

Student Name: _____

Art 8 Art Philosophy

What is Aesthetics?

MAKING JUDGMENTS ABOUT JUDGMENTS

"A Picture is worth a thousand words." —Napoleon Bonaparte

Strictly speaking, aesthetics is not the same thing as the philosophy of art. Aesthetics is a broader term, not just referring to created artwork but to matters of taste in general. Translated from the original Greek, the word encompasses any sort of sensory perception. It wasn't until the 18th century that the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten gave aesthetics its modern meaning. In short, the study of aesthetics, as we understand it today, is concerned with how our judgments of taste relate to our language, our minds, and our surroundings.



Of course, this book is about art first, so our primary focus will be on the branch of aesthetics interested in art—the philosophy of art. Some of the unique questions found in the philosophy of art involve the value and purpose of art, the role art plays in different societies, and the aesthetic trends in the artistic world.

Think about the *Mona Lisa* (page 12). It's probably the most famous painting in the world. Is it your favorite painting? Why is it so famous? Why is it worth so much? If you saw it for the first time today and had never heard of it, would you find it beautiful? Instead of blindly accepting the standards and traditions of our culture, a little philosophizing will challenge us to justify our beliefs about beauty and the arts. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- We constantly perceive the world through our five senses. Why do we like some sensations more than others?
- How might the study of aesthetics affect our experience of art?

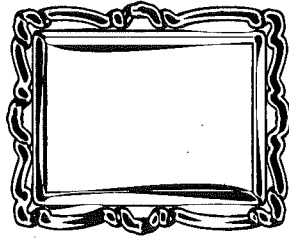
What is Art?

A LEXICOGRAPHER'S NIGHTMARE

"Art is either plagiarism or revolution." —Paul Gauguin

The most fundamental question in the philosophy of art is that of the nature or definition of art in general. Of course, many philosophers have debated the question but never has there been universal satisfaction with any one theory.

It's worth asking whether it is even possible to properly address the question, "what is art?" or whether there is any practical purpose in doing so. The arguments may be fascinating to some, but supposing a proper definition is even possible, what would its creation accomplish? Part of art's appeal is in its freedom from rules and boundaries, and time has shown that art is a fluid concept defying rigid classification. Whenever new art forms emerge from revolutionary minds, humanity gradually adapts to the change and the concept of art is modified.



So, it is important that radical views on art receive open-minded consideration. However, if the idea of art is going to retain meaningful specificity, it is going to need some boundaries. If everything could be considered art, then the word "art" would be void of meaning. We must use some discretion in identifying art in order to prevent such a fall into semantic oblivion.

When it comes to matters of taste and technique in the world of art, subjectivity is all well and good, but it may become troublesome if we become too relativistic with our categories. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

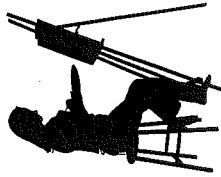
- How would you define "art"?
- Do you believe it is possible to define art in a way that satisfies everyone?

What is an Artist?

DO YOU MAKE THE CUT?

“The artist is not a different kind of person, but every person is a different kind of artist.” —Eric Gill

The above quote is charming in its political correctness, making us feel all warm and fuzzy inside as we bask in our newfound status as artists, but not everyone would agree with it. Other basic definitions of an artist would include “someone who actually does art,” “someone who actually does art well,” and “someone who does art for a living.” Well, which is it?



Obviously, the question is closely related to our previous topic, *what is art?* If art includes everything from composing symphonies to making coffee, then we certainly are all accomplished artists. However, if we only think of the “fine arts” as true art, then the number of artists in the world quickly diminishes. Even then, the word can be used in different ways. It’s one thing if someone sees you doodling on a notepad and says, “You’re a pretty good artist!” and quite another if someone asks you what you do and you say, “I’m an artist.”

