**27 Responses to the Question “What is Art?”**

[**Judith B Herman**](http://mentalfloss.com/authors/judith-b-herman) http://mentalfloss.com/article/57501/27-responses-question-what-art

To Plato, art was imitation of nature, but in the 19th century, photography took over that function, and in the 20th, abstract art overturned the whole notion that art was about representation. And although art meant skill early on, conceptual artists elevated ideas over execution. So what is art? Does it have to be beautiful? Expressive? Original? Uplifting? Intellectual? Here’s how 27 artists, critics, and others answered the question, "What is art?"

Art is…

**…ACCORDING TO A DICTIONARY:**

**1.** [from the 1300s] Skill; its display, application, or expression… [from the 1600s] The expression or application of creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting, drawing, or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.

-- Oxford English Dictionary Online

**…IMITATION OR CREATION?**

**2.** [Socrates:] Which is the art of painting designed to be—an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear—of appearance or of reality?

[Glaucon:] Of appearance.

[Socrates:] Then the imitator…is a long way off the truth…

– [Plato](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/), (429–347 B.C.E.) Athenian philosopher, *The Republic, Book X*, translated by Benjamin Jowett

**3.** Art is the unceasing effort to compete with the beauty of flowers – and never succeeding.

– [Marc Chagall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Chagall) (1887–1985) Russian-French artist, remark, 1977

**4.** The imitator is a poor kind of creature. If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer.

– [James McNeill Whistler](http://www.jamesabbottmcneillwhistler.org/) (1834–1903), American-born, British-based artist, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*(1890)

**5.** The craftsman knows what he wants to make before he makes it.…The making of a work of art…is a strange and risky business in which the maker never knows quite what he is making until he makes it.

– [R.G. Collingwood](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R._G._Collingwood) (1889–1943), English philosopher,*The Principles of Art*(1938)

**6.** Art is either a plagiarist or a revolutionary.

 – [Paul Gauguin](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gaug/hd_gaug.htm), (1848–1903), Peruvian-born French artist, quoted in Huneker, *The Pathos of Distance* (1913)

**…CREATING BEAUTY OR HARMONY**

**7.** Filling a space in a beautiful way. That's what art means to me.

– [Georgia O'Keeffe](http://www.georgiaokeeffe.net/) (1887–1986), American painter, in *Art News* December 1977

**8.** Art is harmony.

– [Georges Seurat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_Seurat) (1859–1891), French painter, letter to Maurice Beaubourg (1890)

**…SOMETHING THAT REVEALS THE ESSENTIAL OR HIDDEN TRUTH**

**9.** To me the thing that art does for life is to clean it – to strip it to form.

– [Robert Frost](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/robert-frost) (1874–1963), American poet, in *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thoughts of Robert Frost*, by Lawrence Thompson (1942)

**10.** Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.

– [Paul Klee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Klee) (1879–1940), Swiss painter, *The Inward Vision* (1959)

**11.** We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.

– [Pablo Picasso](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pablo_Picasso) (1881–1973), Spanish painter living in France, quoted in Dore Ashton's*Picasso on Art* (1972)

**…THOUGHT EXPRESSED THROUGH FORM (OR NOT)**

**12.** To give a body and a perfect form to one’s thought, this—and only this—is to be an artist.

– [Jacques-Louis David](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques-Louis_David) (1748–1825), French painter, in *Jacques-Louis David*, by Anita Brooker (1980)

**13.** [In order to distinguish Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes from actual Brillo boxes, art can be defined as] embodied meaning.

– [Arthur C. Danto](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/28/arts/design/arthur-c-danto-a-philosopher-of-art-is-dead-at-89.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (1924–2013), American philosopher of art, *What Art Is*(2013)

**14.** Ideas alone can be works of art….All ideas need not be made physical.…A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist’s mind to the viewer’s. But it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artist’s mind.

– [Sol LeWitt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sol_LeWitt) (1928–2007), American artist, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," in *Art and Its Significance*, edited by Stephen David Ross (1994)

**…A SOURCE OF CALM IN A CHAOTIC WORLD**

**15.** What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.

– [Henri Matisse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Matisse) (1869–1954), French artist, *Notes of a Painter* (1908)

**16.** Art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos.

– [Saul Bellow](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1976/bellow-bio.html) (1915–2005), American novelist, in George Plimpton,*Writers at Work,* third series (1967)

**…POLITICAL**

**17.** I don’t think art is elite or mysterious. I don’t think anybody can separate art from politics. The intention to separate art from politics is itself a very political intention.

– [Ai Weiwei](http://aiweiwei.com/) (1957-), Chinese artist, “Shame on Me,” in *Der Spiegel*, November 21, 2011.

**…SELF-EXPRESSION OR AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

**18.** What is art? Art grows out of grief and joy, but mainly grief. It is born of people’s lives.

– [Edvard Munch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edvard_Munch%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) (1863–1944), Norwegian artist, in *Edvard Munch: The Man and His Art*, by Ragna Stang (1977)

**19.** All art is autobiographical; the pearl is the oyster's autobiography.

– [Federico Fellini](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000019/) (1920–1993), Italian film director, in *Atlantic Monthly,* December 1965

**20.** Airing one's dirty linen never makes for a masterpiece.

– [François Truffaut](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois_Truffaut) (1932–1984), French film director, *Bed and Board* (1972)

**…COMMUNICATION OF FEELINGS**

**21.** To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced, and…then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling—this is the activity of art.

– [Leo Tolstoy](http://www.biography.com/people/leo-tolstoy-9508518#awesm=~oIg8OmLlGOLqeC) (1828–1910), Russian author, *What is Art?* (1890)

**22.** Art has to move you and design does not, unless it's a good design for a bus.

– [David Hockney](http://www.hockneypictures.com/) (1937–) British artist, to *The* *Guardian* on October 26, 1988

**…AN ADDICTION**

**23.** Art is a habit-forming drug.

– [Marcel Duchamp](http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=1634), (1887–1968), French-born American artist, quoted in Richter, *Dada: art and anti-art* (1964)

**…AN ATTEMPT AT IMMORTALITY**

**24.** Life is short, art is long, often quoted as ‘Ars longa, vita brevis’, after Seneca's rendering in De Brevitate Vitae sect.

– [Hippocrates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippocrates) (c.460–357 BC), Greek physician, *Aphorisms sect. 1*, para. 1 (translated by W. H. S. Jones)

**25.** Art is a revolt, a protest against extinction.

– [André Malraux](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9_Malraux) (1901–1976), French novelist, essayist, and art critic, *Les Voix du silence*(1951)

**…WHATEVER IS DISPLAYED IN A MUSEUM OR GALLERY**

**26.** [In 1917, Marcel Duchamp, using the pseudonym R. Mutt, submitted a store-bought urinal, which he titled “Fountain,” to an art exhibition.] Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under a new title and point of view (and) created a new thought for the object.

– [Marcel Duchamp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcel_Duchamp), [Beatrice Wood](http://www.beatricewood.com/biography.html), and [Henri-Pierre Roché](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri-Pierre_Roch%C3%A9), *The Blind Man*, 2nd issue (May 1917)

**27.** If one general statement can be made about the art of our times, it is that one by one the old criteria of what a work of art ought to be have been discarded in favor of a dynamic approach in which everything is possible

– [Peter Selz](http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/selzp.htm) (1919- ) German-born American art historian, Art in Our Times (1981)