lascaux on myartslab.com



Figure 1.3 General view of cave chamber at Lascaux, France, from the early Stone Age (c. 15,000 B.C.E.).

Source: Sisse Brimberg/National Geographic Stock.

daily. Curiously, as close to us as these “art” activities are, in many ways they remain mysteries. How do they, in fact, fit into the larger picture of the human reality that we experience?

We have learned a great deal about our world and how it functions since the human species began, and we have changed our patterns of existence. However, the fundamental characteristics that make us human—that is, our ability to intuit and to symbolize—have not changed. Art, the major remaining evidence we have of our earliest times, reflects these unchanged human characteristics in inescapable terms and helps us to understand the beliefs of cultures, including our own, and to express the universal qualities of humans.

As we begin this text, learning more about our humanness through art, let us start where we are. That means two things. First, it means relying on the perceptive capabilities we already have. Applying our current abilities to perceive develops confidence in approaching works of art. Second, starting

where we are means learning how art fits into the general scheme of the way people examine, communicate, and respond to the world around them. A course in the arts, designed to fulfill a requirement for a specified curriculum, means that the arts fit into an academic context that separates the way people acquire knowledge. Consequently, our first step in this exploration of the arts places them in some kind of relationship with other categories of knowledge. Visual art, architecture, music, theatre, dance, literature, and cinema belong in a broad category of pursuit called the “humanities.” The terms *arts* and *humanities* fit together as a piece to a whole. The humanities constitutes a larger whole into which the arts fit as one piece. So, when we use the term *humanities*, we automatically include the arts. When we use the term *arts*, we restrict our focus. The arts disciplines—visual art (drawing, painting, printmaking, photography), performing art (music, theatre, dance, cinema), and architecture

(including landscape architecture)—typically arrange sound, color, form, movement, and/or other elements in a manner that affects our sense of beauty in a graphic or plastic (capable of being shaped) medium. The humanities include the arts but also include disciplines such as philosophy, literature, and, sometimes, history, which comprise branches of knowledge that share a concern with humans and their cultures. We begin our discussion with a look at the humanities.

The humanities—as opposed to the sciences, for example—can very broadly be defined as those aspects of culture that look into what it means to be human. The sciences seek essentially to describe reality whereas the humanities seek to express humankind's subjective experiences of reality, to interpret reality, to transform our interior experience into tangible forms, and to comment upon reality, to judge and evaluate. But despite our desire to categorize, few clear boundaries exist between the humanities and the sciences. The basic difference lies in the approach that separates investigation of the natural universe, technology, and social science from the search for truth about the universe undertaken by artists.

Within the educational system, the humanities traditionally have included the fine arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, theatre, dance, and cinema), literature, philosophy, and, sometimes, history. These subjects orient toward exploring humanness, what human beings think and feel, what motivates their actions and shapes their thoughts. Many answers lie in the millions of artworks all around the globe, from the earliest sculpted fertility figures to the video and cyber art of today. These artifacts and images comprise expressions of the humanities, not merely illustrations of past or present ways of life.

In addition, change in the arts differs from change in the sciences, for example, in one significant way: New scientific discovery and technology usually displaces the old; but new art does not invalidate earlier human expression. Obviously, not all artistic

approaches survive, but the art of Picasso cannot make the art of Rembrandt a curiosity of history the way that the theories of Einstein did the views of William Paley. Nonetheless, much about art has changed over the centuries. Using a spectrum developed by Susan Lacy in *Mapping the Terrian: New Genre Public Art* (1994), we learn that at one time an artist may be an *experimenter*; at another, a *reporter*; at another, an *analyst*; and at still another time, an *activist*. Further, the nature of how art historians see art has changed over the centuries—for example, today we do not credit an artist's biography with all of the motivations for his or her work, and we now include works of art from previously marginalized groups such as women and minorities. These shifts in the disciplines of arts' history itself suggest important considerations as we begin to understand the nature of art.

In addition, we can approach works of art with the same subtleties we normally apply to human relationships. We know that we cannot simply categorize people as "good" or "bad," as "friends," "acquaintances," or "enemies." We relate to other people in complex ways. Some friendships remain pleasant but superficial, some people are easy to work with, and others (but few) become lifelong companions. Similarly, when we have gone beyond textbook categories and learned how to approach art with this sort of sensitivity, we find that art, like friendship, has a major place in the growth and quality of life.

THE CONCERNS OF ART

Among other concerns, art has typically concerned creativity, aesthetic communication, symbols, and the fine and applied arts. Let's look briefly at each of these.

CREATIVITY

Art has always evidenced a concern for creativity—that is, the act of bringing forth new forces and forms. We do not know for sure

how creativity functions. Nonetheless, something happens in which humankind takes chaos, formlessness, vagueness, and the unknown and crystallizes them into form, design, inventions, and ideas. Creativity underlies our existence. It allows scientists to intuit a possible path to a cure for cancer, for example, or to invent a computer. The same process allows artists to find new ways to express ideas through processes in which creative action, thought, material, and technique combine in a medium to create something new, and that “new thing,” often without words, triggers human experience—that is, our response to the artwork.

AESTHETIC COMMUNICATION

Art usually involves communication. Arguably, artists need other people with whom they can share their perceptions. When artworks and humans interact, many possibilities exist. Interaction may be casual and fleeting, as in the first meeting of two people, when neither wishes a relationship. Similarly, an artist may not have much to say, or may not say it very well. For example, a poorly written or produced play will probably not excite an audience. Similarly, if an audience member’s preoccupations render it impossible to perceive what the play offers, then at least that part of the artistic experience fizzles. On the other hand, all conditions may be optimum, and a profoundly exciting and meaningful experience may occur: The play may treat a significant subject in a unique manner, the production artists’ skills in manipulating the medium may be excellent, and the audience may be receptive. Or the interaction may fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Throughout history, artistic communication has involved *aesthetics* (ehs-THEH-tihks). Aesthetics is the study of the nature of beauty and of art and comprises one of the five classical fields of philosophical inquiry—along with epistemology (the nature and origin of knowledge), ethics (the

