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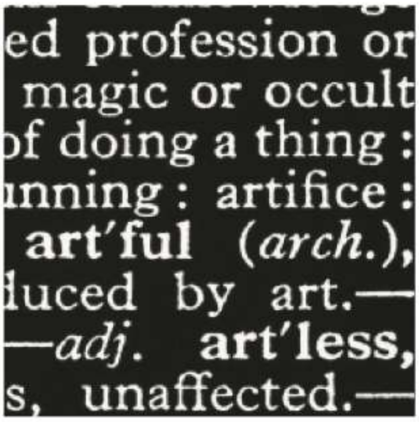

ed profession or
magic or occult
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art'ful (*arch.*),
uced by art.—
—*adj.* **art'less,**
s, unaffected.—

UNDERSTANDING ART

> Everyone wants to understand art. Why not try to understand the songs of a bird? Why does one love the night, flowers, everything around one, without trying to understand them? But in the case of a painting people have to understand. If only they would realize above all that an artist works of necessity, that he himself is only a trifling bit of the world, and that no more importance should be attached to him than to plenty of other things which please us in the world, though we can't explain them. People who try to explain pictures are usually barking up the wrong tree.
>
> — PABLO PICASSO

PABLO PICASSO lived to the age of ninety-two and was one of the most prolific artists in history. He was also an eloquent and forceful commentator on his own work, the work of others, and the ideas and philosophies of his generation of modernists. We find ourselves turning again and again to his sometimes brash but always confident insights, as in this oft-quoted passage on understanding art.

Why did Picasso find attempts to understand art so worrisome? Perhaps he was afraid we'd miss the larger point. In our attempt to comprehend the ingredients of art—the subject, the form, the symbolism—we run the risk of getting it all wrong in the end. One can argue that only artists can *explain* their work, can make intelligible something that is not known or not understood. But *understanding* is defined as full awareness or knowledge that is arrived at through an intellectual or emotional process—including the ability to extract meaning or to interpret. The ability to *appreciate*, or to perceive the value or worth of something from a discriminating perspective, then, is the consummate reward of understanding.

< **JOSEPH KOSUTH.** ***Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) [Art]*** (1968). Photostat, 47 ¼" × 47 ¼".

