Introduction

What Is Art?

The Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) is said to have created a painting, titled *Maple Leaves on a River*, by dipping the feet of a chicken in red paint and letting the bird run freely on a sheet of paper he had just covered in blue paint. Although we know that Hokusai was an unconventional character, we cannot be certain that the story is true, because *Maple Leaves on a River* no longer exists. If we think about this curious story for a while, however, we can begin to understand the most basic question addressed in this book: What is art? This question is not an easy one to answer, because people define art in many individual ways. In Hokusai’s case, he wanted to make viewers of his work feel the peaceful sensations of a fall day by a river, without actually showing them what a real river and real leaves look like. In this instance, art communicated a sensation to its audience.

In nineteenth-century Japan, art could be a means to encourage the quiet contemplation of nature, but to an Egyptian artist almost 3,000 years earlier, art would have meant something very different. The Egyptian who in the tenth century BCE decorated the wooden coffin of Nespawershefi with a painting of the Sun god Re had a quite different idea of rivers in mind from the one Hokusai conceived. For ancient Egyptians, rivers were important for survival. The Egyptians depended on the flooding of the River Nile to grow their crops. Rivers also had religious significance. Egyptians believed that during the daytime Re sailed across a great celestial ocean in his day boat. By night, the Sun god traveled in his evening boat along a river...

0.1 The Journey of the Sun God Re, detail from the inner coffin of Nespawershefi. Third Intermediate Period, 990–969 BCE. Plastered and painted wood. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, England
the underworld, but before he could rise again he had to defeat his enemy, the serpent Apophis, which in 0.1 can be seen swimming in the river. Here the river is again suggested rather than being realistically portrayed. It is a place of danger, not of contemplation, and if Re does not emerge victorious, the world will be deprived of the life-giving light of the Sun. Re, who in the image is seated, is protected by another god carrying a spear. He travels with several attendants, including a baboon. The choice of this subject was appropriate for a coffin: no doubt Nespawershefi hoped to emerge from the underworld to live a happy afterlife, just as Re rose again every morning. For the painter of this coffin, art was a way to express profound religious ideas and to invoke beliefs in a happy life after death.

Both of the works we have examined so far are paintings, even though they were painted on different materials for different purposes. If we consider another medium, a print, we can see how another artist from a different era and continent could depict a river in yet another way. For William Wall (1792–1864), working in the United States in the early nineteenth century, rivers and the landscape of which they formed part were a vehicle for expressing nationalistic sentiment and a way of celebrating the expansion and development of America. Wall published the first book that made Americans aware of the sublime beauty of their own scenery. The work shown here is *Fort Edward* (0.2). Wall produced an attractive scene, but this was not all he wanted to communicate to his audience. His print recalls the struggles of empire- and nation-building that took place on this site. As the artist noted: “The ploughshare now peacefully turns up the soil moistened by the blood of thousands: the dust of the merciless Indian and the ambitious European repose in awful amity together.” As if to remind us that the time of the Indian has been replaced by new ways of life, a lone Indian woman passes in front of prosperous European farmsteads. Although
Wall painted an original watercolor of this scene, the print was made by another artist, John Hill.

Finally, before we try to come to some conclusions about the definition of art, consider a work by Louise Nevelson (1899–1988) that also features a river, or, more precisely, a waterfall (0.3). Nevelson constructed twenty-five painted rectangular and square wooden sections inside an overall rectangular frame, measuring 18 × 9 ft. Inside some of the rectangles we can see undulating curved forms that suggest a cascading waterfall or the froth of white water. Other forms in the upper right of the square resemble squirming fish. Clearly, Nevelson’s purpose in this artwork is not to show to us an instantly recognizable likeness of a waterfall full of fish. Instead we are invited to examine closely her carefully constructed work and to feel the sensations of watching water cascade and fish swimming.