general nature of morals and of the specific moral choices to be made by the individual in relationship with others), logic (the principles of reasoning), and metaphysics (the nature of first principles and problems of ultimate reality). The term *aesthetics* (from the Greek for “sense perception”) was coined by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) in the mid-eighteenth century, but interest in what constitutes the beautiful and in the relationship between art and nature goes back at least to the ancient Greeks. Plato saw art as *imitation* and beauty as the expression of a universal quality. For the Greeks, the concept of “art” embraced all handcrafts, and the rules of symmetry, proportion, and unity applied equally to weaving, pottery, poetry, and sculpture. In the late eighteenth century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant (kahnt; 1724–1804) revolutionized aesthetics in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) by viewing aesthetic appreciation not simply as the perception of intrinsic beauty, but as involving a judgment—subjective, but informed. Since Kant, the primary focus of aesthetics has shifted from the consideration of beauty per se to the nature of the artist, the role of art, and the relationship between the viewer and the work of art.

SYMBOLS

Art also concerns symbols. Symbols usually involve tangible emblems of something abstract: a mundane object evoking a higher realm. Symbols differ from signs, which suggest a fact or condition. Signs are what they indicate. Symbols carry deeper, wider, and richer meanings. Look at Figure 1.4 (Greek cross?). Some people might identify this figure as a plus sign in arithmetic. But the figure might also be a Greek cross, in which case it becomes a symbol because it suggests many images, meanings, and implications. Artworks use a variety of symbols, and symbols make artworks into doorways leading to enriched meaning.

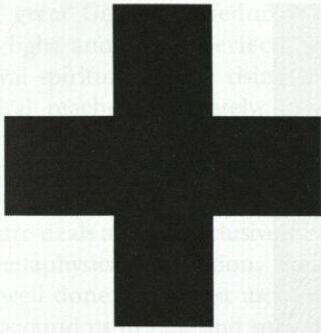


Figure 1.4 Greek cross?

Symbols occur in literature, art, and ritual. Symbols can involve conventional relationships such as a rose standing for courtly love in a medieval romance. A symbol can suggest physical or other similarities between the symbol and its reference (the red rose as a symbol for blood) or personal associations—for example, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats's use of the rose to symbolize death, ideal perfection, Ireland, and so on. Symbols also occur in linguistics as arbitrary symbols and in psychoanalysis where symbols, particularly images in dreams, suggest repressed, subconscious desires and fears. In Judaism, the contents of the feast table and the ceremony performed at the Jewish Passover seder (a feast celebrating the exodus from slavery in Egypt) symbolize events surrounding the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt. In Christian art, the lamb, for example, symbolizes the sacrifice of Christ.

FINE AND APPLIED ART

One last consideration in understanding art's concerns involves the difference between *fine art* and *applied art*. The "fine arts"—generally meaning painting, sculpture, architecture, music, theatre, dance, and in the twentieth century, cinema—are prized for their purely aesthetic qualities. During the Renaissance (roughly the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries), these arts rose to superior status because Renaissance values lauded individual

expression and unique aesthetic interpretations of ideas. The term *applied art* sometimes includes architecture and the "decorative arts" and refers to art forms that have a primarily decorative rather than expressive or emotional purpose. The decorative arts include handcrafts by skilled artisans, such as ornamental work in metal, stone, wood, and glass, as well as textiles, pottery, and bookbinding. The term may also encompass aspects of interior design. In addition, personal objects such as jewelry, weaponry, tools, and costumes represent the decorative arts. The term may expand, as well, to mechanical appliances and other products of industrial design. Nonetheless, even the most common of objects can have artistic flair and provide pleasure and interest. The lowly juice extractor (see Fig. 1.5), an example of industrial design, brings a sense of pleasantry to a rather mundane chore. Its two-part body sits on colored rubber feet and reminds us, perhaps, of a robot. Its cream and brown colors are soft and warm, comfortable rather than cold and utilitarian. Its plumpness holds a friendly humor, and we could imagine talking to this little device as an amicable companion rather than regarding it as a mere machine. The term *decorative art* first appeared in 1791. Many decorative arts, such as weaving, basketry, or pottery, are also commonly considered "crafts," but the definitions of the terms remain somewhat arbitrary and without sharp distinction.

THE PURPOSES AND FUNCTIONS OF ART

PURPOSES

Another way we can expand our understanding of art involves examining some of its purposes and functions. In terms of the former—that is, art's purposes—we ask, *What does art do?* In terms of the latter—that is, art's functions—we ask, *How does it do it?* Among a plethora of purposes, art can: (1) provide a record; (2) give visible or other form



Figure 1.5 Designer Unknown, "Juice Extractor, Multipress" 1950–1958. Plastic, aluminum, rubber, zinc. 18.6 × 27.6 × 19.2 cm. Braun AG.

Source: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Liliane and David M. Stewart Collection, gift of the American Friends of Canada through the generosity of Barry Friedman and Patricia Pastor. Photo: Giles Rivest (Montreal).

to feelings; (3) reveal metaphysical or spiritual truths; and (4) help people see the world in new or innovative ways. Art can do any or all of these. They are not mutually exclusive.

Until the invention of the camera, one of art's principal purposes involved enacting a record of the world. Although we cannot know for sure, very likely cave art of earliest times did this. And so it went through history. Artists undertook to record their times on vases, walls, canvases, and so on—as in the case of the eighteenth-century Italian painter Canaletto (can-ah-LAY-toh),

in highly naturalistic *vedute* (vair-DOO-tay; Italian for "views") that he sold to travelers doing the grand tour of Europe. Examples of Canaletto's work appear at <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/canaletto.html>.

Art can also give visible form to feelings. Perhaps the most explicit example of this aspect of art comes in the Expressionist style of the early twentieth century (see Glossary). Here the artist's feelings and emotions toward content formed a primary role in the work. In terms of art that reveals metaphysical or spiritual truths, we can turn

to the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe, whose light and space perfectly embodied medieval spirituality. The rising line of the cathedral reaches, ultimately, to the point of the spire, which symbolizes the release of earthly space into the unknown space of heaven. On the other hand, a tribal ancestor figure deals almost exclusively in spiritual and metaphysical revelation. Finally, most art, if well done, can assist us in seeing the world around us in new and surprising ways. Art that has no representational content may reveal a new way of understanding the interaction of life forces.

