1
The Artist and His Public

What is art and why is it art? These are questions that are discussed in some detail in the following passage. This selection comes from a highly respected and widely used college textbook on art history entitled *The History of Art: A Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day,* which was written by H. W. Janson of New York University. Reprinted by permission of Henry N. Abrams, Inc. The selection that follows comes from the 1985 edition.

1.1
FIRST READING

Read this selection quickly for the main ideas. Pay attention to the title and the text headings as you read. Do *not* stop to look up words in your dictionary.

1. "Why is this supposed to be art?" How often have we heard this question asked—or asked it ourselves, perhaps—in front of one of the strange, disquieting works that we are likely to find nowadays in museums or art exhibitions. There usually is an undertone of exasperation, for the question implies that *we* don't think we are looking at a work of art, but that the experts—the critics, museum curators, art historians—must suppose it to be one. Why else would they put it on public display? Clearly, their standards are different from ours; we are at a loss to understand them and we wish they'd give us a few simple, clear-cut rules to go by. Then maybe we would learn to like what we see, we would know "why it is art." But the experts do not post exact rules, and the layman is apt to fall back upon his final line of defense: "Well, I don't know anything about art but I know what I like." . . .
2. Deciding what is art and evaluating a work of art are separate problems; if we had an absolute method for distinguishing art from non-art, this

method would not necessarily enable us to measure quality. People have long been in the habit of compounding the two problems into one; quite often when they ask, "Why is it art?" they mean, "Why is it *good* art?" Yet, all systems for rating art so far proposed fall short of being completely satisfactory; we tend to agree with their authors only if they like the same things we do. If we do not share their taste, their system seems like a strait jacket to us. This brings us to another, more basic difficulty. In order to have any rating scale at all, we must be willing to assume that there are fixed timeless values in art, that the true worth of a given work is a stable thing, independent of time and circumstance. Perhaps such values exist; we cannot be sure that they do not. We do know, however, that opinions about works of art keep changing, not only today but throughout the known course of history. Even the greatest classics have had their ups and downs, and the history of taste—which is part of the history of art—is a continuous process of discarding established values and rediscovering neglected ones. It would seem, therefore, that absolute qualities in art elude us, that we cannot escape viewing works of art in the context of time and circumstance, whether past or present. How indeed could it be otherwise, so long as art is still being created all around us, opening our eyes almost daily to new experiences and thus forcing us to adjust our sights? . . .

3. Defining art is about as troublesome as defining a human being. Plato, it is said, tried to solve the latter problem by calling man "a featherless biped," whereupon Diogenes introduced a plucked rooster as "Plato's Man." Generalizations about art are, on the whole, equally easy to disprove. Even the most elementary statements turn out to have their pitfalls. Let us test, for instance, the simple claim that a work of art must be made by man, rather than by nature. This definition at least eliminates the confusion of treating as works of art phenomena such as flowers, sea shells, or sunsets. It is a far from sufficient definition, to be sure, since man makes many things other than works of art. Still, it might serve as a starting point. Our difficulties begin as soon as we ask, "What do we mean by making?" If, in order to simplify our problem, we concentrate on the visual arts, we might say that a work of art must be a tangible thing shaped by human hands. Now let us look at the striking *Bull's Head* by Picasso, which consists of nothing but the seat and the handlebars of an old bicycle.
4. How meaningful is our formula here? Of course the materials used by Picasso are man-made, but it would be absurd to insist that Picasso must share the credit with the manufacturer, since the seat and handlebars in themselves are not works of art. While we feel a certain jolt when we first recognize the ingredients of this visual pun, we also sense that it was a stroke of genius to put them together in this unique way, and we cannot very well deny that it is a work of art. Yet the handiwork—the