Sometimes it’s a close call. We call someone who paints portraits an artist, but we might not say the same about a person who paints houses. What about someone who paints furniture? What about the person who carved the furniture? They are all skilled at their craft, and they all contribute to the beauty of our surroundings. It’s funny how arbitrary we can be when separating our concepts. We should be careful though; people’s identities are at stake! —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- What does it take for a person to be a true artist?
- Would you consider yourself an artist? Why or why not?

The Purpose of Art

WHAT'S THE POINT?

"All art is quite useless."

—Oscar Wilde, *A Picture of Dorian Gray, Preface*



Why do people create art? They may want to imitate an experience, express a personal passion, or just make a few bucks. But why *should* people make art? Are some motives more virtuous than others?

One popular contemporary view, concisely summarized in Wilde's quote, is that art should not attempt to achieve anything at all. In other words, the noblest art, perhaps the only true art, is "art for art's sake." Under this view, the only valid reason for making art is to *make art*. Any other motive, such as the communication of meaning or the paying of bills, devalues the art or disqualifies it altogether.

Opponents of the "art for art's sake" mindset are not satisfied with unemployed art; they want results! Some philosophers go so far as to demand that art perform a specific function, such as reflect truth, work to unify society, or at least decorate a room.

Many of us probably reside somewhere in between the two extremes, recognizing virtue in the mere creation of art but having greater respect for that which seeks to better humanity or improve the lives of individuals. So then, if altruistic intent is more admirable than selfish or indifferent motives, should all art aim to produce an overall good in the world? Or is the simple desire to make art as good a reason as any? —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

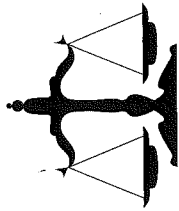
- Should all art strive to fulfill a certain purpose? If so, what should be its goal?
- Is the creation of art, *per se*, a noble ambition?

The Value of Art

IS IT WORTH IT?

"Things are only worth what you make them worth." —Molière

When we talk about determining art's value, we can be referring to many different things. Judgments can be made about art in general, categories of art, or individual pieces of artwork. Likewise, art can be of value to the world as a whole, to specific groups, or to individuals. Finally, the concept of value can refer to monetary worth or to various, intangible kinds of significance. With so many scenarios of value assessment possible, it is extremely difficult to develop any meaningful system of deciding art's value.



Consider this example: In 2006, a Klimt portrait (page 332) sold for \$135 million. Was it worth it? You might not think so, but the owner obviously did (and hopefully still does!). What made it so valuable to him? Its composition? Its history? The fact that it would look perfect above his yellow couch? Who knows?! The point is that its value cannot be resolutely determined. Value is a slippery, incalculable notion, dependent on innumerable factors.

Any attempt to quantify value arrives at the same dilemma. A person or society will find value in that which it deems important. Art, as an inherently subjective entity, is especially elusive. A religious person might tremendously value art that provides spiritual inspiration, while a dog lover might place more value in anything relating to dogs. It's a matter of taste and priorities. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- *What piece of art is most valuable to you?*
- *Do you think everyone should see the same value in it?*
- *Can you make a confident, universal claim about art's overall value in our world?*

What Makes Something Beautiful?

BESIDES PHOTOSHOP®...

"Everything has its beauty, but not everyone sees it." —Confucius

If we can agree that beauty is that which provides pleasure or joy to the senses or the mind, then we can proceed to the more challenging task of deciding which qualities produce beauty. It is often said that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," implying that the concept of beauty is not static but contingent upon each individual's unique preferences, feelings, and circumstances. However, there are some human experiences that almost everyone describes as beautiful.

Most would agree that works of art like van Gogh's *Starry Night* (page 132) or Beethoven's *Für Elise* are beautiful, or that diamonds or sunsets are beautiful. On the other hand, "beautiful" is not usually one of the first words chosen to describe the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard or the contents of a portapotty. These trends suggest that there are certain properties and proportions that are generally more pleasing than others.