If we go back to our original question, what is art?, can our consideration of these four very different works help us to find a quick and simple definition that will tell us whether we are looking at something called art? These four works certainly do not have much in common in terms of their appearance. The definition also cannot include a common range of materials (in fact, art can be made from almost anything). We cannot define art in terms of the kind of choices an artist makes: very few artworks involve a live chicken, but Hokusai used one to make his painting. Nor do these works have a common purpose. The Egyptian coffin painting has a clear religious message. Wall’s print portrays a beautiful landscape but also carries a powerful message of nationalism and colonial conquest. Hokusai’s painting used very simple means to convey restful sensations. Nevelson’s work also focuses on communicating the sensations of being by a river, but in her case with a meticulously constructed geometric suggestion of one.

Perhaps the works do have some things in common, however. We can see that artworks

communicate ideas and emotions (religious feelings or the sensation of watching beautiful fall foliage, for example). The communication of ideas by visual means can help us see the world in new and exciting ways and strengthen our understanding. In other words, art is a form of language. In our contemporary world, some people hold the opinion that art has no boundaries, and that anything can be a work of art. In this book we will examine about 750 artworks made over thousands of years and in all parts of the world, but there will still be many kinds of art that we will not have space to include. The language of art is a living entity that is constantly evolving and changing. Perhaps the most important qualities an artwork can possess are the ability to move the spectator; to convey a message; or to inspire thoughts a person would not otherwise have had.

Where Is Art?

Although so far we have examined only four works of art, you have probably already figured out that there is no single place in which we can find art. We can discover it in a coffin, a book, or a museum. In the modern world we go to museums and art galleries—establishments established specifically to display and care for artworks. If we visit a major museum, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the British Museum in London, we will see that visitors have come from just about every country in the world. But if we consider only works that are displayed in museums and galleries, we will ignore many works that are certainly art. In fact, a great deal of art exists outside such institutions.

You almost certainly have some art in your home: perhaps a painting in the living room, a poster in your bedroom, or a beautifully made flower vase. In parks or other public spaces in most cities there are sculptures and memorials. From 1921 to 1954 Simon Rodia built seventeen interconnected structures on a residential lot in a neighborhood of Los Angeles (0.4). Rodia’s work is now known as the Watts Towers, although he named it Nuestro Pueblo (Spanish for “our town”). Rodia, a construction worker, made his structures out of materials he found or that local people brought to him. The towers are made of steel rods and pipes, wire mesh, and mortar, and decorated with bits of broken glass and pottery. Rodia’s neighbors and the City of Los Angeles did not approve of his work, and efforts were made to destroy it, but in 1990 it was named a National Historic Landmark.

In most American cities there are civic buildings (such as the courthouse or the Capitol) that were designed to impress and to communicate something about the strength of
the Republic and its institutions. The Virginia State Capitol (0.5), designed by Thomas Jefferson, was modeled closely on a famous ancient Roman temple in Nimes, France, built 1,800 years before Jefferson's building. It thereby drew on the symbolic power of ancient Rome.

Who Makes Art?

Who decides what an artwork looks like? The simple answer might seem to be the artist who makes it. We know that art has been made for thousands of years: at least since humans first painted images on the walls of caves, and probably long before then. Much artwork made in the past has not survived, however, so we do not know what it looked like. Even when art did survive, we often have no idea who made it.

The great temples of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome were certainly not the work of one person, and in some cases, we cannot tell if their overall design was the idea of a single individual. Archaeologists have discovered in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt an entire village, Deir el-Medina, which was occupied by artisans who made the great monuments that we admire today. The cathedrals of medieval Europe were the result of the skills of many different artists and artisans: stone carvers, the makers of stained-glass windows, and carpenters who made the furniture. These skilled workers remain mostly anonymous, except for a very few whose names have been found in manuscripts or carved on works of art—for example, the sculptor Gislebertus carved his name on sculptures that adorn the cathedral of Autun, France. But though we may never identify most of these
early artists, it is clear that humans have always wanted to make art. This urge is part of our nature, just like our need to eat and sleep.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Western world, the popular idea of the artist was of a lone individual creating his or her own work to express something very personal. In these centuries it became more common for artists to create their own work, and, in their search for new forms of self-expression, to make art that was often very controversial. But for many centuries before this, very few artists worked alone. Renaissance artists created workshops staffed by artist assistants who carried out most of the work involved in turning their master’s design into a work of art. In nineteenth-century Japan, the eccentric Hokusai was famous around the world for his prints, but he could not have made them alone. A wood carver cut his designs into blocks from which a printer manufactured copies. Even today, some famous artists, such as Jeff Koons, employ other artists to realize their ideas (0.6).

