

What is Art?

This chapter explores the nature of art and aesthetics, reflecting artists' diverse perspectives and beliefs about the definition of art and beauty. It emphasizes the importance of understanding and valuing various aesthetic theories and preferences in appreciating and interpreting art.

The Driftwood Scenario

During the process of building an identity as an artist, each must answer this question: "What is art?" Each answer will be different, because every artist holds unique perspectives and beliefs about the intersections of art and beauty. Every artist approaches their work from their own framework of personal preferences.

Consider this story, a well-known artist happens to be vacationing in the small community where you are curator of the local museum. One day you see her walking along the beach, and you tell her that your museum—although funds are low—would be greatly honored to be given one of her works. He pauses, smiles in an indecipherable way, and bends over to pick up a piece of driftwood that is lying on the beach. "Here," she says with a glint in her eye, "Take this. Call it Driftwood."



What do you think?

1. Would you consider Driftwood art? Why or why not?
2. Would you put this object in your museum if you were the museum curator?
3. Does the act of creating a work of art or the act of coming up with an idea make something art?

Credit: Cindy Ingram, Art Class Curator

Aesthetic Theories: Approaches to Art

When is something considered a work of art?

The branch of philosophy that defines the various views or approaches to art is called aesthetics. While this branch of philosophy is formally classified with visual arts, we extend aesthetics to all art forms.

There are many ways to approach the question “What is art?”: one approach is not superior to another. Aesthetics theories are not forms of evaluation: they represent varying views of the nature and purposes of art. Everyone has their own take on what they define as beautiful, functional, pleasing, or interesting. Here are a few beliefs about art as clarified by Erickson and Katter (1977):

- Some artists seem to value the useful, functional purposes that artworks serve.
- Some artists seem to be concerned with the formal order of things.
- Some artists seem to be concerned with expressing feelings, moods, or ideas.
- Some artists seem to want to make things look real.



What are your personal beliefs about art? What do you value?



What are your personal beliefs about art? What do you value? Aesthetics applies to the art we make as well as the art we view.

What are aesthetic theories?

The following terms and definitions provide an overview of various aesthetic theories or approaches to defining art. These theories can be applied to any image, play, dance, song, poem or other work of art; they can be used separately or in combination, although combination is more common. Some theories apply more appropriately for particular works; some were more prevalent during different ages or in specific cultures.

Other theories, such as sociological and neo-rationalist, are not discussed here. New theories are being developed to help define recently proposed aspects of art and performance. The field of aesthetics is constantly evolving: how can we encourage students to let their "views" of art evolve too?

REPRESENTATIONAL

Art should look real or lifelike. It imitates, mimics, or copies something real. Quality is judged by faithfulness to the original. Early artworks were idealized; later works included more accurate or realistic depictions of nature or life.



Quelle: Deutsche Fotothek

Scenes from the play "Hamlet" by William Shakespeare at the Deutsches Theater Berlin, via Wikimedia Commons

EXPRESSIVE

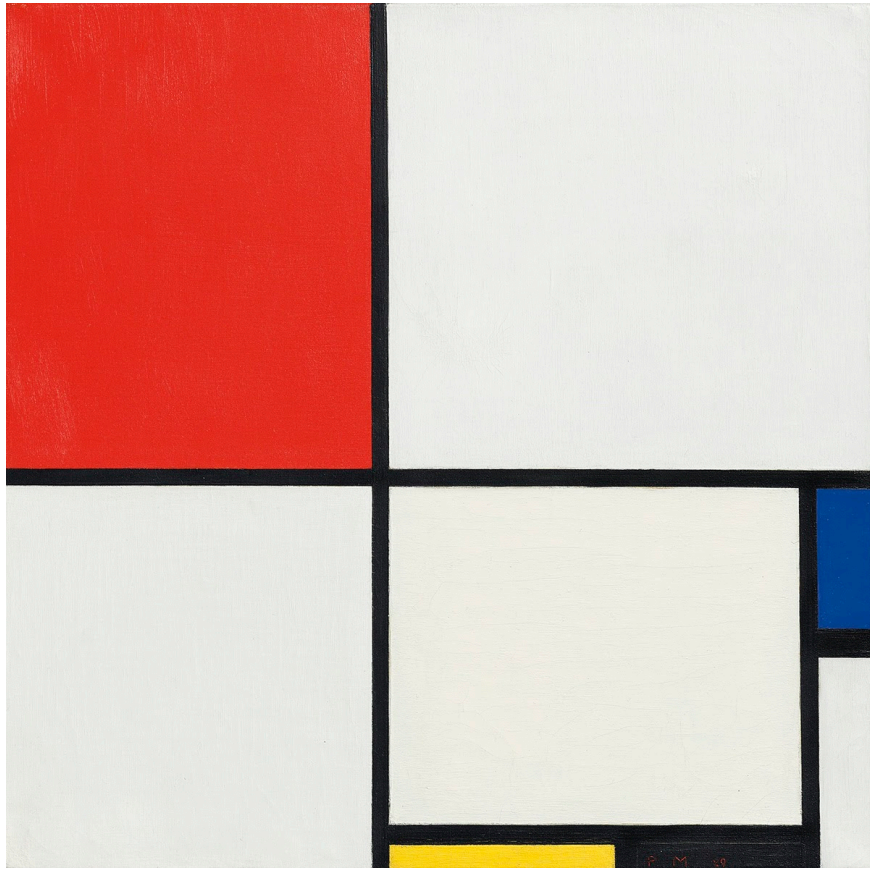
Art should communicate strong feelings, ideas, moods, or emotions of the artist. It can be ugly if ugliness is expressed. Quality is based on the ability to arouse the greatest emotions. Art in abstraction can be expressive through symbolic representation.



