

# **The Language of Art**

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When we look at or think about Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the *Mona Lisa*, or Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel we know that they are from the Renaissance art movement. Similarly when we look at a Monet or Renoir painting we think of the Impressionist art period in late nineteenth century France. Are these distinctions useful? What about categories like high art versus low art or fine art versus craft. While these later categories may polarize, are they still useful distinctions? Although the use of such categories can be problematic at times, as can all categories, and even though they are less relevant today than at the time they were introduced, I feel that such distinctions can still be useful. As art historians, art critics, art students and as art lovers the use of language to communicate about art cannot be avoided. Communicating about art involves observation, analysis, criticism, judgement and appreciation, all of which is only possible through a common language. This does not reduce the validity of any form of art but merely provides us with a framework for discussion.

Many pre-industrial cultures produce objects that today we would characterize as art, even though the producing culture has no linguistic term to differentiate these objects from utilitarian artifacts. While it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the many definitions of art it is important to note that most definitions of art, or perhaps more appropriately art culture, includes some notion of human agency, whether through manual or intellectual manipulation, or public or personal expression. The process or the end result is an art object (physical or conceptual), the artist and the audience, all of which are necessary and inter-related. This embraces many types of production that are not conventionally deemed to be art so that regardless of the terminology that we use to classify or categorize art, it is still art.

As art has evolved and passed through its many different forms and movements, the language that has been used to describe it has also changed. And the language that is used to describe art can also take on new meaning as each society that uses this common language carries with it new environmental conditioning and experiences. At times many have thought that language and visual art were completely incompatible, implying that art was somehow more than just a vehicle for communicating messages. Recently, however, virtually every advanced discussion of art treats art as having very strong similarities with language, if not exact parallels. The reason for this is that art in

itself is a language - in fact art is many languages. The problem lies in that while art may be language-like art does not have anything like a set of grammatical rules that systemizes the language. Yet, the use of language does provide us with a framework for discussion of art whether we want to discuss art in a historical context or as part of current study and analysis or even simple dialogue. Some people may argue that that the use of language hinders us from experiencing art for what it is, especially if has already been categorized for us. It is my belief however that the richness of the artistic vocabulary along with an open mind to experience all forms of art will actually enhance our experiences.

The use of language and the categorization of art are useful and relevant for discussion of art because it helps us to understand artistic movements, changes and developments in culture, society and thought. Art from the Renaissance stressed classical forms, a realistic representation of space based on scientific perspective and worldly subjects. Violent movement, strong emotion, and dramatic lighting and coloring characterized Baroque art. Impressionistic art focused on transitory visual impressions, often painted directly from nature, with an emphasis on the changing effects of light and color. Expressionism refers to art that uses distortion to communicate emotion whereas abstract expressionism emphasized spontaneous personal expression, freedom from accepted artistic values, the surface qualities of paint, and the act of painting itself. Conceptual Art, which was a movement in the 1960s and 1970s, emphasized the artistic idea over the art object. These are but just a few of the many categories that assist us in understanding and communicating about art.

But what about categories like high art versus low art or fine art versus craft. Do these categories polarize popular opinion or are they useful and still relevant in discussion of art today? High art supposedly consisted of the meticulous expression in fine materials whereas low art was the shoddy manufacturing of inferior materials for superficial kitsch. Kitsch is derived from a German word, which means any artwork that has been thrown together chiefly to satisfy popular taste, not trying to state anything of high moral value or to advance any new aesthetic. Kitsch is also a good example of how the use of a particular classification of art can take on slightly new nuances over time, as the Kitsch art of the past is in many ways the Pop art of today. High cultural art forms are art forms such as the opera, historic art, classical music, traditional theater or literature. An example of high art would be the 1994 film *Farinelli, the Castrato* that was directed by Gérard Corbiau, or Bernini's 1644-1652 sculpture of *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa*. The original assumption was that in order to appreciate high art it depended on the viewer or

