

## LESSON 2

# Is it Art

### ART CRITICISM

When looking at a work of art, students might be asked to:

#### **Describe it:**

What kinds of things do you see in this painting? What else do you see?  
How would you describe this painting to a person who could not see it?  
How would you describe the people in this picture? Are they like you or different?  
How would you describe (the place depicted in) this painting?  
How do you think the artist made this work?

#### **Analyze it:**

How would you describe the lines in this picture? The shapes? The colours?  
What does this painting show?  
Which objects seems closer to you? Further away?  
What can you tell me about the colors in this painting?  
What color is used the most in this painting?  
What makes this painting look crowded?  
What can you tell me about the subject in this painting? What do you think is the most important part of this picture?

#### **Interpret it:**

What do you think is happening in this painting? What else could be happening?  
What do you think is going on in this picture? How did you arrive at that idea?  
What do you think this painting is about? How did you come up that idea?  
Why do you suppose the artist made this painting? What makes you think that?

#### **Evaluate it:**

What do you think is good about this painting? What is not so good?  
Do you think the person who painted this do a good or bad job?  
What makes you think so?  
Why do you think other people should see this work of art?  
What do you think other people would say about this work? Why do you think that?  
What would you do with this work if you owned it?  
What does this painting remind you of?  
What do you think is worth remembering about this painting?  
What interests you most about this work of art?

**SKETCHBOOK ASSIGNMENT 2-1**

Look at and evaluate an art work using the 4 steps explained in the text. The art work will be provided by the teacher.



“Fast Food in America” Chris Woods (Chilliwack, BC Artists)

## WHAT IS ART?

When someone asks “Why is this art?,” they are asking a very complicated, but important question. They may be wondering about the value of an artwork or they might be responding to qualities in an artwork that they don’t like or understand. The real question they may be asking is “What is art?”



### Should Art be Beautiful?

People respond emotionally and intellectually to visual images, often recognizing characteristics that make something seem beautiful without even thinking about it. Philosophers call the reaction to an appealing quality an aesthetic response. Aesthetic responses may vary from person to person, and individuals often have different ideas about what makes an artwork beautiful. Some people respond to certain subjects because they associate them with pleasure. Others may find a particular combination of lines, colors, and shapes appealing without understanding the meaning of the artwork.

In the 1700s and 1800s, European philosophers and art schools (called academies) developed formulas to analyze and create beautiful works of art. Understanding compositional elements such as balance, unity, rhythm, and harmony became a formula to guide artists as they created works. By following these rules, they could learn to produce beautiful artworks that many so-called untrained artists could not.

Judged by these traditional standards, many contemporary artworks would not be described as beautiful or pleasurable. Then why are they considered art? Contemporary artists often want viewers to think about art in a different way, beyond the traditional rules of beauty. For many, it is more important that the works are interesting, thought-provoking, and challenging.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” What does this saying mean? How does it apply to the question “What is art?”

### SKETCHBOOK ASSIGNMENT 2-3

Visit the course website (under the AP Workbook tab) and open the appropriate link to see images needed for this activity. The images chosen do not provide any background information except for the title of each artwork. Recreate the chart from the following page and complete this exercise. Do you think the art is Beautiful, not beautiful or not sure? Students will also need to specify “why?.”

**Should Art be Beautiful?**

|    | Title of Art Work | Beautiful     | WHY? |
|----|-------------------|---------------|------|
|    |                   | Not Beautiful |      |
|    |                   | Not Sure      |      |
| 1  |                   |               |      |
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| 36 |                   |               |      |

## Does Art Have to Tell A Story?

For centuries, philosophers and artists believed that art must tell a story or have important meaning. In order to fully appreciate the artwork, viewers had to “read” this story from the image and understand its meaning.

In the 1700s, philosopher Sir Joshua Reynolds stated that great art must tell a major story. He even described the acceptable themes—Greek and Roman mythology and material from the Bible. Subjects such as portraits, landscapes, and still-lives were less important in art. While this may seem old fashioned today, many people still believe that art should express some great idea or tell a story. Therefore, to fully appreciate and understand a work of art, viewers must understand the message behind the work.

This concern for meaning in art expanded in the mid-1800s. Some artists rejected the major art subjects and instead depicted scenes of everyday life and common objects. Others began to reject realistic work altogether and explored other types of images. As the messages became less obvious, viewers were challenged to decipher a story or understand the meaning of the work.

