

What really is art?

(Formal Definition of Art)

We start from the self-evident truth that not everything is art. Some are while others are not. Understanding art involves identifying its distinctive properties. It necessarily means setting limits beyond which it loses intelligibility. Now, to claim that “everything is art” or “art is non-art” is precisely to deny the existence or importance of such properties and limits. But, if these claims were true, the very notion of art itself would never have come to be. In fact, the very statement “everything is art” would never have been formulated. That the notion was ever conceived at all can only mean that, originally, such distinctive properties and defining limits not only existed but also were clearly known and understood. Hence, those who seek to erase these identifying marks or to render them inconsequential fall into self-

contradiction. If they are sincere, they should behave like vegetables towards art because merely arguing their case is already a tacit acceptance of the exact opposite of their convictions. Strangely enough, proponents of this pan-artistic theory who should be the first to keep quiet are the loudest in pontificating about art.

Our goal here is to rediscover these essential properties distinctive of art. In doing so, we cannot ignore the fact that the term art has had different meanings. A quick look into history will show that it has been used to designate three elements of art creation. ***Art can be properly understood as an ability, as an activity and as a product.***

An Operative Habit

Traditionally, the word art signified what we understand today as a personal ***ability or skill*** to carry out some activity, like speaking languages, playing musical instruments, or building pyramids. It is in this general sense that the ancients talked about the art of thinking, the art of warfare, the art of cooking etc. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, defined logic as the art that directs the reasoning process so that man may attain knowledge of the truth in an orderly way, with ease, and without error. Logic is often referred to as ***ars artium***, “the art of all other arts” because it is used in every science as well as in every practical endeavor. It is also in this sense that we argued whether painting is or is not a talent, or that we defined painting as an art of recreating the image of the visible on a flat surface.

As we have already seen before, ability is a habit. Habits are stable qualities through which a subject is well or ill-disposed with regard to a perfection that befits its nature (***entitative habits***, such as health or sickness, beauty or ugliness) or its actions or goal (***operative habits***, such as virtues or vices, knowledge or intellectual deformation). A skill falls under the category of operative habits which are additional

perfections our faculties need to attain their objects adequately.

As an operative habit, art is acquired and cultivated through constant practice. A natural aptitude for speaking, for example, can become, through repetition of acts, the art of oratory with the distinctive marks of a habit or a stable, acquired perfection. Likewise, people devoted to sciences and mathematics where methodical thinking and rigorous demonstrations are the norms have greater chances of developing the art of reasoning.

Because it is a personal habit, art is something subjective. It grows and is cultivated according to the unique dispositions of each individual. But every art also possesses some objective characteristics such as the techniques or methods proper to it. As an example, painting the image of a shiny vase or of a furry carpet is not all a matter of personal taste or of subjective emotions but also of adherence to a proven formula based on objective knowledge



Violet Iris

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

Painting flowers is a good preparation for portraits. For a while, I concentrated on these subjects just for practice and not because I felt any special affection for them. To make this violet iris the focal point, I placed it against the darkest dark thus creating a strong and exciting contrast. To maintain the overall light tone of the painting, I surrounded it with muted, low-value orange and blue, two complementary colors.

about the properties of pigments.

Moreover, abilities have both manual and intellectual components. Painting involves the skills of copying and composing. The first is largely manual while the second is purely intellectual. Or, playing the piano is not just adroitness of the fingers on the keys but above all a huge memory and a sharp intellect for remembering and processing thousands of notes in the right way and in the right sequence.

Therefore, art is a special kind of human ability. Or, simply, *art is a talent.*

A Transitive Action

Art may also denote the *action* or *activity* that gives rise to the artwork. In this sense, we say that the art of cooking is enjoyable or the art of painting is an intense emotional experience.



Girl in Curled Position

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

The human body is one of the hardest subject matters because of its contours that are unique for every individual. Getting a model for it is even harder. This one posed no special difficulty though because the model came in the mailbox together with brochures from Praxis, Gamma, Blokker and others.

But what kind of action is it?

There are two types of actions. *Transient actions* originate from the agent and affect some external objects by transforming them. Technically, these are simply called *actions*. They are designated by the Latin verb “*facere*” and the English infinitive “*to make*.” Slicing cakes, splitting atoms or writing letters are all transient actions. Note that “*transient*” should not be understood here with its other meaning, that is, as something fleeting or ephemeral. *Immanent operations*, on the other hand, produce an

effect not in some external objects but in the agent itself by perfecting it. They are simply called *operations*. The Latin equivalent is “*agere*” while the English is “*to do*” or “*to act*.” Understanding, loving, listening to music or studying are all immanent operations. These two types of actions are, incidentally, the basis for the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs in grammar.

