



# Understanding the Differences between Media

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

There are several main differences between types of artistic media. Works of art can be generally categorized as either two-dimensional or three-dimensional, and created with either traditional or experimental media. In this lesson, the main areas of focus include:

- [1. Two-Dimensional vs. Three-Dimensional Art](#)
- [2. Traditional vs. Experimental Forms of Media](#)

## 1. Two-Dimensional vs. Three-Dimensional Art

The difference between two-dimensional and three-dimensional art is very straightforward. Each is measured using different dimensions, which can include measurements such as height, width, and depth.

- **Two-dimensional, or 2D, art** can be measured only by two different dimensions, as it can only be viewed from the front. You might use height and width when describing or measuring 2D art.
- **Three-dimensional, or 3D, art** is measured in three dimensions, usually height, width, and depth. The subject matter of the artwork exists in 3D space. This means you can move around the object and still see some aspect of the subject matter.

### IN CONTEXT

Below is an example of a two-dimensional painting. You can see that it is on a flat surface.



Artist unknown

*Painting*

Arnhem, Australia

between 1900 and 1970

Paint on bark

Now, compare that image to the one below, a three-dimensional sculpture. It's measured in three dimensions: depth, width, and height. You could potentially move around the sculpture and still see some aspect of it.



Artist unknown

*Head, possibly a King (Ife culture)*

12th–14th century

Southwestern Nigeria, Africa

Terracotta

The image above is a sculpture made of terracotta, a type of clay. It is three dimensional; however, in looking at it, you might consider whether it was made to be viewed at all angles, or whether a specific view is better. This can be a clue to the object's original function. It might also be helpful to know if this object originally consisted of just a head by itself, or if there was at one time a body attached to it. An art historian could determine this by analyzing other sculptures made at the same site, with similar media.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Two-Dimensional Art

A work of art made on a flat surface, such as a painting, drawing, print, or photograph.

#### Three-Dimensional Art

A work of art that exists in space, usually sculpture or variations of sculpture.

## 2. Traditional vs. Experimental Forms of Media

Works of art can be created with various materials, the **artistic medium** or media. Materials such as stone, wood, bronze, ink, paint, and paper are considered **traditional media**. Experimental media includes any material the artist chooses to use.



### DID YOU KNOW

Experimental, or nontraditional, media includes almost anything you can think of. Some of the more interesting experimental media works include garbage or ice sculptures, body art, land art, and even animal blood.

The medium, or material from which an artist creates a work of art, plays an important role in its definition as a work of art. The process of defining art does not only involve the question of "Who is the artist?" but also "What is the object made of?" To a certain extent, we already covered this in Challenge 1.1 when we considered artists versus artisans and the creation of quilts. Now we will revisit this question in a more general way.

#### IN CONTEXT

Art historians may define art in terms of its medium. This might include different types of painting, such as oil, tempera, or watercolor, or sculpture, such as wood carving or bronze casting.

Below is a painting by the Mexican artist Diego Rivera. It is done in oil on canvas on wood and is an example of traditional media:



Diego Rivera (1886 - 1957)

*Juchitán River (Río Juchitán), Panel 4*

Mexico City, Mexico

1953-1955

Oil on canvas on wood

Since the 1970s, artists have increasingly experimented with artistic media, to the point of considering performance and the human body itself as works of art. Consider this work by Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo:



Regina José Galindo

*Perra (Bitch)*

Milan, Italy

2005

Still from video documentation of performance.

In this performance, the artist carves the word *perra* into her thigh, as a protest against the candidacy of José Efraín Ríos Montt for president of Guatemala. Ríos Montt had served as president from 1982 to 1983, during a time when the Guatemalan government was responsible for the murder of many indigenous Maya and political activists. Bodies of women were found with messages carved on them at this time.

- Why do you think Galindo chose this theme for her art, produced more than 20 years later?
- What message was she trying to communicate?
- Would another artistic medium have worked better?
- Why or why not?

Both of these works of art explore themes of indigenous people and their relationship to the government and ideas of nation.

- What is the message of each work of art?
- How does the medium relate to the message?

Works of art done using experimental media often question the role of art in society and how we define the concept of art. As you look at works of art, ask yourself:

- What is the medium of this work?
- Is it traditional or experimental?
- How does that relate to the definition of art and the artist?
- What is the message of this work and whose message is it?

Ink drawings, paintings, tapestries, and mosaics are all examples of traditional art. Experimental, or nontraditional art, might include body art, performance art, land art, or new media.

Below is another example of traditional media, a painting:



Charles Poerson (1609–1667)

*Portrait of Louis XIV as Jupiter Conquering the Fronde*

Versailles, France

1652 - 1654

Oil on canvas

Another example of traditional media, a tapestry:



Artist unknown

*Bayeux Tapestry, Scene 51 (extract), The Battle of Hastings*

Bayeux, Normandy, France

1066

Colored woolen yarns embroidered on linen

One last example of traditional media, a mosaic:



Artist unknown

*Jesus Christ, detail from Deësis mosaic*

Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey

ca. 1261

Tile

An example of nontraditional, or experimental, media, body art:



Prathyush Thomas

*Still from Keechaka Vadham performed by Kalamandalam Gopi*

India

2015

And one last example of experimental media, land art. This is a spiral jetty an artist created:



Robert Smithson (1938 - 1973)

*Spiral Jetty*

Great Salt Lake, Utah, USA

Black basalt rocks and earth



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Artistic Medium

The material with or in which a work of art is made, such as paint or marble.

### Traditional Media

Common materials used to make works of art or architecture, such as stone, wood, bronze, ink, paint, or paper.



## SUMMARY

Works of art can be categorized and created in various ways. In this lesson, you learned about the characteristics of **two-dimensional vs. three-dimensional art**. Two-dimensional art is on a flat surface. Three-dimensional art, such as a statue, can be moved and still have aspects of the subject matter

visible.

You also learned about works of art created with **traditional vs. experimental forms of media**. Wood, stone, ink, or paint are common choices for traditional art, whereas garbage, ice, bodies, land, or performance might be used for experimental media.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY IAN MCCONNELL AND ERIN ALDANA FOR SOPHIA LEARNING.  
PLEASE SEE OUR [TERMS OF USE](#).



## ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Bayeux Tapestry scene51 Battle of Hastings Norman knights and archers](#) | Author: Myrabella | License: Public Domain
- [Painting - Google Art Project](#) | Author: National Museums of World Culture | License: CC
- [Africa Ife Head 2 Kimbell](#) | Author: Kimbell Art Museum | License: Public Domain
- [Juchitán River \(Río Juchitán\) Panel 4 by Diego Rivera](#) | Author: Museo Nacional de Arte | License: CC
- [Perra](#) | Author: Regina José Galindo, Exit Art and prometeogallery di Ida Pisani | License: CC-SA 4.0
- [Keechaka Vadham BN](#) | Author: Prathyush Thomas | License: CC
- [Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty, 1970](#) | Author: Retis | License: CC-SA 4.0
- [Jesus-Christ-from-Hagia-Sophia](#) | Author: Edal Anton Lefterov | License: CC



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Artistic Medium

The material with or in which a work of art is made, such as paint or marble.

### Three-Dimensional

A work of art that exists in space, usually sculpture or variations of sculpture.

### Traditional Media

Common materials used to make works of art or architecture, such as stone, wood, bronze, ink, paint, or paper.

### Two-Dimensional

A work of art made on a flat surface, such as a painting, drawing, print, or photograph.