Portrait of Martha Graham and Bertram Ross, in Visionary recital, 1961, via Wikimedia Commons

FORMALIST

Quality of art is in its perfection of form. The formalist analyzes artistic elements and principles: for example, line, color, shape, balance, and unity. Quality requires coordination of all components. Subject matter and viewer associations are not relevant to evaluation.



Composition No. III with red, blue, yellow, and black, by Piet Mondrian, 1929, via Wikimedia Commons

FEMINIST

According to feminists, art should be interpreted through a woman's point of view. Judgement of quality is based on aspects of being a woman. This view reduces the distinction between art and craft. Gendered, demographic, and socio-economic contexts of an artwork should be considered.



Self-Portrait by Mary Cassatt, 1878, via Wikimedia Commons

INSTITUTIONALIST

Objects become art because they are exhibited, displayed, or promoted. An institute (gallery, museum, or publication) considers something art, therefore it is art. Quality is based on status or recognition of the institute. Remember the piece of driftwood at the beginning of the chapter?



PLEASURE (HEDONISTIC)

Art is valued for its potential to give pleasure. This position is based on an individual's valuing that pleasure is good and pain is bad. A statement of a work's quality is based on the degree of pleasure received by the individual viewer or participant, not on how well-received the piece is by the masses. Such art usually presents an idealized view.



Charlie Chaplin, (1915) by P.D Jankens (Fred Chess), via Wikimedia Commons

INSTRUMENTALIST

Art should serve a social purpose. Art is an instrument to produce desired effects: thus, it should portray vivid and extensive experiences or purposes. Instrumentalist art often encourages viewers to believe a certain political, social, moral, or economic idea.



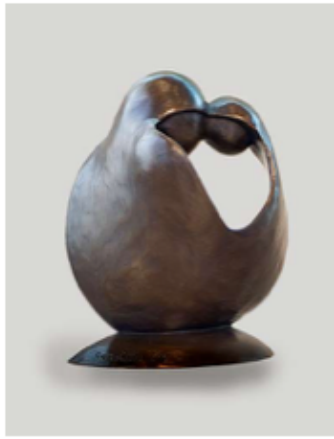
Maya Angelou reciting "On the Pulse of Morning," at President Bill Clinton's inauguration, 1993.

Representative to Non-Representative Art

Fans of representational art argue that art should reflect reality as closely as possible and that performance or visual product should be a literal depiction or representation of what the event, object, or emotion looks like in real life. Others argue that the quality of the work is judged primarily by its inherent ability to communicate the strongest feelings, and that a realistic depiction is unnecessary because artwork can be non-representational. Because of these varying aesthetic opinions, all artwork falls somewhere on the spectrum of representational to non-representational art.



Artist: Woodruff Nash



Artist: Ben Roth



Artist: Henry Moore

Where does your preference lie on the scale of representative to non-representative art? How do you feel about abstraction and minimalist art? Is it beautiful? Interesting? Pointless? Purposeful? [Click here to watch a video](#) with great examples and descriptions of representation, minimalism, and abstraction in visual art.

[Click here to read a blog article](#) titled "Teaching the Skill of Abstraction" for an example of how to help students explore the spectrum of realistic to abstract expression.

Facilitating Discussions on Aesthetics in the Classroom

Helping students identify their personal preferences, aesthetic sensibilities, and individual definitions of beauty teaches students to think and behave like an artist. Recognizing these personal facets gives them confidence in their original work and confidence to engage in discussion regarding works of art. Aesthetic awareness helps students recognize and accept their own subjective opinions while respecting similar or dissimilar viewpoints offered by others.