mounting of the seat on the handlebars — is ridiculously simple. What is far from simple is the leap of the imagination by which Picasso recognized a bull's head in these unlikely objects; that, we feel, only he could have done. Clearly, then, we must be careful not to confuse the making of a work of art with manual skill or craftsmanship. Some works of art may demand a great deal of technical discipline; others do not. And even the most painstaking piece of craft does not deserve to be called a work of art unless it involves a leap of the imagination. But if this is true, are we not forced to conclude that the real making of the *Bull's Head* took place in the artist's mind? No, that is not so, either. Suppose that, instead of actually putting the two pieces together and showing them to us, Picasso merely told us, "You know, today I saw a bicycle seat and handlebars that looked just like a bull's head to me." Then there would be no work of art and his remark would not even strike us as an interesting bit of conversation. Moreover, Picasso himself would not feel the satisfaction of having created something on the basis of his leap of the imagination alone. Once he had conceived his visual pun, he could never be sure that it would really work unless he put it into effect.

CREATIVITY

5. Thus the artist's hands, however modest the task they may have to perform, play an essential part in the creative process. Our *Bull's Head* is, of course, an ideally simple case, involving only one leap of the imagination and a single manual act in response to it — once the seat had been properly placed on the handlebars, the job was done. Ordinarily, artists do not work with ready-made parts but with materials that have little or no shape of their own; the creative process consists of a long series of leaps of the imagination and the artist's attempts to give them form by shaping the material accordingly. The hand tries to carry out the commands of the imagination and hopefully puts down a brush stroke, but the result may not be quite what had been expected, partly because all matter resists the human will, partly because the image in the artist's mind is constantly shifting and changing, so that the commands of the imagination cannot be very precise. In fact, the mental image begins to come into focus only as the artist "draws the line somewhere." That line then becomes part — the only fixed part — of the image; the rest of the image, as yet unborn, remains fluid. And each time the artist adds another line, a new leap of the imagination is needed to incorporate that line into his ever-growing mental image. If the line cannot be incorporated, he discards it and puts down a new one. In this way, by a constant flow of impulses back and forth between his mind and the partly shaped material before him, he gradually de-

fines more and more of the image, until at last all of it has been given visible form. Needless to say, artistic creation is too subtle and intimate an experience to permit an exact step-by-step description; only the artist himself can observe it fully, but he is so absorbed by it that he has great difficulty explaining it to us. Still, our metaphor of birth comes closer to the truth than would a description of the process in terms of a transfer or projection of the image from the artist's mind, for the making of a work of art is both joyous and painful, replete with surprises, and in no sense mechanical. . . .

6. Clearly, then, the making of a work of art has little in common with what we ordinarily mean by "making." It is a strange and risky business in which the maker never quite knows what he is making until he has actually made it; or, to put it another way, it is a game of find-and-seek in which the seeker is not sure what he is looking for until he has found it. (In the *Bull's Head,* it is the bold "finding" that impresses us most. . . .) To the non-artist, it seems hard to believe that this uncertainty, this need-to-take-a-chance, should be the essence of the artist's work. For we all tend to think of "making" in terms of the craftsman or manufacturer who knows exactly what he wants to produce from the very outset, picks the tools best fitted to his task, and is sure of what he is doing at every step. Such "making" is a two-phase affair: first the craftsman makes a plan, then he acts on it. And because he—or his customer—has made all the important decisions in advance, he has to worry only about means, rather than ends, while he carries out his plan. There is thus little risk, but also little adventure, in his handiwork, which as a consequence tends to become routine. It may even be replaced by the mechanical labor of a machine. No machine, on the other hand, can replace the artist, for with him conception and execution go hand in hand and are so completely interdependent that he cannot separate the one from the other. Whereas the craftsman only attempts what he knows to be possible, the artist is always driven to attempt the impossible—or at least the improbable or unimaginable. Who, after all, would have imagined that a bull's head was hidden in the seat and handlebars of a bicycle until Picasso discovered it for us; did he not, almost literally, "make a silk purse out of a sow's ear"? No wonder the artist's way of working is so resistant to any set rules, while the craftsman's encourages standardization and regularity. We acknowledge this difference when we speak of the artist as *creating* instead of merely *making* something, although the word is being done to death by overuse nowadays, when every child and every lipstick manufacturer is labeled "creative."