In other words, there is no simple definition to enable us to tell who is an artist and who is

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0.6 Jeff Koons, Rabbit, 1986.
Stainless steel, 41 x 19 x 12".
Edition of 3 and artist’s proof

Medieval: relating to the Middle Ages; roughly, between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance

Renaissance: a period of cultural and artistic change in Europe from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century

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not. If we take a global view, we certainly cannot define an artist by what he or she made. In Western culture during some eras of history, particularly since the Renaissance, painting and sculpture have been considered to be the most important categories of art ("high art"), while others, such as ceramics and furniture, have been considered less important. The term craft was usually applied to such works, and their makers were considered less skilled or of lower status than painters and sculptors. This distinction arose partly because the cost of producing a fine painting of a beautifully carved marble statue was high. Therefore, those became status symbols of the rich and powerful. In other cultures the relative importance of different forms of art was quite different. The people of ancient Peru seem to have placed special value on wool, and those who made fine woolen textiles were likely considered as skillful as a painter would be in our society. In China the art of calligraphy (elegantly painted lettering) was considered one of the highest forms of art. A Chinese encyclopedia of 624 CE included calligraphy and painting in “Skills and arts,” alongside, for example, archery and chess.

For centuries, in Japan, such ceramic objects as tea bowls have been highly esteemed for their beauty. The bowl seen in 0.7 would have been prized for its subtle variations of color, the pleasant tactile sensations of its slightly irregular surface, and its shape. It was designed to be appreciated slowly as the user sipped tea. The artist who made this bowl worked at roughly the same time as the Italian Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), but the two had different ideas of what it meant to be an artist. The Japanese maker of the tea bowl worked in a society that valued tradition. Japanese artists followed with supreme skill the established methods of working and making. Leonardo, however, became famous in an era in Europe that valued individual ingenuity. He was a supremely talented artist whose visionary interests and inventions extended far beyond the visual arts, to engineering and science. Between 1500 and 1503 he created a portrait that is probably the most famous painting in the world. Leonardo was not content to create a likeness of the subject (Lisa Gherardini, wife of a silk merchant in Florence). The Mona Lisa smiles and looks out at the viewer, inviting us to seek in her face, her pose, and the surrounding landscape a meditation on the human soul (0.8). Both the tea cup and the portrait are great works of art, but they display very different ideas of what it means to be an artist.

We must also consider that artworks are not only the result of the work of those who made them, but are also influenced by the input of others: the patrons who employ an artist.

0.7 Tea bowl, 16th century. Stoneware with red glaze [Karatsu ware]. 3 x 10 inches. Indianapolis Museum.
to make a work; the collectors who buy it; and the dealers and gallery owners who sell it. In contemporary times, both the publicist who presents artworks and the critic who reviews them in a newspaper, on TV, or on the Internet help to make an artist's work well known and desirable. All of these people, not just the artist, help to determine what art we see, and to some extent they can influence what we consider to be art. By controlling access to those who buy art, the places where art is displayed, and the media that inform the public about art and artists, they also often influence what kind of art an artist actually produces.
One individual who greatly impacted the production and presentation of art was Isabella d'Este (1474–1539), Marchesa of the city of Mantua, Italy, and the wife of the ruler of the city, which she governed in her husband’s absence. As an influential patron of the arts, Isabella funded a variety of artists to create luxurious objects for her collections, including such things as gems, musical instruments, manuscripts, and ceramics. Her money and tastes therefore played an important part in determining what art was produced in Mantua. Titian’s (1485–1576) portrait of the Marchesa presents her as a formidable woman who enjoys the finer things in life (0.9). This elegant woman wears a turban she designed, fine embroidered clothes, and a white ermine stole (a sign of wealth and refinement) over her shoulder. Although the Marchesa was in her sixties when she commissioned this painting, Titian portrays her as a youthful beauty.