There is no shortage of theories about the roots of beauty. Everything from general rules (curves are more beautiful than straight lines) to rigid mathematical formulas (the Fibonacci Sequence, page 209) have been offered as indisputable explanations for the true source of beauty, but there is always a counterexample to refute such narrow claims. Perhaps we should be content with the delight that beauty brings us, but then we wouldn't be very good philosophers! —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- How much of beauty is relative to individual experience and how much is the same for everyone?
- How is beauty different from goodness? Can thoughts and actions be beautiful?

Creativity

THE NATURE OF INVENTIVE INTELLIGENCE

"The world is but a canvas to the imagination."

—Henry David Thoreau



Creativity is a bizarre, often misunderstood concept. It is typically classified as a sort of mystical enemy to the relatively boring world of logic in the epic battle between the left and right hemispheres of the brain. In reality, though, creativity is more of a friend to logic. In fact, you could say the two have a rather codependent relationship. Creativity allows us to come up with new ideas and make connections between preexisting ones. Logic guides the process and directs it toward fruitful ends.

Although it's commonly associated with art, creativity is involved in every type of thought, whenever we think in an innovative way. In art, though, there is another, more enigmatic aspect of creativity that can yield some truly wondrous results—imagination. Our minds have the marvelous ability to experience ethereal, fabricated sensations of things that aren't really there.

Essential to both the creation and experience of art, imagination takes us temporarily out of our immediate surroundings and into a shadowy realm of alternate realities. While visiting these other worlds, we gain new experiences that become assimilated into our conceptual network. In this way, our creative connections grow exponentially, weaving between worlds of reality and illusion. In art, creativity and imagination are free to run wild and reach their full potential. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

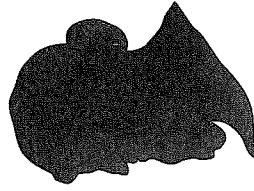
- Where do the invaluable mental powers of creativity and imagination come from?
- The mind? The brain? Evolution? God?
- How is imagination involved in experiences of art?

Plato (427–347 BCE)

ART AS IMITATION OF IMITATION

“But what if man had eyes to see the true beauty—the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life...?”

—Plato, Symposium, 212



You may vaguely recall from Philosophy 101 that a guy named Play-Dough wrote about some cave and was really into these things called “forms.” Well, besides the spelling, you wouldn’t be too far off. Plato was definitely obsessed with the unattainable ideals that he (and his mentor Socrates before him) called Forms. In Plato’s view, these perfect ideas exist only in the mysterious Realm of Forms, outside the world of sensory experience. So, our earthly perceptions of virtues like Truth or Beauty are only inferior approximations of their corresponding Forms.

This means that when an artist creates an original work that imitates human experience, the result is nothing more than an imitation of an imitation of the Forms. Artists with a keen sense of measurement and proportion can come closer than others in reflecting the essence of Beauty. But, because of the senses’ inherent fallibility, human creations will never capture the perfection of the Forms.

Since art is always twice removed from the Forms, Plato is not a huge fan of it. However, he respects art’s ability to shape people’s thoughts and feelings, and therefore believes it should be strictly censored by the wisest members of a society. —CKG

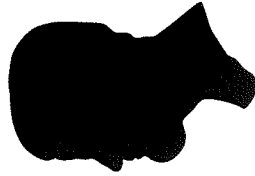
QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- *Is any work of art ever perfectly beautiful, or is it always flawed in some way?*
- *Are the five senses capable of receiving universal truths about our world?*

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

ART AS INSPIRATION

“...generally art partly completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and partly imitates her.” —Aristotle, *Ethics*; Book II, pt. 8



In some ways, the Greek philosopher Aristotle agrees with his teacher Plato. He grants that most art is imitative in nature and that beauty is dependent on a proper balance and ordering of measurements. He also recognizes art's capacity to incite enthusiasm in an individual. However, unlike Plato, who sees art's powers of persuasion as a threat to society, Aristotle admires its ability to affect people's thoughts and emotions.