7. Needless to say, there have always been many more craftsmen than artists among us, since our need for the familiar and expected far exceeds our capacity to absorb the original but often deeply unsettling

experiences we get from works of art. The urge to penetrate unknown realms, to achieve something original, may be felt by every one of us now and then; to that extent, we can all fancy ourselves potential artists. . . . What sets the real artist apart is not so much the desire to *seek,* but that mysterious ability to *find* which we call talent. We also speak of it as a "gift," implying that it is a sort of present from some higher power; or as "genius," a term which originally meant a higher power—a kind of "good demon"—that inhabits the artist's body and acts through him. All we can really say about talent is that it must not be confused with aptitude. Aptitude is what the craftsman needs; it means a better-than-average knack for doing something that any ordinary person can do. An aptitude is fairly constant and specific; it can be measured with some success by means of tests which permit us to predict future performance. Creative talent, on the other hand, seems utterly unpredictable; we can spot it only on the basis of *past* performance. And even past performance is not enough to assure us that a given artist will continue to produce on the same level: some artists reach a creative peak quite early in their careers and then "go dry," while others, after a slow and unpromising start, may achieve astonishingly original work in middle age or even later.

ORIGINALITY

8. Originality, then, is what distinguishes art from craft. We may say, therefore, that it is the yardstick of artistic greatness or importance. Unfortunately, it is also very hard to define; the usual synonyms—uniqueness, novelty, freshness—do not help us very much, and the dictionaries tell us only that an original work must not be a copy, reproduction, imitation, or translation. What they fail to point out is that originality is always relative: There is no such thing as a completely original work of art. Thus, if we want to rate works of art on an "originality scale" our problem does not lie in deciding whether or not a given work is original (the obvious copies and reproductions are for the most part easy enough to eliminate) but in establishing just exactly *how* original it is. To do that is not impossible. However, the difficulties besetting our task are so great that we cannot hope for more than tentative and incomplete answers. Which does not mean, of course, that we should not try; quite the contrary. For whatever the outcome of our labors in any particular case, we shall certainly learn a great deal about works of art in the process. . . .
9. If originality is what distinguishes art from craft, tradition serves as the common meeting ground of the two. Every budding artist starts out on the level of craft, by imitating other works of art. In this way, he gradually absorbs the artistic tradition of his time and place until he has

gained a firm footing in it. But only the truly gifted ever leave that stage of traditional competence and become creators in their own right. No one, after all, can be taught how to create; he can only be taught how to go through the motions of creating. If he has talent, he will eventually achieve the real thing. What the apprentice or art student learns are skills and techniques — established ways of drawing, painting, carving, designing; established ways of *seeing*. . . .

LIKES AND DISLIKES

10. It is now time to return to our troubled layman and his assumptions about art. He may be willing to grant, on the basis of our discussion so far, that art is indeed a complex and in many ways mysterious human activity about which even the experts can hope to offer only tentative and partial conclusions; but he is also likely to take this as confirming his own belief that "I don't know anything about art." Are there really people who know nothing about art? . . . Our answer must be no, for we cannot help knowing *something* about it, just as we all know something about politics and economics no matter how indifferent we may be to the issues of the day. Art is so much a part of the fabric of human living that we encounter it all the time, even if our contacts with it are limited to magazine covers, advertising posters, war memorials, and the buildings where we live, work, and worship. Much of this art, to be sure, is pretty shoddy — art at third- and fourth-hand, worn out by endless repetition, representing the lowest common denominator of popular taste. Still, it is art of a sort; and since it is the only art most people ever experience, it molds their ideas on art in general. When they say, "I know what I like," they really mean, "I like what I know (and I reject whatever fails to match the things I am familiar with)"; such likes are not in truth theirs at all, for they have been imposed upon them by habit and circumstance, without any personal choice. To like what we know and to distrust what we do not know is an age-old human trait. . . .