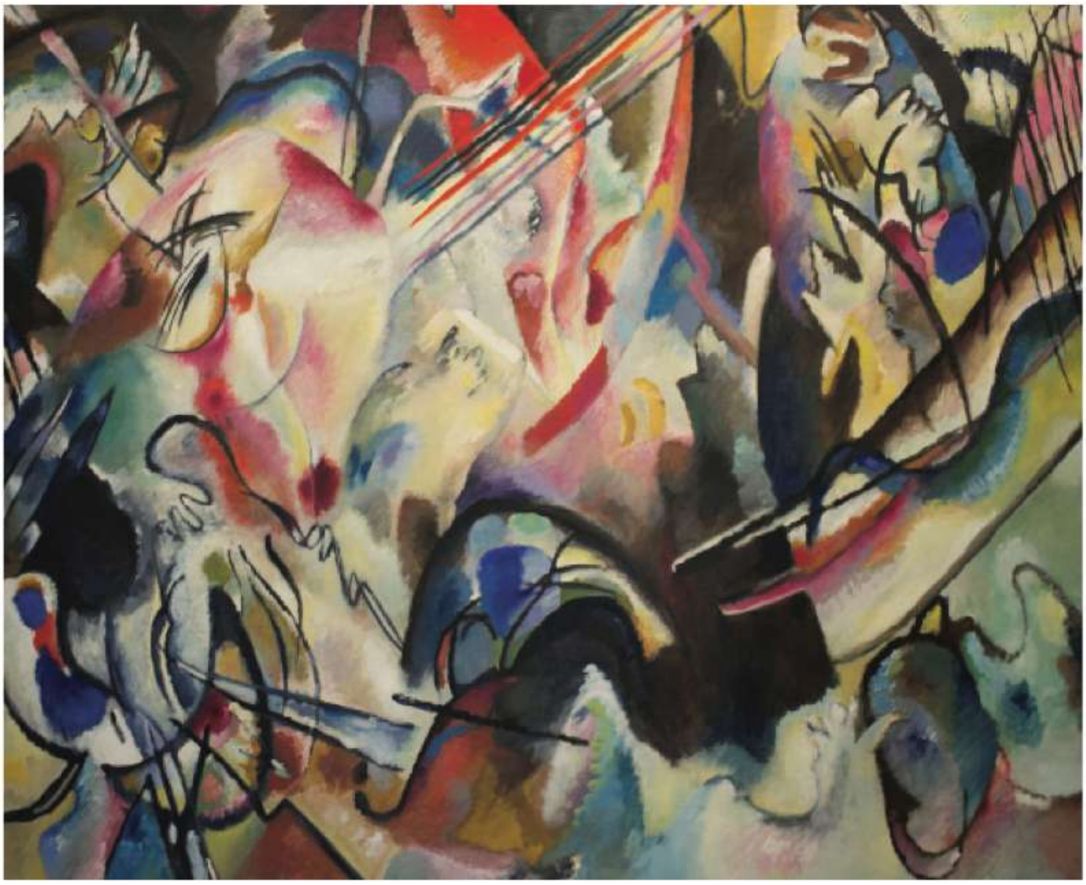
SUBJECT

The **subject** is the *what* of a work of art—people, places, things, themes, processes, events, ideas. For most of the history of art, the subject is recognizable or at least reflects some sort of visual experience. Categories of subjects with which artists work are often called **genres**. The word comes from French meaning "kind" or "type." Genres include religious or mythological subjects, historical subjects, portraiture, still life, landscape, nonobjective art, and so on. They also include something called *genre* subjects—images and themes from ordinary life. The modernist era, however, challenged the traditional definition of *subject,* which grew to include anything from the elements of art in their purest form, as in a painting by Wassily Kandinsky (Fig. 1.1), to the physical processes of art making, to a concept for a work of art without a tangible object fabricated by the artist.

The imagery in **abstract art** may be difficult to decipher because it no longer fully resembles the original things or scenes from which it was derived. But we cannot say that these works are without a subject. **Nonobjective art** may make no reference whatsoever to the natural world, no pretext to representing it, but even nonobjective works are not without a *subject*—at least from one perspective. Picasso insisted, for example, that there is always a subject: "even if the painting is [nothing but] green, well then! The 'subject' is the green." Jackson Pollock also challenged the notion that a nonobjective work is necessarily a work without a subject: "There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is critical." Even though we are accustomed to defining the subject of a work as a recognizable representation of a tangible thing, *subject* is a much more inclusive word.

CONNECTIONS Standing in the interior of a Gothic cathedral, there is much to discuss about the floor plan, the structural elements, the design of the vaults and stained glass, the engineering, the style of the sculpture. But it is the content of the work as a whole—its role in society, the religious beliefs that gave rise to it, the symbolism of its design and its iconographic program—that leads us to better understand and appreciate the historical and sociological relevance of the work.

∧ Interior, Laon Cathedral (Fig. 16.15)



1ft.

< 1.1 **WASSILY KANDINSKY,** ***Composition VI,*** (1913). Oil on canvas, 76¾" × 118⅛". Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