FUNCTIONS

In addition to its purposes—what it does—art also has many functions—how it does what it does—including (1) enjoyment, (2) political and social commentary, (3) therapy, and (4) artifact. Again, one function is no more important than the others. Nor are they mutually exclusive; one artwork may fill many functions. Nor are the four functions just mentioned the only ones. Rather, they serve as indicators of how art has functioned in the past and can function in the present. Like the types and styles of art that have occurred through history, these four functions and others provide options for artists and depend on what artists wish to do with their artworks.

Works of art can provide escape from everyday cares, treat us to a pleasant experience, and engage us in social occasions. The same artworks we enjoy may also create insights into human experience. We can also glimpse the conditions of other cultures, and we can find healing therapy in enjoyment. An artwork in which one individual finds only enjoyment may function as a profound social and personal comment to another. In the case of a Chinese landscape like *Walking by a Mountain Stream* (Fig. 1.6), it may raise a plain feature of nature to a profound level of beauty.

Art may have a political or social function, such as influencing the behavior of large groups of people. It has functioned

thus in the past and continues to do so. Eugène Delacroix's (deh-lah-KWAH) painting, *Liberty Leading the People* (July 28, 1830), illustrates this concept (<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/july-28-liberty-leading-people>). In July 1830, for three days known as the *Trois Glorieuses* (the Glorious Three), the people of Paris took up arms to bring in the parliamentary monarchy of Louis-Philippe in hopes of restoring the French Republic. Eager to celebrate July 28, Delacroix painted the allegorical figure of Liberty waving the tricolor flag of France and storming the corpse-ridden barricades with a young combatant at her side. The painting was reviled by conservatives, but purchased by Louis-Philippe in 1831. Soon after, it was hidden for fear of inciting public unrest.

The ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes (air-ih-STAH-fuh-nee-z) used comedy in such plays as *The Birds* to attack the political ideas of the leaders of ancient Athenian society. In *Lysistrata*, he attacked war by creating a story in which all the women of Athens go on a sex strike until Athens rids itself of war and warmongers. In nineteenth-century Norway, playwright Henrik Ibsen used *An Enemy of the People* as a platform for airing the issue of whether a government should ignore pollution in order to maintain economic well-being. In the United States today, many artworks act as vehicles to advance social and political causes, or to sensitize viewers, listeners, or readers to particular cultural situations like racial prejudice and AIDS.

In a therapeutic function, creating and experiencing works of art may address individuals with a variety of illnesses, both physical and mental. Role-playing, for example, used frequently as a counseling tool in treating dysfunctional family situations, often called psychodrama, has mentally ill patients act out their personal circumstances in order to find and cure the cause of their illness.



View the Closer Look of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* on myartslab.com



Figure 1.6 Walking by a Mountain Stream, Chinese School, Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Ink and color on paper, 67.8 cm × 88.6 cm.

Source: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, USA / Gift of Charles Lang Freer / The Bridgeman Art Library. Image number FSG 325083.

Here the individual forms the focus. However, art in a much broader context acts as a healing agent for society's general illnesses as well. In hopes of saving us from disaster, artists use artworks to illustrate the failings and excesses of society. In still another vein, the laughter caused by comedy releases endorphins, chemicals produced by the brain, which strengthen the immune system.

Art also functions as an *artifact*. As a product of a particular time and place, an artwork represents the ideas and technology of that specific time and place. Artworks often provide not only striking examples but occasionally the only tangible records of some peoples. Artifacts, like paintings, sculptures, poems, plays, and buildings, enhance our insights into many cultures, including

our own. Consider, for example, the many revelations we find in a sophisticated work like the cast vessel from Igbo-Ukwu (IGH-boh OOK-woo; Fig. 1.7). This artifact from the village of Igbo-Ukwu in eastern Nigeria utilizes the *cire perdue* (sihr pair-DOO; see Fig. 3.5) or “lost wax” process and reveals great virtuosity. It tells us much about the vision and technical accomplishment of this ninth- and tenth-century African society.

The Igbo-Ukwu vessel, as exemplary of art in a context of cultural artifact, raises the issue of religious *ritual*. Music, for example, when part of a religious ceremony, has a ritual function (the same musical piece comprises a work of art), and theatre—if seen as an occasion planned and intended for presentation—would include religious rituals as well as events that take place in theatres. Often, as a survey of art history would confirm, we cannot discern when ritual stops



Figure 1.7 *Lost wax cast vessel, from Igbo-Ukwu (ninth or tenth century). Leaded bronze, height 12 1/2".*

Source: © Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY.

and secular production starts. For example, ancient Greek tragedy seems clearly to have evolved from and maintained ritualistic practices. When ritual, planned and intended for presentation, uses traditionally artistic media like music, dance, and theatre, we can legitimately study ritual as art, and see it also as an artifact of its particular culture.

Having said all that about purposes and functions, we must also state that sometimes art just exists—for its own sake. In the late nineteenth century, a philosophical artistic thrust occurred called aestheticism, characterized by the slogan “art for art’s sake.” Those who championed this cause reacted against Victorian notions that a work of art must have uplifting, educational, or otherwise socially or morally beneficial characteristics. Proponents of aestheticism held that artworks stand independent and self-justifying, with no reason for being other than being beautiful. The playwright Oscar Wilde said in defense of this viewpoint: “All art is quite useless.” His statement meant that exquisite style and polished device had greater importance than utility and meaning. Thus, form rides victorious over function. The aesthetes, as proponents of aestheticism were called, disdained the “natural,” organic, and homely in art and life

and viewed art as the pursuit of perfect beauty and life—a quest for sublime experience.

HOW SHOULD WE PERCEIVE AND RESPOND?