THE ARTIST'S AUDIENCE

11. The artist does not create merely for his own satisfaction, but wants his work approved by others. In fact, the hope for approval is what makes him want to create in the first place, and the creative process is not completed until the work has found an audience. Here we have another paradox: The birth of a work of art is an intensely private experience (so much so that many artists can work only when completely alone and refuse to show their unfinished pieces to anyone); yet it must, as a final step, be shared by the public, in order for the birth to be successful. . . . At a minimum, this audience need consist of no more than

one or two people whose opinion he values. If he can win them over by his work, he feels encouraged to go on; without them, he despairs of his calling. There have been some very great artists who had only such a minimum audience. They hardly ever sold any of their work or had an opportunity to display it in public, but they continued to create because of the moral support of a few faithful friends. . . . The audience whose approval looms so large in the artist's mind is a limited and special one, not the general public: The merits of the artist's work can never be determined by a popularity contest. . . .

1672 words

Reading Times
1st reading ____ minutes
3rd reading ____ minutes

Reading Speed
10 minutes = 167 wpm
9 minutes = 186 wpm
8 minutes = 209 wpm
7 minutes = 239 wpm
6 minutes = 279 wpm

1.2
SECOND READING

Go back and read this passage again. Take as much time as you need this time. Look up some of the unfamiliar words in the glossary at the end of the book or in your dictionary if you wish.

1.3
THIRD READING

Read the passage quickly a third time. Concentrate on understanding the main ideas of each paragraph. Figure out how the title and the headings relate to the text. Since this passage is very densely written (it is tightly packed with ideas), do not hesitate to read it over a fourth and even a fifth time.

1.4
READER RESPONSE

In order to explore your response to this reading, write for 15 minutes about anything that interested you in this passage. You may wish to write about a point that you strongly agreed—or disagreed—with, or you may wish to write about an idea in the text that you had never thought of before. Try to explore ***your own thoughts and feelings*** as much as possible. Do ***not*** merely summarize or restate the ideas in this passage.

1.5 RESPONSE SHARING

Read your response to two or three other people in your class. Listen carefully to what the others have written. After you have discussed each other's responses, talk about other points of interest in the passage.

1.6 IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEAS

Working with the same small group, make a list of the main ideas in this passage. Go through the passage paragraph by paragraph; pick out the main ideas in each paragraph. *Note:* In this text, there are several important ideas in each paragraph. Try to express these ideas in your own words wherever possible.

1.7 ANALYZING THE TEXT

Work with your group members on this exercise. Discuss the answers carefully, particularly if there are disagreements among members of your group. In some cases, there may be more than one possible interpretation.

1. Write whether these statements are true *(T)* or false *(F)*.
   a. _____ There are absolute, clear-cut standards for evaluating a work of art.
   b. _____ A work of art does not necessarily depend upon the manual skill or craftsmanship of the artist.
   c. _____ An artist takes more risks than a craftsman does.
   d. _____ An artist makes a plan before he or she begins creating and sticks to that plan faithfully. All decisions are made in advance.
   e. _____ Most artists create for their own satisfaction; they do not care about the approval of anyone else.
2. What are some of the main differences between art and craft? List some of these differences below.

Art	**Craft**
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Explain the points you listed to others in your class.