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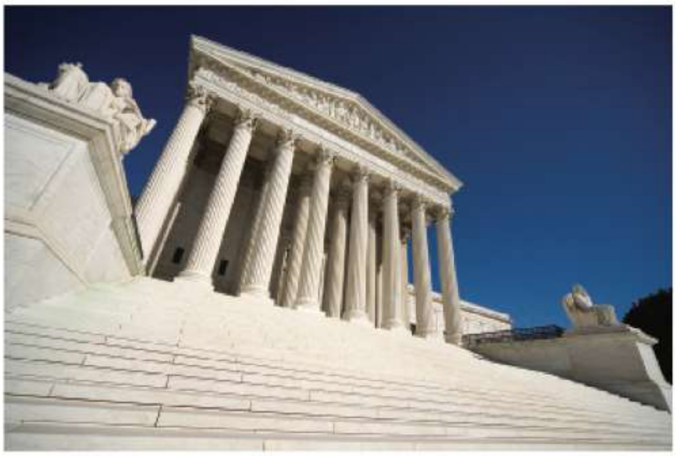
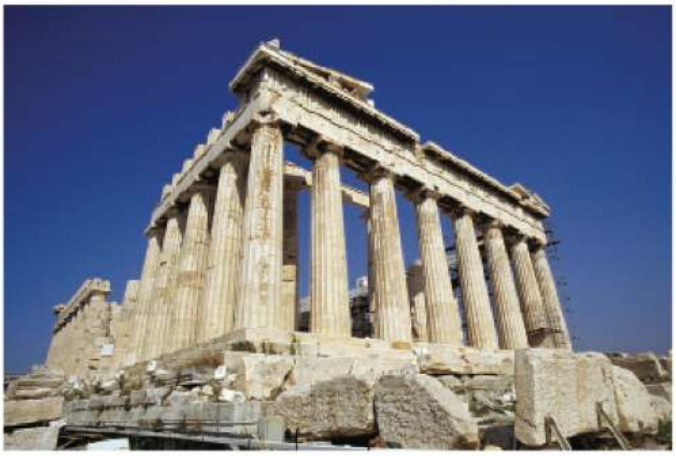


^ 1.2 **United States Supreme Court Building,** Washington, D.C. (1935).



^ 1.3 **ICTINOS AND CALLICRATES,** Parthenon, Athens, Greece (447–438 BCE).

CONTENT

A distinction is often made between subject and **content**. Whereas *subject* refers to the aspects of a work that can be described, *content* refers to a work's array of intangible aspects: the emotional, intellectual, psychological, symbolic elements. Content implies subject matter, but is a much bigger concept. Content comes close to being the *why* of a work of art in that it includes what we might consider the reasons behind its appearance: the idea, the cultural and artistic contexts, and the meaning behind the symbolism.

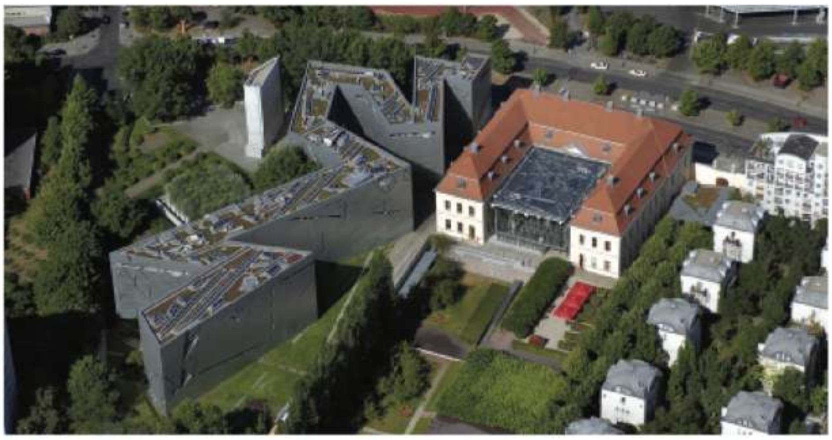
Symbolism is often a key component of a work's content, even if is unapparent or indecipherable to a viewer. The study of symbols is called *iconography*, literally the "writing of images." Symbols convey ideas, beliefs, messages, or the ideology underlying works of arts; investigating their significance enriches our understanding of the meaning and purpose of the work.

