

# What Is an Artist?

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers how to define an artist by exploring the difference between an ordinary artist and an artistic genius, and comparing and contrasting the Western and non-Western conceptions of the artist. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Identifying an Artist
2. Notion of Genius
3. Conception of the Artist

## 1. Identifying an Artist

By definition, an **artist** is a person who creates work of aesthetic value. **Aesthetic** is concerned with beauty, or the appreciation of beauty. Keep in mind that sometimes the word aesthetic is also used as a synonym for the word "style."

This introduces some subjectivity because the idea of beauty itself is subjective; you may argue that whether or not someone is considered an artist is determined by the preferences of the viewer. We might distinguish an artist from an artisan in terms of the type of work they produce. Artists tend to produce "art for art's sake," or objects that have no practical purpose. Artisans often work in media such as ceramics, woodworking, and metalworking, and their work has a specific purpose or function.



Artist unknown

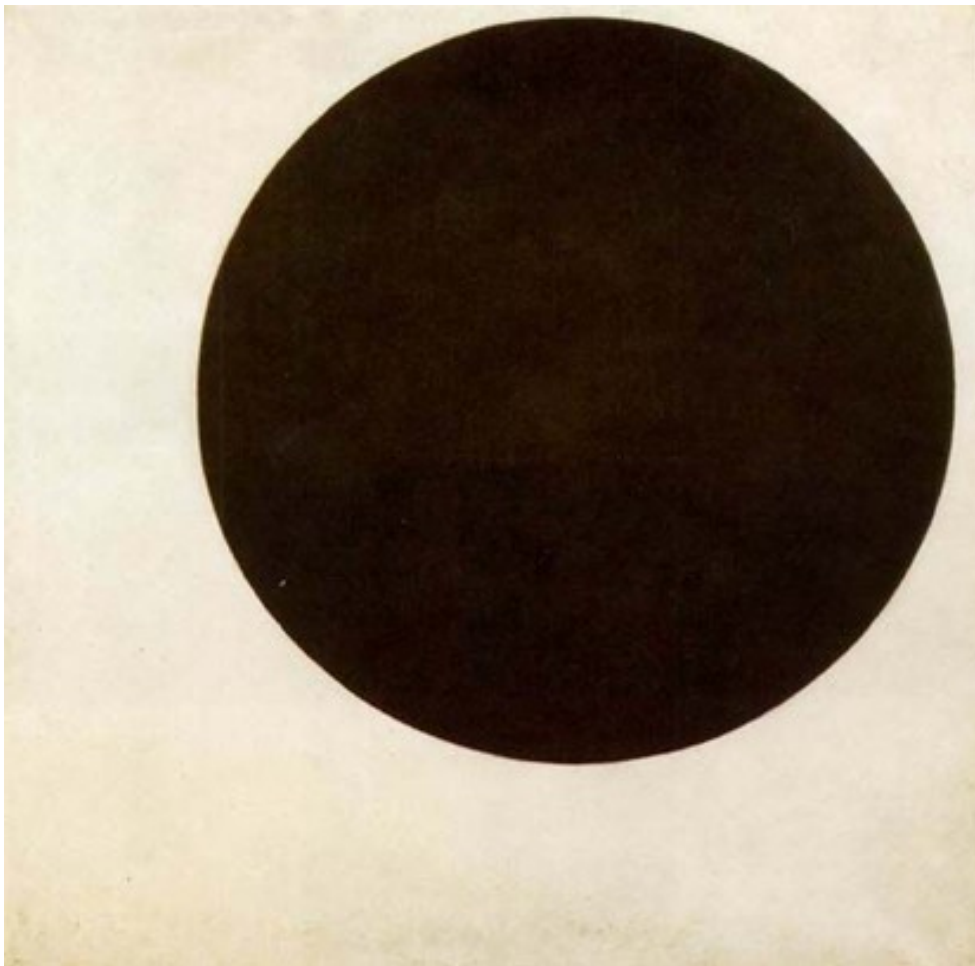
*Alebrije*

San Antonio Arrazola, Oaxaca, Mexico

2009

This sculpture is an *alebrije* from the state of Oaxaca in Mexico. We do not have the name of the person who made it, and its usually defined as craft and not art.