3. Explain what each statement means in the context in which it was used.
   a. Thus the artist's hands, however modest the task they may have to perform, play an essential part in the creative process. (paragraph 5)
   b. [Making a work of art] is a game of find-and-seek in which the seeker is not sure what he is looking for until he has found it. (paragraph 6)
   c. Did [Picasso] not, almost literally, "make a silk purse out of a sow's ear"? (paragraph 6)
   d. Originality, then, is what distinguishes art from craft. (paragraph 8)
   e. No one, after all, can be taught how to create; he can only be taught how to go through the motions of creating. (paragraph 9)
4. According to Janson, the author of this passage, art (visual art, in this case):
   a. can exist only in the author's imagination; it does not have to be realized in any external form.
   b. must be made by man, rather than by nature.
   c. cannot be made up of man-made or ready-made parts.
   d. is higher up on the originality scale than is craft.
   e. must have an audience, however small that audience may be.
   f. All of the above.
   g. *a, b, d,* and *e*
   h. *b, d,* and *e*
5. The implication of the last paragraph (paragraph 11) is that:
   a. the best artists are immediately recognized by the public, and they are very popular.
   b. many good artists have a very small number of people who really appreciate and understand their work.
   c. an artist's popularity is an accurate measure of his or her worth.

1.8
VOCABULARY STUDY

Study the italicized words and phrases in their contexts. Guess at their meanings. Write your guess in the first blank. Then, look up the word or phrase in your dictionary.

1. (paragraph 1) But the experts do not post exact rules [about art], and the *layman* is apt to fall back upon his final line of defense: "Well, I don't know anything about art but I know what I like."
   a. (guess) _____
   b. (dictionary) _____
2. (paragraph 3) Even the most elementary statements turn out to have their *pitfalls*. Let us test, for instance, the simple claim that a work of art must be made by man, rather than by nature.

a. (guess) _____

b. (dictionary) _____

3. (paragraph 4) Some works of art may demand a great deal of technical discipline; others do not. And even the most *painstaking* piece of craft does not deserve to be called a work of art unless it involves a leap of the imagination.

a. (guess) _____

b. (dictionary) _____

4. (paragraph 5) . . . the making of a work of art is both joyous and painful, *replete* with surprises, and in no sense mechanical.

a. (guess) _____

b. (dictionary) _____

5. (paragraph 11) Here we have another *paradox:* The birth of a work of art is an intensely private experience (so much so that many artists can work only when completely alone and refuse to show their unfinished pieces to anyone); yet it must, as a final step, be shared by the public, in order for the birth to be successful.

