

## What Is Art?

“Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable” – Cesar A Cruz

“There should be something revelatory about art” – Tracey Emin

“The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls” – Pablo Picasso

“Art is not what you see, but what you make others see” – Edgar Degas

“Art is the concrete representation of our most subtle feelings” – Agnes Martin

“Art is anything you can get away with” – Marshall McLuhan (copied by Andy Warhol?)

As a child growing up, I loved drawing, painting, printing etc - being creative generally came easy to me and I enjoyed it (I still do). Throughout my school years I was told that I was 'good at art' by teachers, friends and family. It wasn't until I got to the Nottingham School of Art that I discovered being good at drawing wasn't the same as being 'good at art'. Indeed, I struggled to understand what Art was, especially as taught in academic establishments during the 1970s - which seemed to focus on the conceptual, the abstract, and the postmodern. After a couple of years, I followed some of my idols and became an art-school dropout playing bass in a rock band for the next 10 years instead.

**So what is Art?** and how has our understanding of it changed over the course of history?

### 1. Prehistoric Art: Time Period - Up to 3000 BCE

- Characteristics: Cave paintings, petroglyphs, carvings, and megalithic structures.
- Purpose: Mainly functional or ritualistic, often connected to hunting, fertility, and religious rites.

### 2. Ancient Art: Time Period 3000 BCE - 400 CE

- Characteristics: Monumental architecture (pyramids, temples), sculpture, pottery, frescoes.
- Purpose: Depicting gods, myths, rulers; often religious or political.

### 3. Medieval Art: Time Period 400 CE - 1400 CE

- Characteristics: Iconography, illuminated manuscripts, Gothic cathedrals, mosaics. Artists such as Giotto, Van Eyck, Fra Angelico
- Purpose: Religious themes dominate, with art used to inspire faith and convey biblical stories.

### 4. Renaissance Art: Time Period 1400 - 1600

- Characteristics: Realism, perspective, humanism, classical themes. Notable artists include Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael and Donatello (TMNTs?)
- Purpose: Emphasis on human potential and experience; revival of classical learning and values.

#### 5. Baroque and Rococo Art: Time Period 1600 - 1750

- Characteristics: Dramatic, detailed, emotional intensity in Baroque; playful, light-hearted, ornate in Rococo. Artists include Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Bernini etc.
- Purpose: To evoke emotional responses; often supported by the church and aristocracy.

#### 6. Neoclassicism and Romanticism: Time Period - Late 18th to mid-19th century

- Characteristics: Neoclassicism focused on simplicity and symmetry, inspired by classical antiquity. Romanticism emphasized emotion, nature, and individualism. Artists like Jacques-Louis David, Antonio Canova, William Blake and Francisco Goya.
- Purpose: Reaction to the previous art movements and the social changes of the time, including the Industrial Revolution.

#### 7. Modern Art: Time Period - Late 19th to mid-20th century

- Characteristics: Diverse movements such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism. Artists include Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso, Dalí.
- Purpose: Break from traditional forms and techniques; exploration of new perspectives, abstraction, and personal expression.

#### 8. Contemporary Art: Time Period - Mid-20th century to present

- Characteristics: Varied and eclectic, including Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Performance Art. Artists include Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, Tracey Emin.
- Purpose: Reflect contemporary society, culture, and technology; often challenges traditional boundaries and concepts of art.

### **Key Factors Influencing Changes in Art**

**Technological Advances:** Innovations such as the camera, computer, and new materials have expanded the possibilities for artistic expression.

**Cultural Shifts:** Changes in societal values, politics, and religion have deeply influenced art themes and styles.

**Globalization:** Increased interaction between different cultures has led to a fusion of styles and ideas in art.

**Economic and Political Contexts:** The patronage system, wars, revolutions, and economic changes have all impacted the production and themes of art.

## **And what have philosophers had to say about Art?**

1. Plato (427–347 BCE) Mimesis (Imitation): Plato viewed art as an imitation of reality, which itself is an imitation of the ideal Forms. Therefore, he considered art as a step removed from truth. He was skeptical of the emotional impact of art, believing it could mislead people and stir irrational passions. Plato was critical of art because he believed it could corrupt the soul by encouraging emotional over rational responses.

2. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) Catharsis: Unlike Plato, Aristotle saw art, particularly tragedy, as having a positive function. He introduced the concept of catharsis, where art allows people to experience and purge emotions such as pity and fear, leading to emotional cleansing. Aristotle agreed with Plato that art is imitation, but he argued that this imitation could reveal universal truths about human nature.

3. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) Aesthetics and the Sublime: Kant explored aesthetics in terms of the judgment of beauty. He distinguished between the beautiful and the sublime, with beauty being a harmonious form that pleases the senses, and the sublime being an overwhelming experience that transcends ordinary beauty. Kant believed true aesthetic appreciation comes from a "disinterested" pleasure, meaning appreciation without any desire or personal interest.

4. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) Art as the Expression of the Absolute: Hegel viewed art as one of the ways through which the Absolute (the ultimate reality or truth) expresses itself. Art, for Hegel, is a stage in the development of human consciousness, where spirit manifests itself in sensory form. He also argued that art evolves over time, reflecting changes in society's collective understanding of truth.

5. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) Art as a Way to Escape the Will: Schopenhauer saw life as driven by irrational desires (the "will"), which lead to suffering. Art, especially music, offers a way to temporarily escape the tyranny of the will by allowing individuals to contemplate pure forms without personal desire. He valued the contemplative aspect of art, which enables a detachment from worldly concerns and suffering.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) Art as Life-Affirmation: Nietzsche viewed art as a necessary force for life, emphasizing the importance of aesthetic experience in affirming existence. He distinguished between the Apollonian (order, beauty) and Dionysian (chaos, passion) aspects of art, both of which are essential to a full appreciation of life. Nietzsche elevated the role of the artist as a creator who brings new values into the world, challenging established norms.

7. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) Art as Unconcealment: Heidegger argued that art reveals truths that are otherwise hidden, a process he called "unconcealment." For him, art is a way of revealing the essence of things, showing aspects of reality that are not immediately apparent. Heidegger emphasized the importance of the "work" in art, where a work of art opens up a world and allows us to encounter things in their truest form.

8. Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) Art and the Culture Industry: Adorno, a member of the Frankfurt School, critiqued mass-produced art, which he believed was manipulated by the culture industry to enforce conformity and suppress critical thinking. He valued avant-garde art for its potential to resist commodification and encourage critical awareness.

9. Contemporary Perspectives - Art as a Social and Political Tool: Modern and contemporary philosophers often view art as a medium for social and political engagement. Thinkers like Jacques Rancière argue that art can disrupt social hierarchies and challenge established power structures.

### **In Summary**

Art is a broad and dynamic field that encompasses a wide range of human activities and creations that express aesthetic, emotional, or conceptual ideas. Traditionally, art includes visual forms such as painting, sculpture, and architecture, but it also extends to music, literature, theatre, film, dance and digital media. Art often serves multiple purposes: it can be a form of personal expression, a means of communication, a reflection of cultural and societal values, or a tool for political and social commentary.

Or, is it anything you can get away with?