### SKETCHBOOK ASSIGNMENT 2-3

Visit the course website (under the AP Workbook tab) and open the appropriate link to see images needed for this activity. View the following images without reading the background information:

1. John Currin- *Park City Grill*
2. Jacques Lipchitz- *Prometheus Strangling the Vulture II*
3. Adrian Piper- *The Mythic Being; I/You (Her)*
4. Sigmar Polke- *Mrs. Autumn and Her Two Daughters*
5. George Segal - *“The Diner”*
6. John Sloan- *South Beach Bathers*
7. Kara Walker- *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress*
8. Andy Warhol- *16 Jackies*

For each of these works, in your sketchbook write a brief story about what you think is happening from the point of view of one of the people in the image. Look for visual clues in the artwork to help you add details to your story. Next, read the artists’ background information and answer the following questions. Give specific reasons for your answers.

Which artist seems the most interested in telling a story?

Which one seems to be more open to interpretation?

How do these artists communicate meaning in their work?

Which artwork is the most interesting to you?

Which is the most challenging?

## Should Art Be Realistic?

Realistic art depicts or represents the visual world as closely as possible. Since the Renaissance in Europe until the beginning of the modern era, art has been valued for qualities that create an illusion of reality, such as light and shadow, proportion, and perspective. Many artists during this period were trained according to these ideals. Most people admire the work of a highly skilled artist in the traditional sense: one who faithfully reproduces realistic scenes. This ability was a major source of artistic success in the past, particularly before the invention of photography. Even today, many judge art by its true-to-life quality, which can make appreciating artwork that is nonrepresentational more challenging.

The idea of abstraction, in which artists alter the visual qualities of a subject, was a major development in modern art. There are many degrees of abstraction in art. Some artists made small changes in the look of their subject matter by simplifying or exaggerating colors or shapes. In these works, the subject can often still be recognized. Others created images that do not realistically represent any object. This type of abstract art may be called nonrepresentational or non-objective art. It may be composed of basic geometric shapes and forms or a complex arrangement of colors, shapes, textures, and lines.

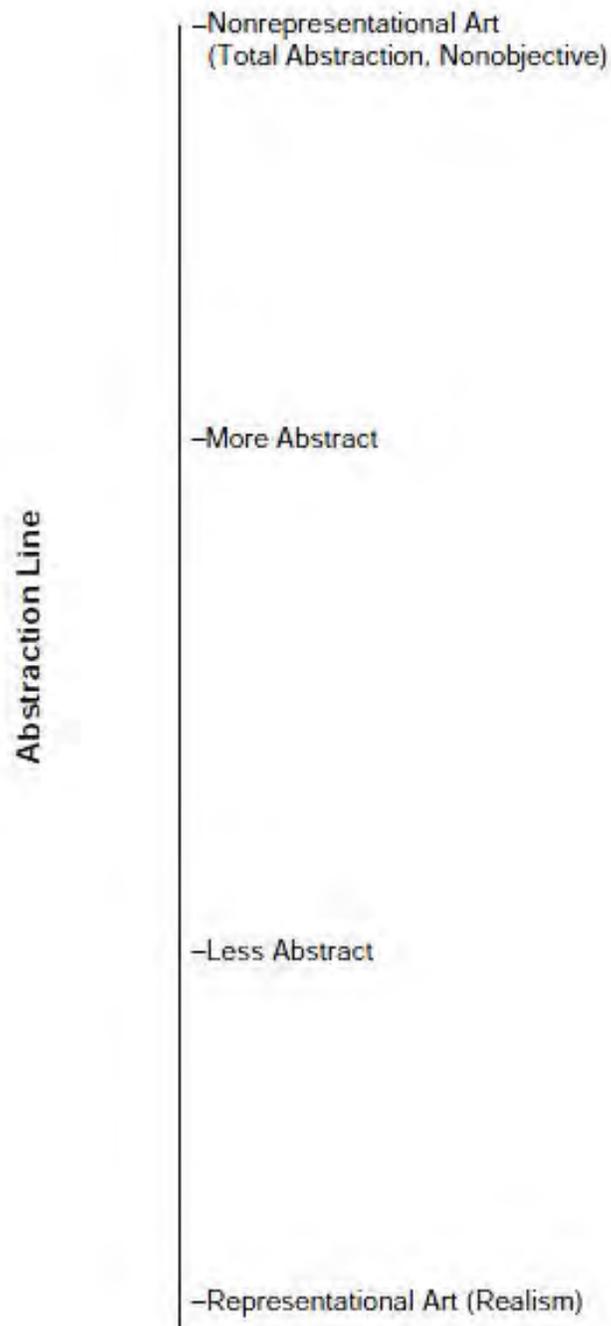
“All works of art are by their very nature abstract.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not? Do you think it takes more or less artistic skill to create abstract art? What type of art do you think requires more creative ability?

## SKETCHBOOK ASSIGNMENT 2-4

In this activity, students will learn about terms defining representational and abstract art, then apply them to individual works. Visit the course website (under the AP Workbook tab) and open the appropriate link to see images needed for this activity. Recreate the chart from the following page and complete this exercise.

