Overview

In the perspective of the history of art,[10] artistic works have existed for almost as long as humankind: from early prehistoric art to contemporary art; however, some theorists think that the typical concept of "artistic works" does not fit well outside modern Western societies.[11] One early sense of the definition of art is closely related to the older Latin meaning, which roughly translates to "skill" or "craft", as associated with words such as "artisan". English words derived from this meaning include artifact, artificial, artifice, medical arts, and military arts. However, there are many other colloquial uses of the word, all with some relation to its etymology.

20th-century bottle, Twa peoples, Rwanda. Artistic works may serve practical functions, in addition to their decorative value.

Over time, philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Socrates and Immanuel Kant, among others, questioned the meaning of art.[12] Several dialogues in Plato tackle questions about art: Socrates says that poetry is inspired by the muses, and is not rational. He speaks approvingly of this, and other forms of divine madness (drunkenness, eroticism, and dreaming) in the Phaedrus (265a–c), and yet in the Republic wants to outlaw Homer's great poetic art, and laughter as well. In Ion, Socrates gives no hint of the disapproval of Homer that he expresses in the Republic. The dialogue Ion suggests that Homer's Iliad functioned in the ancient Greek world as the Bible does today in the modern Christian world: as divinely inspired literary art that can provide moral guidance, if only it can be properly interpreted.[13]

With regards to the literary art and the musical arts, Aristotle considered epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, Dithyrambic poetry and music to be mimetic or imitative art, each varying in imitation by medium, object, and manner.[14] For example, music imitates with the media of rhythm and harmony, whereas dance imitates with rhythm alone, and poetry with language. The forms also differ in their object of imitation. Comedy, for instance, is a dramatic imitation of men worse than average; whereas tragedy imitates men slightly better than average. Lastly, the forms differ in their manner of imitation—through narrative or character, through change or no change, and through drama or no drama.[15] Aristotle believed that imitation is natural to mankind and constitutes one of mankind's advantages over animals.[16]

The more recent and specific sense of the word art as an abbreviation for creative art or fine art emerged in the early 17th century.[17] Fine art refers to a skill used to express the artist's creativity, or to engage the audience's aesthetic sensibilities, or to draw the audience towards consideration of more refined or finer works of art.

Within this latter sense, the word art may refer to several things: (i) a study of a creative skill, (ii) a process of using the creative skill, (iii) a product of the creative skill, or (iv) the audience's experience with the creative skill. The creative arts (art as discipline) are a collection of disciplines which produce artworks (art as objects) that are compelled by a personal drive (art as activity) and convey a message, mood, or symbolism for the perceiver to interpret (art as experience). Art is something that stimulates an individual's thoughts, emotions, beliefs, or ideas through the senses. Works of art can be explicitly made for this purpose or interpreted on the basis of images or objects. For some scholars, such as Kant, the sciences and the arts could be distinguished by taking science as representing the domain of knowledge and the arts as representing the domain of the freedom of artistic expression.[18]

Back of a Renaissance oval basin or dish, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Often, if the skill is being used in a common or practical way, people will consider it a craft instead of art. Likewise, if the skill is being used in a commercial or industrial way, it may be considered commercial art instead of fine art. On the other hand, crafts and design are sometimes considered applied art. Some art followers have argued that the difference between fine art and applied art has more to do with value judgments made about the art than any clear definitional difference.[19] However, even fine art often has goals beyond pure creativity and self-expression. The purpose of works of art may be to communicate ideas, such as in politically, spiritually, or philosophically motivated art; to create a sense of beauty (see aesthetics); to explore the nature of perception; for pleasure; or to generate strong emotions. The purpose may also be seemingly nonexistent.

The nature of art has been described by philosopher Richard Wollheim as "one of the most elusive of the traditional problems of human culture".[20] Art has been defined as a vehicle for the expression or communication of emotions and ideas, a means for exploring and appreciating formal elements for their own sake, and as mimesis or representation. Art as mimesis has deep roots in the philosophy of Aristotle.[21] Leo Tolstoy identified art as a use of indirect means to communicate from one person to another.[21] Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood advanced the idealist view that art expresses emotions, and that the work of art therefore essentially exists in the mind of the creator.[22][23] The theory of art as form has its roots in the philosophy of Kant, and was developed in the early 20th century by Roger Fry and Clive Bell. More recently, thinkers influenced by Martin Heidegger have interpreted art as the means by which a community develops for itself a medium for self-expression and interpretation.[24] George Dickie has offered an institutional theory of art that defines a work of art as any artifact upon which a qualified person or persons acting on behalf of the social institution commonly referred to as "the art world" has conferred "the status of candidate for appreciation".[25] Larry Shiner has described fine art as "not an essence or a fate but something we have made. Art as we have generally understood it is a European invention barely two hundred years old."[26]