It may be obvious to us that paintings can be rich in content, but architecture, at first glance, may not seem the most obvious place to find content. Yet architecture informs us not only of the materials and technical means commonly used during certain periods in history; it can also embody the ideas, beliefs, and aspirations of an era. Architecture can have strong symbolic significance. It is easy to spot the influence of Greek and Roman architecture on buildings in the U.S. capital, Washington, D.C.—pristine white marble, columns, pediments, rotundas. But there is a reason why the architects responsible for designs for the United States Capitol Building and the United States Supreme Court building and others chose to emulate the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome in the capital of the New Republic (Figs. 1.2 and 1.3). It was to symbolize a connection to history's greatest contributions to civilization: democracy, the rule of law, duty to country and fellow citizen.

Contemporary architect Daniel Libeskind has said that, in the design of his buildings, he wants to

> communicate the vastness and also the legacy of things that are not completely visible. Contrary to public opinion the flesh of architecture is not cladding, insulation and structure, but the substance of the individual in society and history; a figuration of the inorganic, the body and the soul.

In other words, according to Libeskind, the "flesh of architecture" is not the form; it is the content. His extension of the Berlin Museum, dedicated to Jewish art and life and the memory of the Holocaust, is designed around the concept of a void (Fig. 1.4). A zigzag building—reminiscent in shape of a lightning bolt—was



^ 1.4 **DANIEL LIBESKIND, Extension of the Berlin Museum,** Berlin, Germany (1989–1996).

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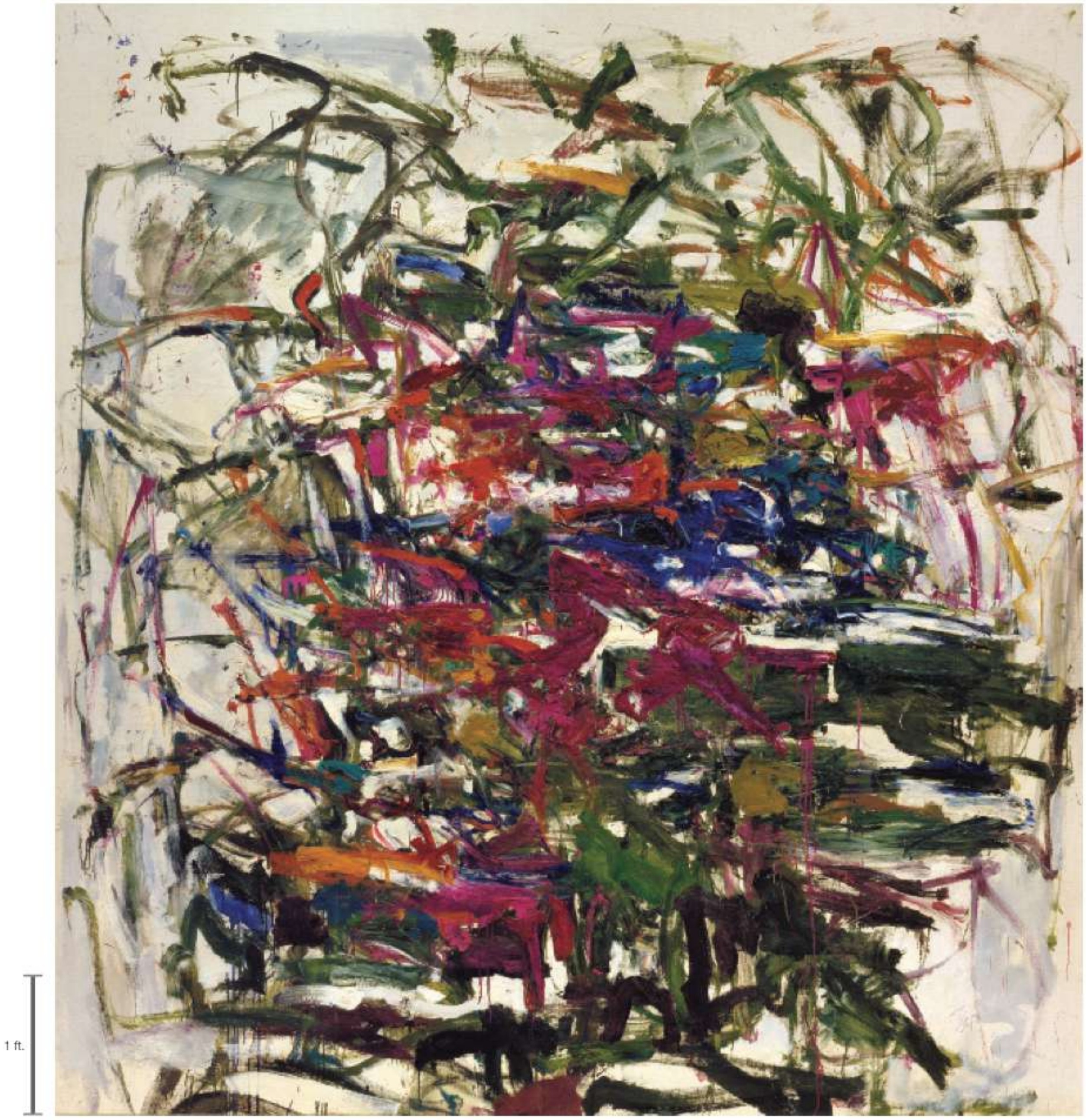
derived mathematically by plotting the home addresses of Jewish writers, artists, and composers who had lived in Berlin neighborhoods before World War II but were killed during the Nazi Holocaust. The building's jagged shape reads as a "bolt out of the blue"—a catastrophic event that could not have been anticipated. It also reads as a painful rift in the continuity of the neighborhood in which it stands; it is punctuated by voids that symbolize the absence of Jewish people and culture in Berlin. The visitor to the museum is immediately struck by the overwhelming evidence that everything at which one is looking—every structural, design, and symbolic element—has been informed by the historic circumstances that necessitated Libeskind's building. To learn more about the *whys* behind works of art, see the **Visual Glossary: Themes & Purposes of Art**.