a. (guess) _____

b. (dictionary) _____

1.9
CLOZE EXERCISE

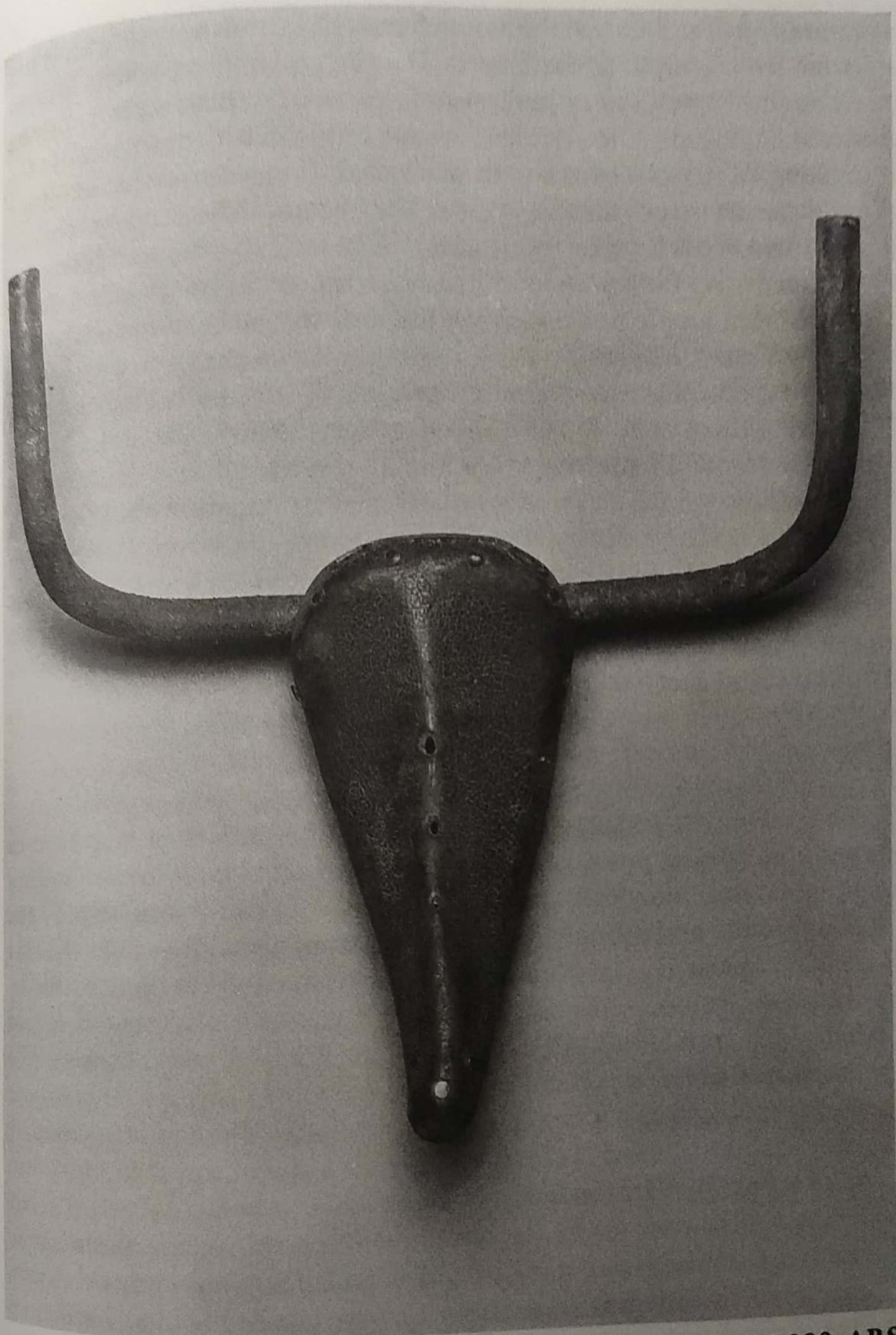
Write an appropriate word in each blank. Discuss your word choice with your group. *Note:* In some cases, more than one word may be appropriate, or no word may be needed.

There are no exact _____(1)_____ for telling what is _____(2)_____ and what is not art. _____(3)_____ fact is very troubling to _____(4)_____ people who are not _____(5)_____ in art. These people _____(6)_____ assistance in deciding whether _____(7)_____ piece of art is good — _____(8)_____ even if it is really art. _____(9)_____ art is like understanding _____(10)_____ other field: music, literature, science, mathematics, for example. _____(11)_____ more you study, the _____(12)_____ you understand. To be _____(13)_____

expert in art, it is _____ (14) to know something about _____ (15) history of art and the period _____ (16) which the piece was created.

1.10 APPLICATION, CRITICAL EVALUATION, AND SYNTHESIS

1. Many people have looked at Pablo Picasso's famous ***Bull's Head,*** and they have wondered to themselves, "Is this *really* art?" What do you think? Why? Are you bothered by the commonplace materials—the bicycle parts? Do they seem unartistic to you? Are you familiar with other works of art that use commonplace materials? If so, explain and describe.
2. Why do you think many, if not most, great artists and writers are not recognized and appreciated in their lifetime? Can you give an example of an artist or writer who became well known only after his or her death?
3. Discuss a famous artist from your country. It this person still living? If not, when did he or she live? What kind of art did the person do? What was original or important about this person's work? Describe a work by this person.
4. Discuss your favorite work of art. What is it? Who was the artist? Why is it your favorite work? What does it mean to you?
5. How important do you think art is in society? Is it as important as science, for example? Business? Give reasons and examples to support your point of view. Do you think art is as important today as it was in the past? Why? Why not?



Cliché dès Musées Nationaux, Picasso, ***Bull's Head,*** 1943, © 1990 ARS N.Y./SPADEM