readers level of intelligence, social standing, educated taste, and a willingness to be challenged. In contrast, low art simply catered to popular taste, unreflective acceptance of realism, and a certain lower class or "couch potato" mentality. Popular cultural art forms include cultural communication such as newspapers, television, advertising, comics, pop music, radio, cheap novels, movies, jazz, etc. An example of low art could be plastic Madonnas, a beer commercial, or a hamburger stand shaped like a hamburger. In the beginning of the twentieth century high art was more in the realm of the wealthy and educated classes and popular culture or low art was considered commercial entertainment for the lower classes.

Other categories, which also polarize the art world, are fine art and craft. Fine arts are the visual arts, considered primarily for their aesthetic or theoretical character, including its meaning and significance independent of practical application. Craft in contrast restored a tradition of craftsmanship in honest straightforward design, natural materials and high quality construction techniques. The values of hearth and home, idealizing domestic life, and the virtues of honesty and simplicity became the predominant themes, with nature being the constant source of inspiration. Perhaps what distinguish fine arts from craft is not so much different methods, practices and objects but also where things are made, often in the home, and for whom they are made, often the family. Fine arts has distinguished itself from craft in the conventional sense of mere manual dexterity or technical skill but certainly developments like the popularity of ceramics programs and feminist reclamation of women's crafts have counterbalanced this trend. Raphael's sixteenth century painting *The School of Athens* or current sculpture work by American sculptor Dave McGary are examples of the traditional fine arts. In comparison the Christmas decorations someone's mother makes year after year or the ceramics one might make and decorate for the home are examples of craft.

But the distinction between these polarizations has diminished significantly in recent decades. Modern artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol were two of the better known artists who have affected this trend. Since Duchamp's readymades *Bicycle Wheel* in 1913 and *Fountain* in 1917 almost anything claiming the status of art can be so designated. Pop art in which commonplace objects (such as comic strips, soup cans, road signs, and hamburgers) were used as subject matter and were often physically incorporated in the work. The Pop art movement was largely a British and American cultural phenomenon of the late 1950s and '60s. Pop art was characterized by its portrayal of any and all aspects of popular (mass) culture that had a powerful impact on contemporary life. The work was presented emphatically and objectively, without praise or condemnation but with

overwhelming immediacy, and by means of the precise commercial techniques used by the media from which the iconography itself was borrowed. Although the critics of Pop art described it as non-stimulating, non-aesthetic, and sometimes as a joke, its proponents saw it as an art that was democratic and nondiscriminatory, bringing together both the connoisseurs of art and untrained viewers. Andy Warhol's 1968 painting of a *Campbell's Soup Can* or his 1964 painting of *Marilyn Monroe* are examples of American Pop Art.

In spite of these artistic developments, one still wonders if the distinction still exists, albeit in a slightly different form. Few would seriously argue that the millions of viewers that watch televised wrestling matches and afternoon soap operas have any genuine interest in contemporary art. It is even less likely that those who read supermarket tabloids or romance novels would ever choose to read advanced art criticism or visa versa. It could also be argued that the introduction of polarizing categories is a way to segregate or elevate certain classes of society as a way to create an elite or an elite response. This would somehow rationalize that particulars segments power or wealth over the have-nots. But even if this is the case, these polarizing categories have less and less relevance today from their original intent and they offer interesting and useful study of our artistic past - without which we would have no artistic present - for today's art historians, art critics and art students. These categories are helpful because they provide us with the ability to make distinctions between artist's intention and the meaning and significance of the object itself. They are informative because they give us a historical perspective and insight into the social constructs of our times. For the art student they are practical because they put a language around our artistic past and assist us with formulating new artistic futures. Recognizing that especially in the art world there is no black and white, only many shades of gray, we can use these categories to observe, analyze, discuss, appreciate and learn from art.

## Works Cited

No works are cited. All references are from lecture notes and tutorial discussions.