^ 1.5 **JOAN MITCHELL, *Cercando un Ago*** (1957). Oil on canvas, 95" × 88 ⅛". Collection of the Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York.

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FORM

In the context of art and design, the word **form** has more than one meaning. Form refers to the totality of a composition or design—the arrangement or organization of all of its visual elements. Form gives substance to a subject or an idea; think of it as the all-encompassing framework of artistic expression. It signifies the totality of technical means and materials employed by the artist, as well as all of the visual strategies and pictorial devices used to express and communicate. It is, simply, the work of art as a whole. The word *form* is also used to discuss three-dimensional shapes (spheres, cylinders, cubes, pyramids, for example) or works of art (such as sculpture or architecture). It also is used to describe areas of void space in sculptural works that serve as compositional counterpoints to solid shapes.

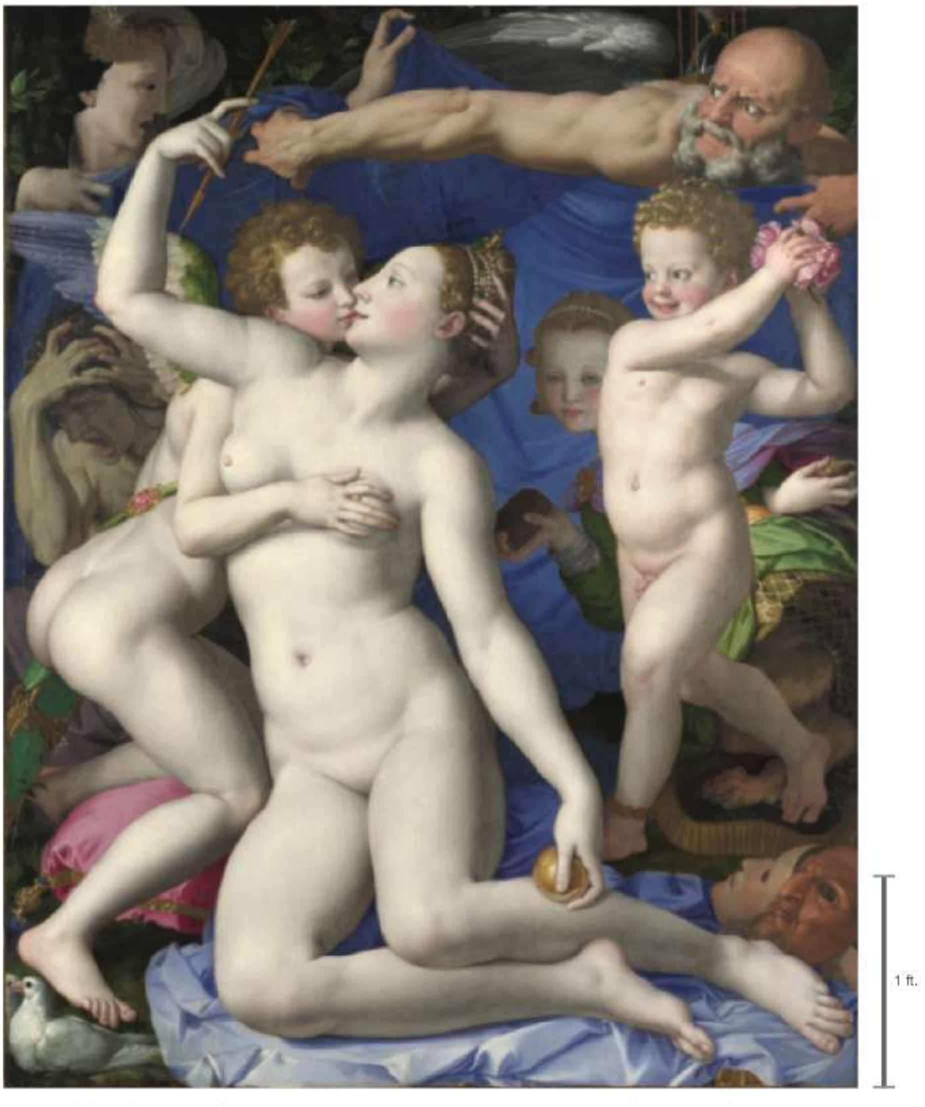
If the subject of a work of art is the *what,* the form is the sum total of *how* the *what* is presented. The appearance of a work of art derives from the artist's manipulation of the elements of art, principles of design, and the medium. When we consider the form of a work, we are asking ourselves how it all fits together—how color and shape are related, how the position of objects or figures reinforces the compositional structure, how brushwork is used to render meticulous detail, or perhaps how brushwork seems to exist for its own sake—free from the task of description, as in many modern and contemporary paintings.

Let's return to the beginning of this section: If subject matter is the *what* of a work of art, form is the *how*. Now let's return to Jackson Pollock. For him, as for many artists—including Joan Mitchell—producing nonobjective work, the *how* IS the *what*. That is, the materials and process may be described as the subject of the work (Fig. 1.5).

ICONOGRAPHY

Iconography, as noted, is the study of themes and symbols—figures and images that, when deciphered, reveal the underlying meaning of a work of art. Bronzino's sixteenth-century masterpiece, *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 1.6) in the collection of the National Gallery in London, is a fascinating example of a work in which there must be much more than meets the eye, but whose iconographic puzzle is yet to be solved. When Bronzino conceived the painting for King Francis I of France, he clearly intended to weave an intricate allegory with many actors and many symbols.

Venus, fondled by her son, Cupid, is exposed by the gray-bearded Father Time, whose muscular arm draws back a purple drape to reveal the couple's incestuous behavior. We recognize them by their symbolic attributes, or things that they hold or have around them. Venus cups a golden apple in one hand and an arrow from the winged Cupid's quiver in the other; Time has



∧ 1.6 **BRONZINO, *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*** (c. 1546). Oil on wood, 61" × 56¾". National Gallery, London, England.

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