1. Lyonel Feininger- ***Church of the Minorites II***
2. Kazuo Shiraga- ***Untitled***
3. Chuck Close- ***Big Self-Portrait***
4. Ellsworth Kelly- ***Black Curve***
5. Charles Ray- ***Unpainted Sculpture***
6. John Currin- ***Park City Grill***
7. Alberto Giacometti- ***Bust of Diego***
8. Donald Judd- ***Untitled***
9. Deborah Butterfield- ***Woodrow***
10. Stanton MacDonald-Wright ***Synchromy in Green and Orange***
11. Georgia O’Keeffe- ***Lake George Barns***
12. John Sloan- ***South Beach Bathers***

## Should Art be Realistic?



### Which Comes First, the Art or the Idea?

Some 20th-century artists pushed the limits of abstraction to the extreme. Once free of the perceived requirement to make representational art, they began to focus more on their ideas for what art could be. For some, the idea or concept became the most important part of the artwork. Since the 1960s, this type of art has been called conceptual art. Conceptual artists documented or diagrammed their ideas for various artworks. If they were interested in creating a physical object based on their plan, they either made it themselves or provided the instructions to other people to fabricate the

piece as a drawing, painting, sculpture, or other work. Some conceptual artists simply display the plans, texts, or notations as an artwork, which emphasizes the idea as the key part of their creative process. What do you think is more important, the idea behind an artwork or the actual work of art?

### **Key Ideas of Conceptual Art**

- The artist's ideas are more important than the actual painting, sculpture, or object created.
- The use of language takes priority over visual experience.
- Artists criticized art-world institutions and society and wanted to create something outside of the system.

Conceptual art is a style of art that includes a wide variety of ideas and media. The emphasis on the artist's thoughts and ideas led some to consider any activity or thought as a potential artwork. One of the goals of conceptual artists was to expand the scope of what art could be. In some cases, artists considered everything in life to be a work of art. Do you agree or disagree with these artists? Why or why not?

### **SKETCHBOOK ASSIGNMENT 2-5**

View the images and read the background information for each art work. Visit the course website (under the AP Workbook tab) and open the appropriate link to see images needed for this activity.

1. Lawrence Weiner- ***Bits & Pieces Put Together to Present a Semblance of a Whole***
2. Sol LeWitt- ***X with Columns***
3. On Kawara- ***TODAY series***

If you were given Lawrence Weiner's text "Bits & Pieces Put Together to Present a Semblance of a Whole" to make into an artwork, what would you create? In your sketchbook make several sketches of how you might interpret the artist's concept as a drawing, painting, or sculpture.

Look carefully at Sol LeWitt's *X with Columns* and read the background information. What do you think the artist wrote as the concept or instructions for producing this sculpture?

In the *TODAY series*, On Kawara explores the concept of time and the "reading of the days." Do you keep a record of days in a diary or journal, on a calendar, or in an assignment book? Do you consider this to be an artistic practice? If so, what makes it art? If not, what could be added or changed for it to become art?

## **Does Art Express Emotions?**

As we have seen, an artwork can tell stories or depict ideas; it can be realistic or abstract. However, for some people, the most important issue in art is that it expresses or stirs emotions. Art can be a record of what the artist is feeling and, at the same time, it can bring about emotional reactions in the viewer. In the 20th century, this type of art has been called Expressionist Art. There are expressionistic features within many different art styles and movements. Artists make choices about color, line, texture, and composition to evoke or express feelings. Sometimes this leads to abstracting a subject to make it more expressive. In the 1950s, a group of American artists referred to as Abstract Expressionists believed the best way to express pure emotions was to create non-objective or totally abstract artworks in which colors, lines, shapes, and textures directly conveyed their emotional state.

Which artworks seem the most expressive to you? Which seem the least expressive?

Do you think a work must express a feeling or emotion in order to be art? Why or why not?

What is more interesting to you: the shapes and colors in an artwork or the feelings and emotions it seems to express?

## **SKETCHBOOK ASSIGNMENT 2-6**

View the images and read the background information for each art work. Visit the course website (under the AP Workbook tab) and open the appropriate link to see images needed for this activity.

1. Lee Bul- ***Plexus Blue***
2. Donald Judd- ***Untitled***
3. Franz Marc- ***The Large Blue Horses***
4. Georgia O'Keeffe- ***Lake George Barns***
5. Mark Rothko- ***Untitled***
6. Kazuo Shiraga- ***Untitled***

For each artwork, in your sketchbook discuss the feelings or emotions you think the artist has expressed. Look at the colors, lines, textures, and shapes. Compare these to your classmates' drawings of particular emotions. Try to find characteristics used by the students and the artists to express similar feelings.