The question of how we go about approaching the arts, or how we study them, presents another challenge. We must choose one of the myriad methods available and carry on from there. We assume those who are interested in this book have had only limited exposure to the arts. So we have chosen a method of study that can act as a springboard into the arts and literature, as a point of departure from the realm of the familiar into the unknown. Inasmuch as we live in a world of facts and figures, weights and measures, it seems logical to begin our study by dealing with some concrete characteristics. In other words, from mostly an intellectual point of view, what can we see and what can we hear in the arts and literature?

To put that question in different terms, how can we sharpen our aesthetic perception?

- First of all, we must identify those items that can be seen and heard in works of art and literature.
- Second, we must learn—just as we learn any subject—some of the terminology relating to those items.
- Third, we must understand why and how what we perceive relates to our response.

After all, our *response* to an artwork provides our major interest. We can *perceive* an object. We *choose* to *respond* to it in aesthetic terms.

We need to employ a consistent method as we pass from one art discipline to another. We will ask three questions: (1) What is it? (2) How is it put together? (3) How does it stimulate our senses? We will study these questions in each of the art

disciplines. As we will see, these are also the basic questions we can ask about individual artworks.

When we respond to the question *What is it?*, we recognize that we perceive the two-dimensional space of a picture, the three-dimensional space of a sculpture or a piece of architecture, or perhaps time in sound, or time and space in dance. We also recognize the form of the item—for example, a still life, a human figure, a tragedy, a ballet, a concerto, a narrative film, a park, or a residence. The term *form* is a broad one: There are *art forms*, *forms of arts*, and *forms in art*.

When we respond to the question *How is it put together?*, we identify and respond to the technical elements of the artwork. We recognize and respond to, for instance, the fact that the picture has been painted in oil, made by a printmaking technique, or created as a watercolor. We also recognize and respond to the elements that constitute the work, the items of composition—line, form or shape, mass, color, repetition, harmony—and the unity that results from all of these. What devices have been employed, and how does each part relate to the others to make a whole? A concerto consists of melody, harmony, timbre, tone, and more; a tragedy utilizes language, *mise-en-scène*, exposition, complication, *dénouement*; a ballet has formalized movement, *mise-en-scène*, line, idea content, and so on.

Moving to the third question, we examine *how the work stimulates our senses*—and why. In other words, how do the particular formal and technical arrangements (whether conscious or unconscious on the part of the artist) elicit a sense response from us? Here we deal with physical and mental properties. For example, our response to sculpture can be physical. We can touch a piece of sculpture and sense its smoothness or its hardness. In contrast, we experience essentially mental sense responses. For example, upright triangles give us a sense of solidity. When we perceive the colors green and blue we call them “cool”; reds and yellows,

“warm.” Pictures that are predominantly horizontal or composed of broad curves stimulate “soft” or placid responses. Angular, diagonal, or short, broken lines stimulate a sense of movement. Music that utilizes undulating melodic contours can be “smooth”; highly consonant music (see Glossary) can be “warm” or “rich.” These and other sense responses reflect universals; most individuals respond in similar fashion to them.

We also can ask a fourth question about a work of art: *What does the work mean?* We may answer that question in strictly personal terms; for example, a painting may remind us of some personal experience. However, we cannot dismiss the question *What does it mean?* as a reference to purely personal experience. Meaning in a work of art implies much more. The ultimate response, meaning, and experience of an artwork could go beyond opinion to encompass an attempt to understand contextual matters. Taking a contextual approach to a painting such as Parmigianino’s *Madonna with the Long Neck* (<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/parmigianino/madonna-with-the-long-neck-1540>) would reveal artistic and cultural conditions and give us an enriched understanding of the painting’s appearance that would exceed the purely personal. Sometimes meaning in an artwork derives from cultural or historical contexts, including biography. Sometimes artworks spring from purely aesthetic necessity. Sometimes it is difficult to know which case applies or whether both cases apply.

In this book, we delve into only the first three questions (What is it? How is it put together? How does it stimulate our senses?) because the fourth involves a great deal more exploration than our space allows. Those who wish to deepen their understanding of art history beyond the “A Question of Style” features in the text are invited to peruse the Glossary, which, in addition to those explained in the text, contains brief definitions of most of art’s historical styles.

STYLE IN THE ARTS

The manner in which artists express themselves constitutes their *style*. Style is like the personality of an artwork. Style gives us that body of characteristics that identifies an artwork with an individual, a historical period, a school of artists, or a nation—for example, realism, expressionism, abstract, and so on. For an overview of some important styles, refer to the “A Question of Style” boxes throughout the text. Applying the term means assimilating materials and drawing conclusions.

Therefore, determining the style of any artwork requires analysis of how the artist has arranged the characteristics applicable to his or her medium. If the usage appears similar to others, we might conclude they exemplify the same style. For example, Bach and Handel typify the *baroque* style in music; Haydn and Mozart, the *classical*. Listening to works by these composers leads to the conclusion that the ornate melodic developments of Bach are like those of Handel, and quite different from the precise concern for structure and clearly articulated motifs of Mozart and Haydn. The precision and symmetry of the Parthenon (see Fig. 4.2) compared with the ornate opulence of the Palace of Versailles (see Fig. 4.20) suggest that in line and form the architects of these buildings treated their medium differently. Yet the design of the Parthenon suggests visual companionship, stylistically, to Mozart and Haydn; Versailles reflects an approach to design similar to that of Bach and Handel.

We can take our examination one step further and try some stylistic analysis with four paintings. The first three of these paintings reflect three different artists and styles; the fourth, one of those three. By stylistic analysis we will determine the painter of the fourth painting. Inasmuch as we have not yet dealt with definitions in composition, our analysis will remain as nontechnical as possible. We use three characteristics only: *line*, *palette*, and *brush stroke*.