Art may be characterized in terms of mimesis (its representation of reality), narrative (storytelling), expression, communication of emotion, or other qualities. During the Romantic period, art came to be seen as "a special faculty of the human mind to be classified with religion and science".[27]

History

Main article: History of art

Löwenmensch figurine, Germany, between 35,000 and 41,000 years old. One of the oldest-known examples of an artistic representation and the oldest confirmed statue ever discovered.[28]

A shell engraved by Homo erectus was determined to be between 430,000 and 540,000 years old.[29] A set of eight 130,000 years old white-tailed eagle talons bear cut marks and abrasion that indicate manipulation by neanderthals, possibly for using it as jewelry.[30] A series of tiny, drilled snail shells about 75,000 years old—were discovered in a South African cave.[31] Containers that may have been used to hold paints have been found dating as far back as 100,000 years.[32]

The oldest piece of art found in Europe is the Riesenhirschknochen der Einhornhöhle, dating back 51,000 years and made by Neanderthals.

Sculptures, cave paintings, rock paintings and petroglyphs from the Upper Paleolithic dating to roughly 40,000 years ago have been found,[33] but the precise meaning of such art is often disputed because so little is known about the cultures that produced them.

The first undisputed sculptures and similar art pieces, like the Venus of Hohle Fels, are the numerous objects found at the Caves and Ice Age Art in the Swabian Jura UNESCO World Heritage Site, where the oldest non-stationary works of human art yet discovered were found, in the form of carved animal and humanoid figurines, in addition to the oldest musical instruments unearthed so far, with the artifacts dating between 43,000 and 35,000 BC, so being the first centre of human art.[34][35][36][37]

Cave paintings, Lascaux, France, c. 17,000 BCE

Many great traditions in art have a foundation in the art of one of the great ancient civilizations: Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, China, Ancient Greece, Rome, as well as Inca, Maya, and Olmec. Each of these centers of early civilization developed a unique and characteristic style in its art. Because of the size and duration of these civilizations, more of their art works have survived and more of their influence has been transmitted to other cultures and later times. Some also have provided the first records of how artists worked. For example, this period of Greek art saw a veneration of the human physical form and the development of equivalent skills to show musculature, poise, beauty, and anatomically correct proportions.[38]

In Byzantine and Medieval art of the Western Middle Ages, much art focused on the expression of subjects about biblical and religious culture, and used styles that showed the higher glory of a heavenly world, such as the use of gold in the background of paintings, or glass in mosaics or windows, which also presented figures in idealized, patterned (flat) forms. Nevertheless, a classical realist tradition persisted in small Byzantine works, and realism steadily grew in the art of Catholic Europe.[39]

Renaissance art had a greatly increased emphasis on the realistic depiction of the material world, and the place of humans in it, reflected in the corporeality of the human body, and development of a systematic method of graphical perspective to depict recession in a three-dimensional picture space.[40]

The stylized signature of Sultan Mahmud II of the Ottoman Empire was written in Islamic calligraphy. It reads "Mahmud Khan son of Abdulhamid is forever victorious".

The Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia, also called the Mosque of Uqba, is one of the finest, most significant and best preserved artistic and architectural examples of early great mosques. Dated in its present state from the 9th century, it is the ancestor and model of all the mosques in the western Islamic lands.[41]

In the east, Islamic art's rejection of iconography led to emphasis on geometric patterns, calligraphy, and architecture.[42] Further east, religion dominated artistic styles and forms too. India and Tibet saw emphasis on painted sculptures and dance, while religious painting borrowed many conventions from sculpture and tended to bright contrasting colors with emphasis on outlines. China saw the flourishing of many art forms: jade carving, bronzework, pottery (including the stunning terracotta army of Emperor Qin[43]), poetry, calligraphy, music, painting, drama, fiction, etc. Chinese styles vary greatly from era to era and each one is traditionally named after the ruling dynasty. So, for example, Tang dynasty paintings are monochromatic and sparse, emphasizing idealized landscapes, but Ming dynasty paintings are busy and colorful, and focus on telling stories via setting and composition.[44] Japan names its styles after imperial dynasties too, and also saw much interplay between the styles of calligraphy and painting. Woodblock printing became important in Japan after the 17th century.[45]

Chinese painting by Song dynasty artist Ma Lin, c. 1250. 24.8 × 25.2 cm

The western Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century saw artistic depictions of physical and rational certainties of the clockwork universe, as well as politically revolutionary visions of a post-monarchist world, such as Blake's portrayal of Newton as a divine geometer,[46] or David's propagandistic paintings. This led to Romantic rejections of this in favor of pictures of the emotional side and individuality of humans, exemplified in the novels of Goethe. The late 19th century then saw a host of artistic movements, such as academic art, Symbolism, impressionism and fauvism among others.[47][48]