He is fascinated by the way humans respond to and interact with art, especially poetry and epic tragedy, pointing out that while fictional stories may not correspond to factual events, they can still contain universal truths. In such a way, Aristotle believes art can actually improve on that which it imitates.

In *Poetics*, he explains that people gravitate toward art because they see it as a reflection of their own lives or of human existence in general. In many cases, art may offer empathy and consolation to its recipient. At other times, it can inspire people or even, as in the case of tragic drama, illuminate the perils of foolish behavior.

The experience of painting, poetry, or music can provide us with a better understanding of our purpose and predicament. Aristotle believes that when created nobly and performed with masterful technique, art can foster moral growth and an overall improvement of society. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

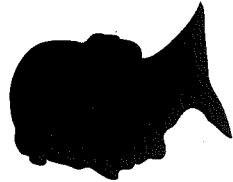
- Has an experience of art ever inspired you to change your character or behavior?
- Should all art strive to reflect universal truths about human life?

St. Augustine (354-430 CE)

BRINGING GOD INTO THE PICTURE

"...to us promised a vision of beauty—the beauty of whose imitation all other things are beautiful, and by comparison with which all other things are unsightly."

—Augustine, *De Ordine*, 19.51



Like Plato, St. Augustine (pronounced *uh-GUH-stinn*) rejects physical, bodily things in favor of metaphysical, spiritual ideals. However, Augustine is also a Christian who relies on scripture to guide his beliefs and behavior. It's a unique theological challenge for him to reconcile the Christianity in his heart with the Platonism in his head, especially when analyzing art.

In many ways, art is a physical pursuit. Every art form requires tangible materials, and the reception of art involves sensory perception. For people like Augustine, then, who frown on physical objects and distrust sensory experience, art must be a defective enterprise.

But the implications change when the topic of art is viewed through a Christian lens. God made the physical universe, created humans in his own image, and became flesh in the person of Jesus. So creation in general can't be completely worthless to Augustine, right?

He recalls the Garden of Eden story to help sort things out. God gave humans free will so they could have moral responsibility, but that also gave them the freedom to screw up His perfect creation, which they wasted little time in doing. Whenever humans create, their inherent sinfulness taints the results. According to Augustine, we can only experience true beauty when we experience God. —CKG

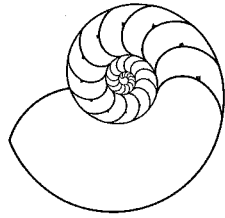
QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- How might a theist view art differently from an atheist or agnostic?
- What might be some potential conflicts between Christian belief and Platonic Dualism in the analysis of art?

Patterns of Beauty in Nature and Art

THE GOLDEN RATIO AND THE FIBONACCI SEQUENCE

"If there is a God, he's a great mathematician." —Paul Dirac



What do the *Mona Lisa*, the Parthenon, and a common pinecone have in common? They all conform to a specific mathematical ratio, called the "Golden Ratio," that has fascinated the world's great thinkers for millennia. It may surprise you, but there is an intimate and longstanding relationship between beauty, art, and math.

One of the easiest ways to define the Golden Ratio is through the famous sequence of numbers named after the mathematician Fibonacci. See if you can identify the pattern in the following set of numbers: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34... Each number is the sum of the previous two numbers. When you divide any of the numbers (after the first few) by the one before it, you get roughly the same number (about 1.6, or ϕ), and the value becomes increasingly refined as the numbers get larger.

This "golden" proportion, when applied visually, creates specific kinds of rectangles and spirals whose precise shapes we find all over the place in nature. Cones, shells, and flowers, for example, typically illustrate the pattern in the elegant arrangement of their features. The uncanny recurrence of the ratio in nature, and its mysterious connection with beauty, has inspired many artists, from Dalí to the architects of the Great Pyramids, to employ it in their own compositions. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- Why is this pattern found so often in nature?
- What would make one set of proportions more beautiful than another?