- What would make this object a work of art?
- What can we learn about it aside from who made it?
- How important is the name of the artist in understanding this object?



Kazimir Malevich

*Black Circle*

St. Petersburg, Russia

1915

Oil on canvas



Frederic Edwin Church

*The River of Light*

United States of America

1877

Oil on canvas

In some cases, we know the name of the artist. But how much can we really understand about a work of art simply by knowing this information?

As you saw with Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, it is quite commonplace to interpret a work of art in relation to the artist's biography when we have that information. But how do we interpret a work of art when we do not know who the artist is? What if we are looking at a culture that does not define artists and works of art in the same way that we do?





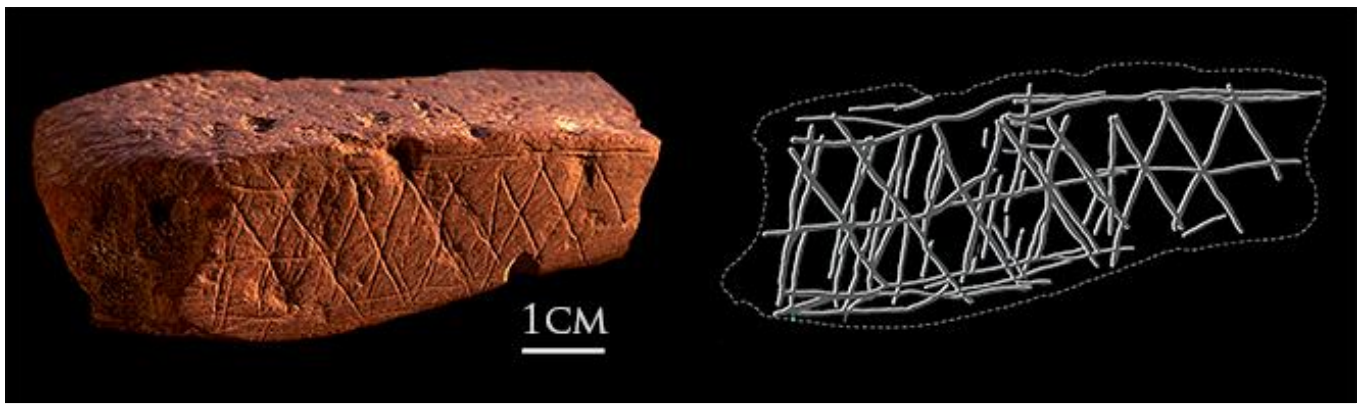
Artist unknown

*Codex-style Vase with Mayan Scribes*

Guatemalan Lowlands

AD 600-900, Late Classic Maya

Here is a Maya cylindrical vase with an image of a scribe. He has feathers used for writing in his headdress and is holding a shell that would have contained pigment in it. A folded bark paper book is next to his hand. To our knowledge, the Maya did not distinguish between scribes and artists. How does this knowledge influence our interpretation of this work? In addition, we refer to this object as a vase, when it was actually a vessel for drinking. Does this function mean that it is not a work of art? Why or why not?



Artist unknown

*Incised ochre stone*

Blombos cave site, South Africa

approx. 70,000 years old

Here is an ochre stone found in the Blombos Cave in South Africa. It is one of the oldest known objects that a human has left a mark on that appears to be aesthetic. 75,000 years ago, someone carved a series of lines and triangular shapes on its surface, but we do not know who did this or why. Was this person an artist? Is this object a work of art?



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Artist**

A person who creates works of aesthetic value.

##### **Aesthetic**

Concerned with the beauty or the appreciation of beauty.

