1.2: What is Visual Art?

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

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

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

1.2.1 Historic Development of the Idea of Art

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

1.2.1.1 Mimesis

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

![Figure 1.2 Zeuxis conceding defeat: "I have deceived the birds, but Parhassios has deceived Zeuxis." Artist: Joachim von Sandrart; engraving by Johann Jakob von Sandrart Author: (Public Domain; "Fae").](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Art_-_Design_Context_and_Meaning_(Sachant_et_al…

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

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

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

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


1.2.1.3 Significant Form

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

1.2.1.4 Art world

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

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


1.2.2 Definition of Art

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

![Science and Art](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Art_-_Design_Context_and_Meaning_(Sachant_et_al…)

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

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

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

When challenged with a question or problem about what is best, we first ask, “What do I personally know about it?” When we realize our personal resources are limited, we might ask friends, neighbors, and relatives what they know. In addition to these important resources, the educated person can refer to a larger body of possible solutions drawn from a study of the history of literature, philosophy, and art: What did the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley say about truth in his essay Defense of Poetry (1840)? (Figure 1.5) What did the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau claim about human nature in his treatise Emile or On Education (1762)? (Figure 1.6) What did Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675, Netherlands) show us about the quiet dignity of the domestic space in his painting Woman Holding a Balance? (Figure 1.7) Through experiencing these works of art and literature, our ideas about such things can be tested and validated or found wanting.
We will examine works of visual art from a diverse range of cultures and periods. The challenge for you as the reader is to increase your ability to interpret works of art through the use of context, visual dynamics, and introspection, and to integrate them into a coherent worldview. The best outcome of an encounter with art is an awakening of the mind and spirit to a new point of view. A mind stretched beyond itself never returns to its original dimension.

1.2.3 The Distinction of Fine Art

From our definition of art proposed above, it would seem that craft and fine art are indistinguishable as both come from the mind into the world. But the distinction between craft and art is real and important. This distinction is most commonly understood as one based on the use or end purpose of an object, or as an effect of the material used. Clay, textiles, glass, and jewelry were long considered the province of craft, not art. If an object’s intended use was a part of daily living, then it was generally thought to be the product of craft, not fine art. But many objects originally intended to be functional, such as quilts, are now thought to qualify as fine art. (Figure 1.8)
So what could be the difference between art and craft? Anyone who has been exposed to training in a craft such as carpentry or plumbing recognizes that craft follows a formula, that is, a set of rules that govern not only how the work is to be conducted but also what the outcome of that work must be. The level of craft is judged by how closely the end product matches the pre-determined outcome. We want our houses to stand and water to flow when we turn on our faucets. Fine art, on the other hand, results from a free and open-ended exploration that does not depend on a pre-determined formula for its outcome or validity. Its outcome is surprising and original. Almost all fine art objects are a combination of some level both of craft and art. Art stands on craft, but goes beyond it.

1.2.4 Why Art Matters

American physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer is considered a “father of the atomic bomb” for the role he played in developing nuclear weapons as part of the Manhattan Project during World War II (1939-1945). (Figure 1.9) Upon completion of the project, quoting from the Hindu epic tale Bhagavad Gita, he stated, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” Clearly, Oppenheimer had read more than physics texts in his education, which fit him well for his important role during World War II.
When we train in mathematics and the sciences, for example, we become very powerful. Power can be used well or badly. Where in our schools is the coursework on how to use power wisely? Today a liberal arts college education requires students to survey the arts and history of human cultures in order to examine a wide range of ideas about wisdom and to humanize the powerful. With that in mind, in every course taken in the university, it is hoped that you will recognize the need to couple your increasing intellectual power with a study of what is thought to be wisdom, and to view each educational experience in the humanities as part of the search for what is better in ourselves and our communities.

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