Animals, Art, and Consciousness

WHERE ARE THE LINES?

"All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others."

—George Orwell



Creativity and art are typically thought to be exclusively human domains. We see lots of beautiful patterns in nature, and animals do some pretty clever things, yet we usually don't consider such occurrences to be art. We also tend to assume that non-humans do not appreciate art. My cat doesn't seem to enjoy Mozart any more than the sounds of the trash truck outside.

We don't talk about beauty as art unless it's created on purpose by an intelligent mind. But what about the behavior of some more sophisticated animals, like the elephants that we see on page 16? They hold paintbrushes, dip them in paint, and carefully produce clear, recognizable images on canvas. Is it art? In one sense we say yes, but a skeptic might say no, arguing that the elephants have no concept of art but are simply trained to reproduce the creative acts of their human trainers. We can then point to the studied work of gorillas and chimpanzees who willfully paint pictures of their companions and surroundings, sometimes from memory. At that point it seems silly not to call their work art.

When we see art created and enjoyed by animals other than humans, it raises a whole bunch of really tricky, touchy issues. When an ape draws a picture and conveys an abstract understanding of its content, we are immediately faced with major arguments not only about consciousness, but ethics, anthropology, and even theology. It's just another way art gets to the core of who we are and what we believe. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

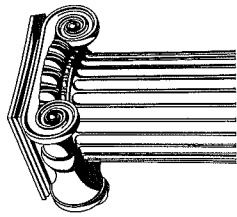
- What level of consciousness is needed to create art?
- What kinds of issues might be raised by a gorilla's creation of art?

Ancient Aesthetics

FROM REAL CAVES TO ALLEGORICAL CAVES

"Mankind is poised midway between the gods and the beasts."

—Plotinus



Prehistoric people didn't have it easy. Outside of Greece and prior to its glory days, the world was overwhelmingly mysterious and confusing. On page 10, you can learn about cave paintings that exhibit the ancient human's desperation to make sense of a world that seemed infinite. Superstition and awe were the most natural responses for our planet's earliest human inhabitants, and art's power to broadcast raw emotion was perhaps never better suited to a time.

You can imagine the excitement when the universe first showed signs of order in the equations of men like Pythagoras and Thales. Convinced that there were forces at work greater than themselves, directing the cosmos and perhaps giving it meaning, these thinkers pursued the sources of their work's harmony. Hence the power and perfection of the gods, the ideal forms, and the portrayal of ultimate reality in theater, sculpture, and literature.

It's important to remember that academic disciplines were still in their infancy in Ancient Greece. The philosophers who studied things like the meaning of life were the same people trying to figure out math, science, ethics, art, and pretty much everything else. Art would only have been a cursory interest for someone like Aristotle, who was busy trying to organize the first systems of classifying the entire natural world when he wasn't tutoring Alexander the Great. Still though, there was no denying the impact art had on people's lives. Clearly art was here to stay. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- What might have inspired the earliest artwork?
- How does ancient Greek art reflect the beliefs and concerns of that time?

Medieval Aesthetics

DIVINE INSPIRATION

“Ad pulcritudinem tria requiruntur, integritas, consonantia, claritas.”

—St. Thomas Aquinas

A lot happened during the thousand years between the fall of the Roman Empire and the dawn of the Renaissance, but we tend to lump it all together. One reason for this is that the bulk of medieval thought was unified by a core belief in God. The Italian monk Thomas Aquinas is known first and foremost as a Christian theologian, yet he and his fellow saints are also the first place we look for any scholarly output from the Middle Ages.



You could say, rather ironically, that a thinker in the Dark Ages had to be quite a Renaissance man. As it was in Ancient Greece, the same guys trying to figure out the right way to live were refining the scientific method and analyzing art. The main difference in medieval times was that Christ had been born and the Christian God had replaced the pagan gods.