## **Is Art an Object or is it a Process?**

Every work of art at some point is conceptualized and/or created. Artists, philosophers, critics, and curators have explored different ideas about the creative process and the actions of artists in creating artworks. This has led some artists to focus more on the activity of creating art, rather than on a resulting finished object. For them, making art can be a process, performance, or action that blurs the boundaries between visual art, dance, media art, and theatre. This is sometimes referred to as performance art or process art. The artists may not know in advance the exact outcomes of their activity and chance occurrences or unpredictable events become an important part of their works.

### **SKETCHBOOK ASSIGNMENT 2-7**

View the images and read the background information for each art work. Visit the course website (under the AP Workbook tab) and open the appropriate link to see images needed for this activity.

1. Deborah Butterfield- ***Woodrow***
2. Lucio Fontana- ***Spatial Concept—Expectation***
3. Rebecca Horn- ***The Little Painting School Performs a Waterfall***
4. Gabriel Orozco- ***Yielding Stone***
5. Nam June Paik- ***TV Cello***
6. Niki de Saint Phalle- ***Untitled from Edition Mat 64***
7. George Segal- ***Diner***
8. Kazuo Shiraga- ***Untitled***

In your sketchbook, write about the creation of the piece or what they think each artist may have done to make it.

How does the “finished” artwork reflect the physical movements, activities, or performance of the artist?

Were other people besides the artist part of the process?

Do you think this has resulted in the creation of an artwork or is it just a record of an activity? Why?

## **What is the Difference between Art and Popular Culture?**

During the decades following World War II, the United States and a number of European countries experienced tremendous growth in consumerism. For some artists, the overwhelming presence of consumer products and popular culture led them to question the lack of connection between art and real life. The term “high” art was used to refer to painting, sculpture, and other works that followed the accepted theories of art at the time and that we would expect to see exhibited in galleries and museums. “Low” art or popular culture referred to imagery made for the general public, such as that found in comic books, industrial design, movies, television, and advertising.

Traditionally, the art world did not consider popular culture as a worthy source of art. Some artists rebelled against these established traditions by taking images or objects from popular culture (low art) and displaying them in art institutions. Their goal was to break down the barriers between high art and the objects we live with and to make people think about the values of the culture around them.

### **SKETCHBOOK ASSIGNMENT 2-8**

View the images and read the background information for each art work. Visit the course website (under the AP Workbook tab) and open the appropriate link to see images needed for this activity.

1. Lee Bul- ***Plexus Blue***
2. Willie Cole- ***Stowage***
3. Roy Lichtenstein- ***Artist’s Studio No. 1 (Look Mickey)***
4. Claes Oldenburg- ***Shoestring Potatoes Spilling from a Bag***
5. Jack Pierson- ***Beauty***
6. Andy Warhol- ***Untitled [Green Peas] from Campbell’s Soup 1***

For each artwork, in your sketchbook, write about the subject matter and its possible connections to popular culture. What has the artist done to make it into “high” art?

Choose an everyday object or image and talk about it as if it were a famous work of art.

If you were a collector of high art, what would you think about a painting of a soup can? What do you think artist Andy Warhol is saying about traditional art? What do you think he is telling us about common, household objects?

## Can Art Change Society?

In times of cultural upheaval or change, art can reflect the society in which it was made. Artists around the world have used their work to raise issues about racism, sexism, consumerism, injustice, and war. To address issues of injustice, some produce works that criticize oppressive governments or political leaders. Some feminists and artists of color critique white-male domination of the art world and society. Artists who break with artistic traditions often do so to criticize the art world and sometimes extend that criticism to other institutions in society as well. In these cases, the purpose of art may become political or be used as a form of protest.

### SKETCHBOOK ASSIGNMENT 2-9

View the images and read the background information for each art work. Visit the course website (under the AP Workbook tab) and open the appropriate link to see images needed for this activity. *Note that some of the images may contain content that might be disturbing to young students.* View the following images and read the background information about the artists:

1. Willie Cole- ***Stowage***
2. Jacques Lipchitz- ***Prometheus Strangling the Vulture II***
3. Adrian Piper- ***The Mythic Being; I/You(Her)***
4. Jana Sterbak- ***Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic***
5. Paul Thek- ***Hippopotamus from Technological Reliquaries***
6. Kara Walker- ***Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress***
7. Andy Warhol- ***16 Jackies***

### **Brainstorming questions:**

Do any of these artworks make you uncomfortable? Why do you think the artists chose to create such work?

Do you agree that art can change society? Why or why not?

### **Writing activity:**

Select one of the artists presented here and research his/her life and work. Write a one-page personal response to the artwork presented in this section based on your research.