A *transient action* flows from the agent to the receiver of the action. It springs from one being but affects another. Thus, in the strict sense, it is a perfection of the effect rather than of the cause. An example could be grilling a fish because the change takes place in the fish, the object of grilling, and not in the person grilling. In contrast, an *immanent operation* begins and ends in the agent. From all perspectives, it is a perfection of the agent. An example would be seeing a fish because the act of seeing does not transform the fish but only the viewer who is enriched with an increased knowledge on marine life. Every activity characteristic of sensorial

and intellectual life is an immanent operation.

Art is primarily a transient action.

It is an activity that emerges from the artist, goes out from him and modifies certain raw materials in order to create objects of beauty. Painting transforms a surface and some pigments into an image based on an exemplary model. Sculpture is an activity that imparts a particular form to a block of matter. Music involves producing pleasant sounds.

This does not exclude the fact that artistic processes may have instances of immanent operations in it. In painting, for example, the conceptualization of the model may be more time-consuming and exhausting than the brushwork itself. But, since no amount of mental composition can produce a painting unless pigments are applied on the canvas, painting is classified primarily as a transient action. Similarly, until the musical artist actually starts altering the decibel equilibrium of his environment with his voice and instruments, there can be no music no matter how much mental improvisation is generated beforehand.

Some are of the opinion that the operational aspect is more essential than the transitive. Thus, Michelangelo said that a man paints with his brains and not with his hands. This may be true in the

ontological order. But, gnoseologically, what is immediately known is the transient activity. Since terms are normally attributed to what are known first, the transient aspect takes priority, therefore. In the order of knowledge, *art is more of “making” than of “thinking.”*

An Aesthetic Product

Art can also designate the *product* resulting from such transient activity. In reality, art refers principally to the final

effect. The term reminds us more of the Mona Lisa of Leonardo da Vinci, or the La Pieta of Michelangelo, or the 5th Symphony of Beethoven rather than of their working habits and activities.

The interesting question, however, is “What distinguishes an art piece from an ordinary work product?” Both are external effects of a transitive activity. Both are man-made objects. In fact, an ordinary product with no obvious relation to art, like a tasty cup of brewed coffee, may even be praised at times as artistic. Is there a dividing line between the two?

beauty is the proper effect of talent. Moreover, *beauty is a natural sign for talent.* Certain causes can only be known through their effects; beauty is always an indication of the existence of an underlying talent while ugliness is a clear sign of its absence. Beauty is thus an external expression of talent. Together, they form the true pillars of art. Modernism tries to eliminate them by corrupting their meanings or reducing their importance. But, *talent and beauty cannot be dissociated from the concept of art without causing the catastrophic damage Modernism has already inflicted on the world of art.*



Rough Sailing

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

This is another of my several paintings on ships with sails. I kept the composition simple by limiting the number of points of interest to three: the two ships and the major wave. I gave the eye of the wave (the translucent part) the same color of the ships to link them to each other. A general tone of blue in the painting served to make them stand out.

Our foregoing analysis showed that *for a product to be art it must first proceed from the exercise of a special ability or talent.* Now, the effect of any talented activity cannot be but of outstanding and extraordinary quality. The product necessarily bears all the essential perfections proper to it because it is distinctive of talent to always impart everything demanded by the specific nature of its effect. But, anything that possesses all the perfections that correspond to its own nature is called beautiful in the fullest sense. Therefore, *a work product is art only if it is beautiful!* An ugly product, on the contrary, lacks the perfections due to it; it cannot be art.

Art is then a beautiful product created by man through the exercise of his talent. From this, one can deduce the absolute importance of beauty and talent. Art cannot be understood without these two concepts. They are closely united to each other. Talent implies beauty; beauty presupposes talent. *Talent creates beauty;*

Analogical Meaning of Art

We have just analyzed three meanings of art. Which is the right one? All of them are valid and correct! Using any to define or describe art is not falling into error. The multiplicity only shows that *the concept of art is analogical.* It has several meanings that are partly the same and partly different as opposed to *univocal* concepts which have only one meaning. For instance, in “good beer,” “good carrot,” “good cat” and “good boy”, the analogical concept of “good” does not mean the same although its four meanings here do have something in common. In contrast, the univocal concept of “man” has one and only one meaning which refers to a species of animal, the rational animal.

As a *talent*, art refers to its remote efficient cause, the operative habit that enables our practical intellect to accomplish its object adequately. As a *transitive activity*, art stands for its proximate efficient cause, the process that immediately transforms the raw material into art. As a *final product*, art points to the effect of art creation, the aesthetic object formed by the exercise of talent in a transitive activity. But, what is proper of analogical concepts is that there is always a central and primary meaning (*principal analogate*)

upon which the other meanings (*secondary analogates*) depend. In this case, art is predicated principally to the aesthetic object and by derivation to the transient action and to the talent.

We are now, therefore, in a position to formulate a proper definition of art. It can have three equivalent forms, each one giving special emphasis on a certain aspect. 1) *Art is a talent for making beautiful things.* 2) *Art is the making of beautiful things using one’s talent.* 3) *Art is the beautiful object made with one’s talent.*

But, what is beauty?

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