Toward the end of James Joyce's excellent novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, protagonist and aspiring young artist Stephen Daedalus discusses the definition of beauty with his friend Lynch. After citing the Latin text quoted above, Daedalus translates it as, “Three things are needed for beauty, wholeness, harmony, and radiance,” and he accepts the words of St. Thomas as his own criteria for beauty. The choice of descriptors is very characteristic of medieval thought, reflective of the Judeo-Christian conception of God, and for Joyce to quote it says quite a bit about the era's enduring impact on Western thought. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

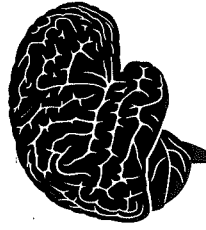
- How would a Christian worldview influence a theory of aesthetics?
- Do you agree with Aquinas's requirements for beauty?



Modern Aesthetics

CELEBRATING HUMANITY

"Aesthetic matters are fundamental for the harmonious development of both society and the individual." —Friedrich Schiller



Society and the individual—that's what the modern era was all about. After millennia of submitting to the mysteries of supernatural authority, people began to believe in their own superiority. The arrival of the Renaissance in the 14th century was the dawn of mankind's trust in itself. Thus, humanism and naturalism were born under the veneer of enlightenment. These ideologies had faith in the human brain's ability to discover all truth through the natural world.

During that time, humankind's rationality was also celebrated in the art world. Finding inspiration in the realism of classical art, artists like Giotto di Bondone began to use lifelike perspective in their work. Later artists like da Vinci and Michelangelo meticulously studied the human body and represented its form in astonishing detail.

Exceptional progress in science and technology led many philosophers to cherish their own rational abilities and reject traditional notions of divinity; hence the ideas of people like David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche. Eventually, however, the fixation with reason and cold machinery provoked reactions of Expressionism and Romanticism, where an apparent nostalgia for mystery rekindled imagery of passion and the sublime.

Finally, after it seemed like art had been dissected from every angle, the slippery slope of innovation dropped into the foggy seas of Postmodernism, where categories break down and subjectivity reigns supreme. —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- How would artistic ideals change with God out of the picture?
- What kinds of art might reflect a relativistic, postmodern worldview?

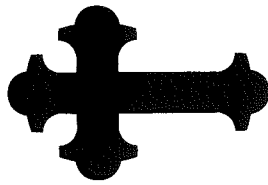
Art and Christianity

ART IMITATING GOD

“Pictures about Jesus’s childhood, teachings, sufferings and death are—regardless of our beliefs—in a very real sense pictures about us.”

—Neil MacGregor, *Seeing Salvation*

The Christian religion is unique in its belief that God literally became a physical, human person. Of course, the belief in Jesus Christ as both God and man presents some dense philosophical puzzles, but it also potentially opens the door for certain kinds of worship—and artwork—that might be unacceptable in other religions. For example, in the minds of many Christians, since God revealed himself in human form, worshipping that person (including his physical characteristics) is worshipping God. Artistic portrayals of God through the face of Jesus (or other, more abstract symbols) are therefore accepted by most Christians.



In Orthodox branches of Christianity, religious icons bearing the face of Jesus, Mary, and other saints are made to be objects of worship. However, the Roman Catholic Church and most Protestant Christian groups oppose the worship of icons as idolatry (see the Ten Commandments), hence the various schisms and iconoclasm that decorate the timelines of history books.

A large percentage of the world has been saturated with Christian art during the last couple of millennia. From the poetry of early Church fathers to the architecture of medieval cathedrals, from Renaissance paintings to modern worship music, art has long been a source of inspiration and comfort for Christians. The story of Christian art is not without conflict, but then what good story is? —CKG

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- How would the world of art be different today if it weren't for Christian art?
- Is it okay for a person who worships Jesus Christ to worship a picture of him?