In the first painting (Fig. 1.8), *A View Near Volterra*, Corot has used curvilinear line primarily, and that line (which creates the edges of the forms or shapes in the painting) appears somewhat softened: Many of the forms—the rocks, trees, clouds, and so on—do not have crisp, clear edges. Color areas tend to blend with each other, giving the painting a somewhat fuzzy or out-of-focus appearance. Corot's use of *palette* (PA-leht) heightens that comfortable effect. Palette, as we note later, encompasses the total use of color and contrast. As with his use of line, Corot maintains a subtle value contrast—that is, a subtle relationship of dark and light. He moves gradually from light to dark, and he avoids stark contrasts. He employs a limited range of colors, but does so without calling attention to their positioning. He uses apparent *brush stroke*. If we look carefully, we can see brush marks, individual strokes where paint has been applied. Even though the objects in the painting appear lifelike, Corot has not pretended that his picture has not been painted. We can tell he created the foliage by stippling (by dabbing the brush to the canvas as you would dot an “i” with a pencil). Likewise, we can see marks made by the brush throughout the painting. The overall effect of the painting seems lifelike, but we can see in every area the spontaneity with which it was executed.

We hardly need be an expert to tell that the second painting, Picasso's *Guernica* (ghair-NEE-kuh; Fig. 1.9), reflects a different style from Corot's *A View Near Volterra*. Picasso has joined curved lines and straight lines, placing them in such relationships that they create movement and dissonance. The edges of color areas and forms reflect sharpness and remain distinct; nothing here appears soft or fuzzy. Likewise, the value contrasts are stark and extreme. Areas of the highest value—that is, white—slam against areas of the lowest value—black: a range of tonalities far less broad than in the previous work. Mid or medium (gray) tones exist, but they play a minor



Figure 1.8 Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, French (1796–1875), *A View Near Volterra* (1838). Canvas, 0.695×0.951 ($27\frac{3}{8}'' \times 37\frac{1}{2}''$).

Source: Image Courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Chester Dale Collection.

role in the effect of the palette. In palette, the work remains limited to blacks, whites, and grays. Brush stroke reinforces the starkness of the work by its near *absence* of effect. Tonal areas are flat, and few traces of brush exist.

The third painting (Fig. 1.10), van Gogh's (van GHOH) *The Starry Night*, uses highly active, although uniformly curvilinear line. Forms and color areas employ both hard and soft edges, and van Gogh, like Picasso, uses outlining to strengthen his images and reduce their reality. Overall, line creates a sweeping and undulating movement, highly dynamic and yet far removed from the starkness of the Picasso. In contrast, van Gogh's curvilinearity

and softened edges differ in effect from the relaxed quality of the Corot. Van Gogh uses very broad but moderate value contrasts. He ranges from darks to lights, all virtually equal in importance. Even when movement from one area to another crosses a hard edge to a highly contrasting value, it results in moderate (neither soft nor stark) effects. Brush stroke gives the painting its unique personality. We can see thousands of individual brush marks where the artist applied paint to canvas. The nervous, almost frenetic use of brush stroke makes the painting come alive.

Now that we have examined three paintings in different styles and by different artists, can you determine by style which of the three painted Figure 1.11? First, examine the use



View the **Closer Look** of van Gogh's *A Starry Night* on myartslab.com

of line. Note the hard form and color edges and use of outlining. Curved and straight lines *juxtapose* against each other yielding an active and stark effect. By comparison, use of line does not suggest Corot, perhaps van Gogh, and definitely Picasso. Next, examine palette. Darks and lights contrast broadly yielding strong contrast—the darkest darks against the lightest lights. This is not like Corot, a bit like van Gogh, and most like Picasso. Finally, brush stroke remains generally unobtrusive with mostly flat tonal areas: definitely not a van Gogh and probably not a Corot. Three votes out of three go to Picasso, and the style is so distinctive you probably had no difficulty deciding, even without the analysis. However, could you have been so certain if asked whether Figure 1.12 represented the same style or painter? Some differences in style appear obvious; some unclear. Distinguishing the work of one artist from another who designs in a similar fashion becomes even more challenging. However, the analytical process we just completed is indicative of how we can approach artworks to determine *how* they exemplify a given style, or what style they reflect.

STYLE AND CULTURE

We sometimes recognize differences in style without thinking much about it. Our experience or formal training need not be extensive for us to recognize that the buildings in Figures 1.13 and 1.14 reflect different cultural circumstances and, hence, different styles. The Russian Orthodox church is distinguishable by its characteristic domes (Fig. 1.13). The tomb in Figure 1.14 is typically Muslim, identifiable by its arch. The decorative embellishment reflects the Islamic prohibition against depicting human form in an architectural decoration.

HOW DOES A STYLE GET ITS NAME?

Why is some art called classical, some pop, some baroque, and some impressionist?

Some styles were named hundreds of years after they occurred—the definition resulted from extended, common usage or a historical viewpoint. For example, the Athenian Greeks, whose works we know as classical were centuries removed from the naming of their style. Some labels, such as surrealist, were coined by artists themselves. Many come from individual critics who, having experienced the emerging works of several artists and noting a common different approach, invented a term (sometimes a derogatory one) to describe it. Because of the influence of the critic or perhaps the catchiness of the term, the name gained general currency.

We must take care, however, when we use labels for artworks. Occasionally they imply stylistic characteristics; sometimes they identify attitudes or tendencies that are not really stylistic. Often debate exists as to which is which. For example, romanticism has stylistic characteristics in some art disciplines, but the term also describes a broad philosophy of life. A style label can be a composite of several elements with dissimilar characteristics but identical objectives—for example, postimpressionism (see the “A Matter of Style” feature in Chapter 2 or see the Glossary). Occasionally experts disagree as to whether certain artworks fall within the descriptive parameters of one style or another, even while agreeing on the definition of the style itself.

In addition, we can ask how the same label might identify stylistic characteristics of two or more unrelated art disciplines, such as painting and music. Is there an aural equivalent to visual characteristics, or vice versa? More often than not, similarity of objectives results in the same stylistic label being used for works that belong in quite different disciplines.

Styles do not start and stop on specific dates, nor do they recognize national boundaries; some are imitations of previous styles. Many styles are profound; others are superficial. Some are intensely individual.

