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 in
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 $18 \times 9$ 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 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—institutions 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

---

**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
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 or 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.
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.