Fame and success do not always come in an artist’s lifetime. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). In his ten years as an active artist, Van Gogh produced about 1,000 drawings, sketches and watercolors, as well as around 1,250 other paintings. Very few people saw his work in his lifetime, however; he received only one favorable notice in a newspaper; his work was shown in only one exhibition; and he sold only one painting. Yet today his work is extraordinarily famous, it sells for millions of dollars, and in his native Netherlands an entire museum is devoted to his work.

The training of artists also helps to determine who makes art and what art is shown in galleries and museums. For example, traditional training for painters in China focused on the passing of artistic skill from a master to his students, who learned by copying his works and those of other famous artists. Only scholars and government officials could become professional artists. Other painters were considered to be just craftspeople whose work was of lower status. In medieval Europe, only those trained in associations of craftsmen called guilds were allowed to make works of art. For example, there were guilds of carpenters, glassmakers, and goldsmiths. The system in Europe changed in the sixteenth century. Schools called Academies were organized (first in Italy) to train artists in a very strict curriculum devised by specialized teachers. It was very difficult to succeed as an artist without being trained in an Academy. In modern Europe and North America, most practicing artists are trained in art schools, which are sometimes independent schools, but often part of a university or college that teaches many different subjects. It is possible, but more difficult, for artists who have not been formally trained in this way to succeed in having their work displayed and sold.

The Value of Art

On November 8, 2006 a sale at Christie’s auction house in New York City broke records by selling 491 million dollars’ worth of artworks. The most expensive item for sale that evening was a portrait, Adele Bloch-Bauer II (0.10), painted in 1912 by the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt (1862–
1918). It sold for $87.9 million. Klimt made a comfortable living from painting portraits of the wives and sisters of wealthy Austrian businessmen, but in his own lifetime he was certainly never paid anything like the enormous sum for which his portrait of Mrs Bloch-Bauer sold in 2006. One reason for the painting's increase in price was its controversial history. In 1938 it had been looted by the Nazis, who had occupied Austria, and the work later became the subject of a lawsuit by the heirs of the Bloch-Bauer family.
When we read that some works of art sell for large amounts of money while others do not, we quite reasonably ask ourselves why such a high financial value is placed on a single work. Works of art by famous artists of the past tend to be valued at a high price, especially if they are very rarely available.

In our modern society art is often valued by its sale price, but there are many other ways of valuing it. When we visit art museums and see artworks displayed inside glass cases or at a distance from the viewer who must not touch, the care to preserve them in perfect condition is an indication that these works are highly valued. Sometimes a work is valued because it is very old or rare, or indeed unique.

In many societies, however, artworks were not made to be sold or displayed where they cannot be touched. As we have seen, the Japanese made fine tea bowls. These bowls were to be used as part of a ceremony, involving other fine objects, good conversation, and, of course, excellent tea. The tea bowl was valued because it formed part of a ritual that had social and spiritual significance. Similarly, in the African art section of many museums we can see masks displayed that were originally made to form part of a costume that, in turn, was used in a ceremony involving other costumed figures, music, and dancing. In other words, the mask often had some kind of spiritual or magic significance for its original creators: but they would have regarded it as holding this value only when used as intended, not when displayed in isolation in a museum.

So we see that price is, of course, not the only measure of the value of an artwork. We might place a high value on a work because it is aesthetically pleasing or because its creation involved great skill. This can be true even if there is no possibility of our owning it. Many museums organize large exhibitions of the work of famous artists because they know that great numbers of people will pay to see the work. Enthusiasts will travel long distances, even to other continents, to visit such exhibitions. In 2007, for example, 796,000 people visited an exhibition of the work of Leonardo da Vinci at the Tokyo National Museum, Japan.

Artworks can also acquire great religious, cultural, or political significance. For example, the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., was dedicated in 1922 to honor a president who had become a symbol of American values and identity. The memorial was the work of three artists. Architect Henry Bacon (1866–1924) designed the form of an ancient Greek temple the building that houses Lincoln’s statue (0.12). Daniel Chester French (1850–1931) made the over-life-sized statue of Lincoln, while Jules Guerin (1866–1946) painted the murals (Reunion and Emancipation) on the interior walls.