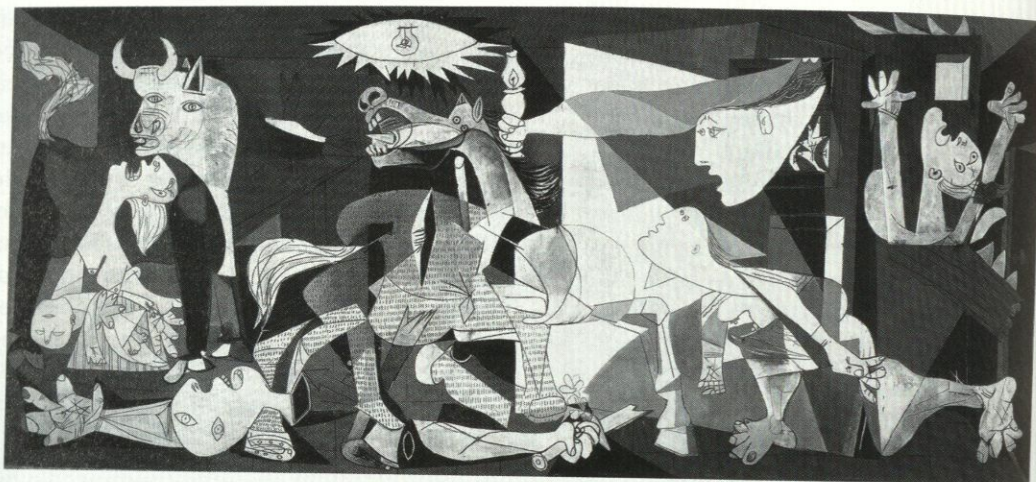


Figure 1.9 Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (mural) 1937. Oil on canvas, 11'60" × 25'80".

Source: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. Photo Credit © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. © 2013 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.



Figure 1.10 Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *The Starry Night* (1889). Oil on canvas, 29" × 36" (73.7 × 92.1 cm).

Source: © Collection, The Museum of Modern Art Licensed by Scala—Art Resource, NY. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (472.1941). The Museum of Modern Art, NY USA. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

APPLYING CRITICAL SKILLS

Inevitably we want to conclude if an artwork is “any good.” Whatever the form or medium, judgments about the quality of the work often vary from one extreme to another, ranging from “I like it” and “interesting,”

to specific reasons why we think the artwork is effective or ineffective.

Criticism *should entail a detailed process of analysis to gain understanding and appreciation.* Identifying the formal elements of an artwork—learning what to look for—represents the first step. We *describe* an



Figure 1.11 Example painting. See end of chapter for identification.

artwork by examining its many facets and then try to understand how they work together to create meaning or experience. We then try to state what that meaning or experience is. Only after completing that process should we attempt judgment.

Professional critics usually bring to the process a set of standards developed from personal experience. Application of personal standards, however, complicates the process of criticism. First of all, knowledge of the art form may be shallow. Second, perceptual skills may be faulty; and, finally, the range of personal experience may be limited. In addition, the application of personal standards proves problematic if judgment involves preestablished criteria: If someone believes that “beauty”

and/or usefulness, as examples, represent essential elements of a work of art, then any work that does not meet those criteria will be judged as faulty, despite other qualities that may make the work unique and profound. Preestablished criteria often deny critical acclaim to new or experimental approaches in art.

History resounds with examples of new artistic attempts that received terrible receptions from so-called experts, whose ideas of what an artwork ought to be could not allow for experimentation or departures from accepted practice. In 1912, when Vaslav Nijinsky (vah-SLAHF nuh-JIHN-skee) choreographed the ballet *Rite of Spring* to music by Igor Stravinsky, the unconventional music and choreography actually caused a riot:



Figure 1.12 Example painting. See end of chapter for identification.

Audiences and critics could not tolerate that the ballet did not conform to accepted musical and ballet standards. Today, most people consider both the music and the choreography masterpieces.

Similarly, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953; Fig. 1.15) does not have a plot, characters, or ideas expressed in a conventional manner. In *Godot*, two tramps wait beside the road by a withered tree for the arrival of someone named Godot. The tramps tell stories to each other, argue, eat some food, and are interrupted by a character named Pozzo leading a slave, Lucky, by a rope. After a brief conversation, Lucky and Pozzo leave. At the end of the first act, a boy enters to announce that Godot will not come today. In Act 2, much the same sequence of events occurs. Then, Lucky leads in a blind Pozzo. The tree has sprouted a few leaves.

The play ends as the young boy returns to indicate Godot will not arrive that day either. If your standards require a "good" play to have a carefully fashioned plot wrapped around fully developed characters and a clear message, then *Waiting for Godot* cannot possibly be a good play. Some people agree with such an assertion; others disagree vehemently. What, then, do we conclude? What if my criteria do not match yours? What if two experts disagree on the quality of a movie? Does that make any difference to our experience of it?

Value judgments involve intensely personal standards, but some opinions are more informed than others and represent more authoritative judgment. However, sometimes even knowledgeable people disagree. Disagreements about quality, however, can enhance our experience of a work of art when they lead us to think about why



Figure 1.13 Church of Nikolai Khamovnik, Russia, 1679–1682.

Source: Author.

the differences exist. In this way, we gain a deeper understanding of the artwork. Nonetheless, we can do *criticism* without involving any judgment. We can thoroughly dissect any work of art and describe what it comprises—for example, we can describe and analyze line, color, melody, harmony, texture, plot, character, and/or message. We can observe how all of these factors affect people and their responses. We can spend a significant amount of time doing this and never pass a value judgment at all.

Does this discussion mean all artworks are equal in value? Not at all. It means that in order to understand what criticism involves, we must separate descriptive analysis, which can be satisfying in and of itself, from the act of passing value judgments. We may not like the work we have analyzed, but we may have understood something we did not understand before. Passing judgment may play no role whatsoever in our understanding of an artwork. But we are still involved in *criticism*.