It is important for students not only to identify their own aesthetic inclinations but also to experience a variety of preferences offered by their peers, teachers, and professional artists as well. Students can enjoy shared understanding with those who appreciate a similar aesthetic to them and simultaneously benefit from respectful dialogue with those who see things differently. Exposure to contrasting opinions can help young minds expand the number of possibilities they can visualize in their mind for beauty and success, offering the opportunity for further exploration, experimentation, and impact through their creative and intellectual work in the future.

An aesthetics education can teach students constructive ways to offer feedback to their peers on creative projects or precise performance tasks such as spelling words or reciting math facts. Students who view their school curriculum and learning through the lens of aesthetics often begin to think more deeply about their surrounding world and are more apt to make relevant connections to their future goals, values, and personal beliefs.

The following questions are designed to act as conversation starters to help you explore aesthetics with your students in the classroom. Read below for more information on important behaviors to reinforce during these conversations.

1. WHO CAN CREATE ART?

Animals? Nature? Children? Laypersons? Crafts persons? Artists? Consider who gets to decide that an individual is an artist: peers, critics, individuals, museum goers, the public, or a museum curator?

2. WHAT QUALIFIES SOMETHING AS ART?

The length of time required to create the work? The cost of materials? It requires great skill to produce? The creation of the artwork required extensive training, planning, and time? Does it have great historical value? Is the artwork's aesthetic similar to well-known artworks? Is it beautiful?

3. WHEN IS SOMETHING ART?

Who gets to decide what is art? When an artist says it is? When an expert says it is? When a critic says it is? Does its price indicate its value? When was it sold? For how much? Does art have to be beautiful? Can it be ugly? What makes something ugly or beautiful?

4. WHERE DO YOU FIND ART?

Is art everywhere? On display in an art gallery, on a billboard, in a magazine? Is art found on television, in a book, or outside? Do mass-marketed works for purchase at retail outlets count as art?

5. WHY IS THERE ART? WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF ART?

Does the artwork communicate visually? Is it a record of people, places or events? Is the artist or artwork expressing ideas, thoughts, experiences, or feelings? Does the work stimulate thinking or reasoning? Is it designed to imitate or abstract real objects? Is the purpose of the artist or work to influence society or elicit change? As a participant, does the work stimulate your senses of sight or touch?

Behaviors for Discussions on Aesthetics

Discussions on aesthetics are full of opinions, subjective statements, and differing points of view. These discussions are great opportunities to practice civil discourse, engage in respectful dialogue, and build conversation and communication skills in the classroom. Whether reading a work of art created by a seasoned artist or facilitating opportunities for students to reflect and offer feedback on their work or the work of their peers, practicing the following behaviors helps create the right environment for productive discussion and deeper learning.

STUDENTS:

- Present reasons or arguments to support their view
- Respond to what someone else says
- Change an earlier decision if desired

TEACHERS:

- Clarify what has been said
- Encourage everyone to be involved in some way
- Ask questions
- Present varying or opposing views
- Summarize arguments, affirm positions, and develop closure
- Remind students that aesthetics is not a defined science and is, therefore, open to change

Who is an artist?

An artist is a creator. An artist is an individual who creates a product, idea, concept, or design with a specific purpose in mind. The purpose could be pleasure, function, emotion, or communication. The purpose could be just to explore the possibilities!

An artist uses their imagination and experiments with alternatives. Artists persist through opposition and dream and fantasize about things. Artists can concentrate for long periods of time and work hard, although it feels easy when the [artist is in flow](#).

Artists look at things more closely than other people do. They expand old ideas to create new ideas and share new perspectives. Artists can see things differently as they make unique connections between disparate concepts, principles, lived experiences, and ideas. As artists explore different ways of doing and thinking, they rearrange history, memory, experiences and ideas in new and interesting ways.

Artists take risks and value failure and mistakes as tools for growth. They feel the freedom to act and do something because it is interesting. Artists are vulnerable and exhibit their work. They respond to art, they feel it, think about it, and comment on it.

Artists shape materials. They form ideas into pictures, movements, sounds, and speech. They gather, combine, rearrange, and use a plethora of tools to fit their design. Artists use this transformative process to express feelings. They connect with others and share their stories. Artists collaborate with others and inspire others to engage in art. Artists change the world.

Questions to consider:

- What is art in your classroom? What does it look like? Who makes it? How is it created? Who says it is art?
- Who are the artists in your classroom? Are you an artist?
- What aesthetic preferences are exhibited in your classroom? What are your own aesthetic preferences? Do your preferences remain constant for each art form? How are they different across various art forms?
- What is the purpose of art in your classroom? How do you describe it to others?



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