0.12 The Lincoln Memorial statue by Daniel Chester French, 1920. Marble, 19’ high. The Mall, Washington, D.C.
Censorship of Art

Art can be a form of expression and communication so powerful that those who are challenged or offended by it wish to censor it. If we examine the history of the censorship of art, we find many reasons for attacking, destroying, or preventing the display of artworks. Art may be censored because some consider it pornographic; because it offends religious beliefs; because of objections to the political message of a work; or because it represents values that somebody considers offensive or improper. For example, in 1999 the Brooklyn Museum held an exhibition of contemporary British art titled Sensation. The mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, objected to a painting by Chris Ofili, The Holy Virgin Mary. When the museum refused to remove the work from public display, the mayor attempted to evict the Brooklyn Museum from the building it had occupied for 106 years and to withhold city funding. He then objected that the exhibition included many works that offended religious sensibilities, were sexual in nature, or were in some other way offensive. One, titled Self, was a self-portrait by Marc Quinn made from nine pints of his frozen blood (0.14). The city argued that the museum had violated the terms of its lease by holding an exhibition that was not appropriate for the citizens of New York, and in particular young
people. A federal court protected the museum’s right to hold the exhibition and prevented the city from evicting it or from withdrawing funding.

In Germany in the 1930s, the Nazi regime of dictator Adolf Hitler launched a systematic and large-scale attack on modern art that did not conform to Nazi party goals. The Nazis initially confiscated around 5,000 works of art from museums; they subsequently took a further 16,500 from private collections. Some 4,000 of these were then burned, while others became the property of Nazi collectors, or were sold to foreign collectors for Nazi profit. The artists who had made them were banned from working. The Nazis also dismissed museum directors, closed art schools, such as the famous Bauhaus, and burned books. On July 19, 1937 the Nazis opened an exhibition of “Great German Art.” The next day they opened a display of 730 works labeled “Degenerate Art” to suggest that these were the work of mentally deficient artists. Works were deliberately displayed awkwardly and labels on the walls ridiculed the artworks. One read: “We act as if we were painters, poets, or whatever, but what we are is simply and ecstatically impudent. In our impudence we take the world for a ride and train snobs to lick our boots!”

One of the artists whose work was ridiculed in the exhibition was Otto Dix (1891–1969). Dix had been a machine-gunner in the German army during World War I from 1914 to 1918. He made many sketches of war scenes, and the experience of war became the main subject of his work until the 1930s. The Nazis dismissed him from his teaching position at the Prussian Art Academy in 1933. They then confiscated his paintings from museums and banned him from exhibiting his work because his paintings were “likely to adversely affect the military will of the German people.” Dix’s drawing War Cripples (0.15) was one of the works that was included in the Degenerate Art Exhibition. Dix was then forced to join the government’s Chamber of Fine Arts and to promise to paint only landscapes. He was drafted into the German army in 1945 and taken prisoner by the French.
Thus the Degenerate Art Exhibition not only affected the lives of artists, but also restricted what art Germans were allowed to see and how they would view it. Ironically, however, Hitler’s attempt to censor art backfired: five times as many visitors attended the Degenerate Art Exhibition as the show of Great German Art. Very few records survive to reveal what viewers really thought of the art in this propaganda spectacle.

Why Do We Study Art?

Finally, why take a course that teaches you how to look at art? Surely we all have eyes and we all see the same thing when we look at a work of art, so we can decide what we like or dislike about it. In fact, it is not quite that simple. Our interpretations of works of art may differ from other people’s according to our perceptions, beliefs and ideas. Art is also a form of language; one that can communicate with us even more powerfully than written language. Art communicates so directly with our senses (of sight, touch, even smell and sound) that it helps us to understand our own experiences. By learning to see, we experience new sensations and ideas that expand our horizons beyond our daily lives.