As an exercise in understanding, criticism is necessary. We must investigate and describe. We must experience the need to know enough about the process, product,

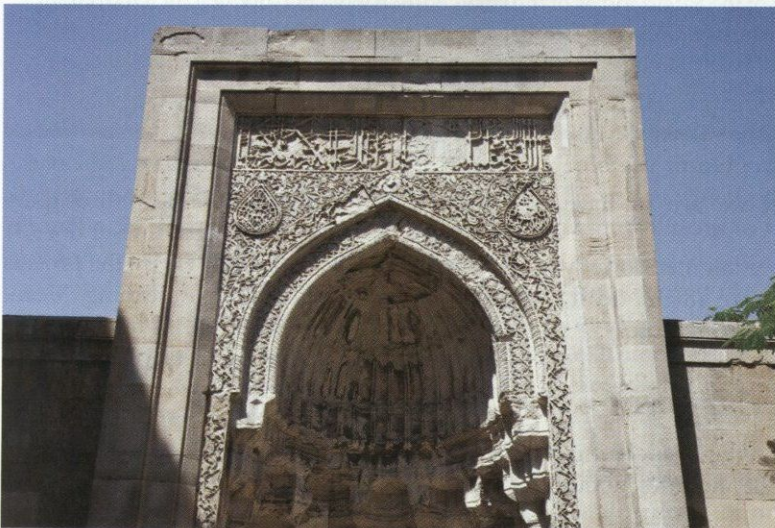


Figure 1.14 Tomb of the Shivan Shah, Baku, Azerbaijan, 15th century.

Source: © dbimages/Alamy. Photographer Jeremy Graham.

PROFILE

Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), born in Malaga on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Barcelona. However, having already mastered realistic technique, he had little use for school. At sixteen, he had his own studio in Barcelona. In 1900, he first visited Paris, and in 1904 he settled there. His personal style began to form in the years from 1901 to 1904, a period often referred to as his blue period because of the pervasive blue tones he used in his paintings at that time. In 1905, as he became more successful, Picasso altered his palette, and the blue tones gave way to a terra-cotta color, a shade of deep pinkish red. At the same time his subject matter grew less melancholy and included dancers, acrobats, and harlequins. The paintings he did during the years between 1905 and 1907 belong to his rose period.

Picasso played an important part in the sequence of different movements in the twentieth century. He said that repeating oneself went against “the constant flight forward of the spirit.” Primarily a painter, he also became a fine sculptor, engraver, and ceramist. In 1917, Picasso went to Rome to design costumes and scenery for Sergei Diaghilev’s (sair-GAY dee-AH-ghee-lehf) *Ballets Russes* (bah-LAY roos). This work stimulated another departure in Picasso’s work, and he began to paint the works now referred to as belonging to his classic period, which lasted from about 1918 until 1925.

At the same time as he designed for the ballet, Picasso also continued to develop the cubist technique, making it less rigorous and austere.

His painting *Girl Before a Mirror* (see Fig. 1.11) gives us an opportunity to study his use of color in contrast to form. The painting depends greatly on form, and yet, if we study it, we understand how color gives meaning to this work. For example, Picasso chose red and green perhaps because they are complementary colors and perhaps, as the art historian H. W. Janson suggests, because Picasso intended the green spot in the middle of the forehead of the mirror’s image as a symbol of the girl’s psyche, or inner self, which she confronts with apparent anguish.

Guernica (see Fig. 1.9), his moving vision of the Spanish Civil War, also depends on curved forms. In this painting, however, he intends the forms as fundamental because Picasso uses no color, only whites, grays, and black. *Guernica*, a huge painting, formed Picasso’s response to the 1937 bombing by the Germans on behalf of the Fascist forces of the small Basque town of Guernica. In it distortions of form approach surrealism (see Glossary), but Picasso never called himself a surrealist. Picasso continued to work with incredible speed and versatility—as painter, ceramist, sculptor, designer, and graphic artist—into his nineties.

and experience of art if we are to have perceptions to share.

Now that we have examined briefly what criticism is and why we might do it, what criteria or approaches can we use?

APPROACHES TO CRITICISM

To put our earlier discussion in succinct form, criticism makes a range of inquiries about

works of art, focusing primarily on three questions: (1) What is it? (2) What does it do? (3) What is it worth? Ultimately for us, the process of criticism yields enhanced meaning. Meaning, however, takes many forms and depends upon what type of criticism or philosophy of criticism we employ. The reason for this is simple. As the authors of *Janson’s History of Art* (7th ed., p. xxv) contend, “Art is never an empty container; rather, it is a vessel loaded with

meaning, subject to multiple interpretations, and always representing someone's point of view." So, by inquiring about a particular work, we can employ a variety of approaches—some fairly straightforward, and others complex and esoteric. In a moment, we will illustrate how we might want to approach an artwork using two basic methods: formal criticism and contextual criticism. We will leave the more esoteric methods for another time and place. First, however, let's digress into a bit of history.

In Western culture, the critical tradition began with Plato (428/427–348 B.C.E.). Plato's models for criticism focused principally on an artwork's moral qualities, and he attacked poets, for example, on the grounds that their art merely imitated nature and that it appealed to the worst rather than the best of human nature. In contrast, Aristotle (c. 450–388 B.C.E.), one of Plato's students, argued for the value of imitation (he found moral value in tragedy, for example, because of its capacity to purge humans of pity and fear), focusing, however, on logical and formal approaches rather than moral ones.

Since the Renaissance, Western criticism has tended to tackle the factors of the moral worth of art and its relationship to nature. By the late twentieth century, however, criticism had undergone a tumultuous upheaval with regard to traditional approaches to criticism. All of this began in the early part of the century and resulted in a splintered series of approaches including some that questioned the importance of the artist altogether, particularly with regard to determining meaning or meanings in works of art. Meaning, for example, for some critical approaches derives not from artistic intent but from wider forces such as structures of language, in the case of literature, theatre, and cinema, and culture. It seems as though every political, social, philosophical, and psychological movement has also generated an approach to criticism, giving rise to such "schools" of criticism as feminist criticism, Freudian criticism, practical criticism, Marxist criticism, structuralism, deconstruction, and reader-response criticism.

Moving now to how we can undertake to "criticize" a work of art, we will withdraw to two broad and basic types of criticism: *formal* criticism and *contextual* criticism. Once we have these concepts in hand, we will follow with some thoughts on making judgments about works of art we might encounter.