## 2. Notion of Genius

When talking about artists, it's important to keep in mind that there is a Western notion of **genius**, or an artist of extraordinary talent. Not every artist was a genius, though this is another subjective notion.

The idea of artists being geniuses in the Western tradition originates with Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, in which Vasari's biographies focus on qualities such as extreme intelligence and talent.



Michelangelo (1475-1564)

*The Creation of Adam*

Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Rome, Vatican

1508-1512

Fresco

In the Western cultural tradition, we often define artists such as Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci as geniuses for their skill in creating works of art. Curators and art historians may define an artist's *oeuvre*, or body of work, as a way of determining its value and whether or not other works are fakes. You should consider the idea of genius critically, and in particular how it has influenced our ideas about art.

The idea of genius is a trope, or an idea, somewhat similar to a stereotype, that is overused. It influences how we view artists and art history today, so it is important that you develop an awareness of how it is being used, as well as your own point of view. The concept of genius places value on the related ideas of individualism and originality.

Other cultures do not value individualism and originality in the same way, and for this reason, the concept of the artist/genius does not exist. In many traditions of making African ceremonial objects, what we might refer to as African art, the person who is best able to replicate certain stylistic aspects is the one whose objects are given value. These objects are used in dances and other ceremonies and have no value beyond this within the societies that made them.





Artist unknown

*Yoruba Gelede mask*

Nigeria

Late 19th or early 20th century

Wood, pigment



This is a Gelede mask, from the Yoruba people. It was made to honor women and especially elderly women. It is the head of a woman wearing a headdress that is tied at the top of her head. Yoruba people would have worn this mask while dancing during ceremonies. Unlike our culture, Yoruba culture did not value individual style, but rather the ability to reproduce masks with stylistic similarities, according to a specific tradition. Can we define these masks as art? Are the people who make them artists?



#### THINK ABOUT IT

You might ask yourself:

- How do works of art and artifacts express the values of the culture from which they came?
- How do values differ from one society to another?
- Can we look critically at what it means to be an artist in our own culture and use that as a way to better understand other cultures?



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Genius

An exceptionally talented, knowledgeable, or creative person.

##### Oeuvre

An artist's body of work.

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## 3. Conception of the Artist

Up to this point in your study, the conception of the artist has been a very Western one. In many non-Western cultures, artists don't necessarily exist in the same way as they do in Western cultures.

Many individuals in Western cultures that you might identify as artists would simply be known as craftsmen or artisans in non-Western cultures because they produce ceremonial or functional objects.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** In Western conception, whether or not a blacksmith is an artist would depend on that person's oeuvre. The argument that a sword is a work of art could definitely be one worth making; however, the possibility might not even be considered in some non-Western cultures.

It's important to remember that all definitions are not universal, and the artist's role is not universal either. It can change as you move from culture to culture.

While the traditional Western approach to art history relies a great deal on knowledge of the artist, there are actually ways to critique or assess art if you don't know the artist. You can look at other known attributes, such as:

- The regional style
- The religious and social values of the time
- The materials used

## IN CONTEXT

Without knowing anything about the artist who produced the Egyptian sculpture in the photograph below, you can still determine a great deal about its meaning and function by studying primary sources and learning about ancient Egyptian culture. After doing this, you might find out that the name of the pharaoh, Menkaure, was more important than the name of the artist.



Artist unknown

*King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and Queen*

Giza, Egypt

2613 – 2498 BC, Fourth Dynasty

Greywacke stone



## SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that **identifying an artist** enables you to identify art by considering that artist's unique values and techniques. While the definition of an artist is subjective, there are some artists who are widely considered to be geniuses, or exceptionally talented artists. This notion of genius came from a consensus among the learned scholars of art history and eventually seeped into the public consciousness.

Finally, you learned that while the Western, or European, **conception of the artist** is that of a person who produces work of an aesthetic value, this conception can be different in non-Western cultures. When critiquing or evaluating a piece of art, cultural context is important, especially if you don't know the artist.

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## Oeuvre

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