Let us consider an artwork and the fact that we may not see the work the way it was seen when it was first made. **Prisoners from the Front** (0.16) by American artist Winslow Homer was painted in 1866. We can tell immediately that the subject is war and that it involves men from two armies. But there are many ways in which we can discover and learn more from this painting: how really to look at it. We can begin by examining the way Homer organizes different aspects of the painting to direct our eyes and to communicate with us. How has he placed the figures in the painting and what first attracts our attention? Perhaps we look first at the group of soldiers dressed in gray (especially the one standing in the center of the work)—but does the gaze of this group then direct us to the officer standing alone on the right? What colors did Homer

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**Bauhaus**: design school founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919

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0.16 Winslow Homer, *Prisoners from the Front*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 24 x 38". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
choose, why, and what impact do they have? What medium did the artist select? In this case, Homer chose neutral tones of oil paint, which has the advantage that it dries very slowly and allows the artist to make alterations almost without limit. Scientific studies have shown that Homer made many changes to his work. Is the date of the painting (1866) significant? This was one year after the end of the Civil War. Homer had witnessed and recorded the war personally. This painting was made during the period of Reconstruction, when the victorious Union troops forced changes on the slave-owning South, represented here by Confederate soldiers in gray uniforms. The officer standing to the right is Homer’s distant cousin: once we know this, it causes us to ask whether all these men are real historical figures. In other words, Homer was not simply showing his audience a dramatic scene, but was also commenting on the important issues that arose after the end of the war. Finally, what is the painting about in a more general sense? It is a painting about war and history, but also about social concerns, and the artist’s desire for reconciliation after a devastating conflict. If we study other paintings that address these themes, we will see that some aspects of the way Homer depicted this event are
Neutral tones: colors (such as blacks, whites, grays, and dull gray-browns) made by mixing complementary hues
Oil paint: paint made of pigment suspended in oil
Ivory: hard, creamy-colored material from the tusks of such mammals as elephants

similar to paintings by other artists. If we compare such works with Prisoners from the Front we might learn more about portrayals of history and war in general and about Homer’s works in particular.

A very contrasting view of war and the treatment of prisoners is found in a painting by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) (0.17). The island of Chios was ruled by the Ottomans of Turkey, but for centuries the majority of the population had been Greek. In 1822 Greeks from a nearby island attacked the Turks on Chios and destroyed mosques. The Turks responded by killing thousands of Greek residents of Chios. Delacroix portrays the victims as helpless: most are women and are partially nude, which emphasizes their helplessness. As in Homer’s painting, a victorious soldier is seen to the right, but in Delacroix’s painting he shows no pity, cutting down a woman with his curved sword. He and the faceless Turkish soldier behind the Greek civilians wear exotic turbans, as if to make them even more fearsome to Delacroix’s European audience.

Thus, if we know what questions to ask about a work of art, we can learn more about it than we probably expected when we first saw it. What happens if a work is several centuries old and comes from a completely different culture? The head of an African woman shown here (0.18) was made in the mid-sixteenth century and comes from Benin in West Africa. The artist has made the woman’s face a perfect and pleasing oval shape. Everything in the figure, from the faces on the woman’s headdress to the eyes that look down and the shape of the nose and mouth, seems to direct our eyes downward. The effect is to concentrate on the beauty of the woman’s features. The artist chose as materials ivory, iron, and bronze, rare items in Benin, so presumably the head was made for someone wealthy. Although we now see this work in a glass case in a museum, this was not how it was used in Benin. Research into its history tells us that this was a decoration worn on the belt of a king. Therefore, it formed part of the presumably impressive finery of the king: the artist did not design it to be seen alone in a glass case. We know that the king maintained groups of specialist artists (including ivory-carvers) and paid them in food, slaves, and wives. Anybody who made ivory objects without the king’s permission was severely punished. Therefore, we can tell that this was an object of great luxury intended to show the wealth and power of a ruler. Finally, the head also tells us something about the history of Africa and the religion of Benin. Those odd-looking heads around the top of the headdress represent the faces of men from Portugal, which was then a powerful European trading nation that had conquered some parts of Africa. The Portuguese were important in Benin because they had worked with the king, whose power had grown as a result. Alternating with the Portuguese heads are mudfish that had sacred significance, and were symbolically connected to the god of the sea, Olukun. This pendant from Benin means much more to us if we take the time and effort to understand and analyze it.

Similarly, if we learn how to look at art, we will discover how exciting it can be. This book aims to help you not just to get a good grade in your course, but also to begin a lifetime of enjoying and being inspired by art.