Formal Criticism

Formal criticism applies no external conditions or information. We analyze the artwork just as we find it: If it is a painting, we look only within the frame; if it is a play, we analyze only what we see and hear. Formal criticism approaches the artwork as an entity within itself. As an example, consider this brief analysis of Molière's comedy *Tartuffe* (tahr-TOOF; 1664) (Fig. 1.16):

Orgon, a rich bourgeois, has allowed a religious con man, Tartuffe, to gain complete control over him. Tartuffe has moved into Orgon's house, and tries to seduce Orgon's wife at the same time he is planning to marry Orgon's daughter. Tartuffe is unmasked, and Orgon orders him out. Tartuffe seeks his revenge by claiming title to Orgon's house and blackmailing him with some secret papers. At the very last instant, Tartuffe's plans are foiled by the intervention of the king, and the play ends happily.

We have just described a story. Were we to go one step further and analyze the plot, we would look, among other things, for points at which *crises* occur and cause important decisions to be made by the characters; we would also want to know how those decisions moved the play from one point to the next. In addition, we would try to locate the extreme crisis, the *climax*. Meanwhile, we would discover auxiliary parts of the plot such as *reversals*—for example, when the other characters unmask Tartuffe and become aware of the true situation. Depending on the detail of our criticism, we could work our way through each and every aspect of



Figure 1.15 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Piccadilly Theatre, London (1998).
Source: Robbie Jack/Corbis.

the plot. We might then devote some time to describing and analyzing the driving force—the *character*—of each person in the play and how the characters relate to each other. Has Molière created fully developed characters? Are they types or do they seem to behave more or less like real individuals? In examining the *thematic* elements of the play, we would no doubt conclude the play deals with religious hypocrisy and that Molière had a particular point of view on that subject.

In this formal approach, information about the playwright, previous performances, historic relationships, and so on, remain irrelevant. Thus, the formal approach helps us analyze how an artwork operates and helps us decide why the artwork produces the responses it does. We can apply this form of criticism to any work of art and come away with a variety of conclusions. Of course, knowledge about how artworks are put together, what they are, and

how they stimulate the senses enhances the critical process. Knowing the basic elements that comprise formal and technical elements of the artwork (which are the subjects of the succeeding chapters of this book) gives us a ready outline on which to begin a formal analysis.

Contextual Criticism

Another general approach, contextual criticism, seeks meaning by adding to formal criticism an examination of related information outside the artwork, such as facts about the artist's life, his or her culture, social and political conditions and philosophies, public and critical responses to the work, and so on. These can all be researched and applied to the work in order to enhance perception and understanding. Contextual criticism views the artwork as an artifact generated from particular contextual needs, conditions,

and/or attitudes. If we carry our criticism of *Tartuffe* in this direction, we would note that certain historical events help clarify the play. For example, the object of Molière's attention probably was the Company of the Holy Sacrament, a secret, conspiratorial, and influential religious society in France at the time. Like many fanatical religious sects—including those of our own time—the society sought to enforce its own view of morality by spying on the lives of others and seeking out heresies—in this case, in the Roman Catholic Church. Its followers were religious fanatics, and they had considerable impact on the lives of the citizenry at large. If we were to follow this path of criticism, we would pursue any and all contextual matters that might illuminate or clarify what happens in the play. Contextual criticism may also employ the same kind of internal examination followed in the formal approach.

MAKING JUDGMENTS

Now that we have defined criticism and noted some approaches we might take in pursuit of understanding and enjoying a work of art, we can move on to the final step: making value judgments.

Several approaches to the act of judgment present themselves. Two characteristics, however, apply to all artworks: Artworks are *crafted*, and they *communicate* something to us about our experiences as humans. Making a judgment about the quality of an artwork should address each of these characteristics.

Artisanship

Is the work well made? To make this judgment, we first need some understanding of the medium in which the artist works. For example, if the artist proposes to give us a realistic vision of a tree, does the



Figure 1.16 Jean-Baptiste Molière, *Tartuffe*, The Theater Antoine (1994).

Source: Stephane Cardinale/Corbis Sygma.

artist's handling of the paint yield a tree that looks like a tree? Of course, if artisanship depended only on the ability to portray objects realistically, judgment would be quite simple. However, we must remember that judgments about the artisanship of an artwork require some knowledge about the techniques and styles of its medium. Although we may not yet be ready to make judgments about all of the aspects of artisanship in any art form, we can apply what we know. Good artisanship means the impact of the work will have clarity and not be confusing. It also means the work will hold our interest (given basic understanding and attention on our part). If the artwork does not appear coherent or interesting, we may wish to examine whether the fault lies in the artwork or in ourselves before rendering judgment. Beyond that, we are left to learn the lessons that this book seeks to teach. Each chapter gives us enhanced tools to evaluate the artisanship of a work of art.

Communication

Evaluating what an artwork tries to say offers more immediate opportunity for judgment

and less need for expertise. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (ghuhr-tuh), the nineteenth-century poet, novelist, and playwright, set out a basic, commonsense approach to evaluating communication. Because Goethe's approach provides an organized means for discovering an artwork's communication by progressing from analytical to judgmental functions, it helps us to end our discussion on criticism. Goethe suggests that we approach the critical process by asking three questions: What is the artist trying to say? Does he or she succeed? Was the artwork worth the effort? These three questions focus on the artist's communication by making us identify first what was being attempted, and then on the artist's success in that attempt. The third question, whether or not the project was worth the effort, raises other issues, such as uniqueness or profundity. This question asks us to decide if the communication offered important or unique perceptions (as opposed to the trivial or inane). A well-crafted work of art that merely restates obvious insights about the human condition lacks quality in its communicative component. One that offers profound and unique insights exhibits quality.

EXERCISE PAINTING IDENTIFICATION

Figure 1.11 Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), *“Girl Before a Mirror.”* Boisgeloup, March 1932. Oil on canvas, 64" × 51¼". Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim. (2.1938).

Source: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. © 2013 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

Figure 1.12 Joan Miró (1893–1983), *Painting*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 68½" × 65¼" (174 × 196.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, NY. Loula D. Lasker Bequest (by example).

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