The history of 20th-century art is a narrative of endless possibilities and the search for new standards, each being torn down in succession by the next. Thus the parameters of Impressionism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, etc. cannot be maintained very much beyond the time of their invention. Increasing global interaction during this time saw an equivalent influence of other cultures into Western art. Thus, Japanese woodblock prints (themselves influenced by Western Renaissance draftsmanship) had an immense influence on impressionism and subsequent development. Later, African sculptures were taken up by Picasso and to some extent by Matisse. Similarly, in the 19th and 20th centuries the West has had huge impacts on Eastern art with originally western ideas like Communism and Post-Modernism exerting a powerful influence.[49]

Modernism, the idealistic search for truth, gave way in the latter half of the 20th century to a realization of its unattainability. Theodor W. Adorno said in 1970, "It is now taken for granted that nothing which concerns art can be taken for granted any more: neither art itself, nor art in relationship to the whole, nor even the right of art to exist."[50] Relativism was accepted as an unavoidable truth, which led to the period of contemporary art and postmodern criticism, where cultures of the world and of history are seen as changing forms, which can be appreciated and drawn from only with skepticism and irony. Furthermore, the separation of cultures is increasingly blurred and some argue it is now more appropriate to think in terms of a global culture, rather than of regional ones.[51]

In The Origin of the Work of Art, Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher and seminal thinker, describes the essence of art in terms of the concepts of being and truth. He argues that art is not only a way of expressing the element of truth in a culture, but the means of creating it and providing a springboard from which "that which is" can be revealed. Works of art are not merely representations of the way things are, but actually produce a community's shared understanding. Each time a new artwork is added to any culture, the meaning of what it is to exist is inherently changed.

Historically, art and artistic skills and ideas have often been spread through trade. An example of this is the Silk Road, where Hellenistic, Iranian, Indian and Chinese influences could mix. Greco Buddhist art is one of the most vivid examples of this interaction. The meeting of different cultures and worldviews also influenced artistic creation. An example of this is the multicultural port metropolis of Trieste at the beginning of the 20th century, where James Joyce met writers from Central Europe and the artistic development of New York City as a cultural melting pot.[52][53][54]

Forms, genres, media, and styles

Napoleon I on his Imperial Throne by Ingres (French, 1806), oil on canvas

Main article: The arts

The creative arts are often divided into more specific categories, typically along perceptually distinguishable categories such as media, genre, styles, and form.[55] Art form refers to the elements of art that are independent of its interpretation or significance. It covers the methods adopted by the artist and the physical composition of the artwork, primarily non-semantic aspects of the work (i.e., figurae),[56] such as color, contour, dimension, medium, melody, space, texture, and value. Form may also include Design principles, such as arrangement, balance, contrast, emphasis, harmony, proportion, proximity, and rhythm.[57]

In general there are three schools of philosophy regarding art, focusing respectively on form, content, and context.[57] Extreme Formalism is the view that all aesthetic properties of art are formal (that is, part of the art form). Philosophers almost universally reject this view and hold that the properties and aesthetics of art extend beyond materials, techniques, and form.[58] Unfortunately, there is little consensus on terminology for these informal properties. Some authors refer to subject matter and content—i.e., denotations and connotations—while others prefer terms like meaning and significance.[57]

Extreme Intentionalism holds that authorial intent plays a decisive role in the meaning of a work of art, conveying the content or essential main idea, while all other interpretations can be discarded.[59] It defines the subject as the persons or idea represented,[60] and the content as the artist's experience of that subject.[61] For example, the composition of Napoleon I on his Imperial Throne is partly borrowed from the Statue of Zeus at Olympia. As evidenced by the title, the subject is Napoleon, and the content is Ingres's representation of Napoleon as "Emperor-God beyond time and space".[57] Similarly to extreme formalism, philosophers typically reject extreme intentionalism, because art may have multiple ambiguous meanings and authorial intent may be unknowable and thus irrelevant. Its restrictive interpretation is "socially unhealthy, philosophically unreal, and politically unwise".[57]

Finally, the developing theory of post-structuralism studies art's significance in a cultural context, such as the ideas, emotions, and reactions prompted by a work.[62] The cultural context often reduces to the artist's techniques and intentions, in which case analysis proceeds along lines similar to formalism and intentionalism. However, in other cases historical and material conditions may predominate, such as religious and philosophical convictions, sociopolitical and economic structures, or even climate and geography. Art criticism continues to grow and develop alongside art.[57]