

Towards A Definition Of Art

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I was recently talking to my friend [James Seehafer](#), the originator of the art school known as massurrealism. Although I am only an amateur in this subject, I have found myself thinking more and more about what can be called “art,” and what should not. Are we to imagine—as many careless people nowadays do—that anyone can create any random object and call it art? Are there any rules, guidelines, or elements for what may be considered “art”? I think the answer must be yes. If it were not so, there would be no need for the term “artist.” The following are only a few thoughts on the subject, that I may feel free to add to, or modify, as my thoughts gestate on the subject. I have tried to recall all those things that I consider to be art, and then to ask myself what those objects had in common. For better or for worse, here is my list of elements.

Art, like religion, has been with mankind since our species spread out over the world. Cave paintings found around Europe testify to the powerful hold that form and image exerted on the consciousness of primitive man. If we watch Werner Herzog’s wonderful documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, we learn that primeval man made his cave paintings in darkness, deep inside his caves. They would not have been easy to see.

Why would he do this? Why would he spend the time and effort in creating images by torchlight on cold, stony walls, far out of sight of his fellows? What secret grasping at truth, what unnameable passions must have animated his mind?

The Need To Create Order

The answer, I think, takes us to the first element in our definition of art. Art is the attempt to create form out of chaos. It is the desire to reduce to pictorial or symbolic representation the passion, violence, chaos, and turbulence of the world. Ancient man was buffeted on all sides by wild beasts, weather, climate variations, mortality, and the terrifying mysteries of life and death. He created art because he had to.

He did it because he would go insane with terror if he did not do it. Frankly, he was motivated by the same motivations of artists today. That was why he made his cave paintings. It did not matter to him whether he received applause for his paintings. He wanted to capture the wild beasts he saw all around him and commit them to pictorial form for all eternity. This was his way of possessing them. This was how he could impose order on the chaos all around him. It was a noble, valiant enterprise, born of man’s deepest cravings.

Notice that when I say “order,” I do not mean that every piece of art should have nice linear designs and conform to some rigid design requirements. Do not misunderstand me. *What I mean is that the artwork should embody some attempt to organize, arrange, or systematize the artist’s creative spirit. Art is the human mind’s attempt to create something from nothing. And this is, by definition, the process of bringing creating order from disorder.*

The Expression Of A Spirit

All art must embody some zeitgeist. It must be the visual expression of some view of the world. The cave paintings of Lascaux embody one spiritual value; the Parthenon another; the Pyramids another; the Hagia Sophia another; and so on. One could do the same sort of comparison for paintings, pottery, literature, or any other kind of art. Art styles change because civilizations and cultures change. Art must represent, almost as a concentrated distillation, the essence of that popular philosophy which permeates the age. This spirit is a palpable, tangible thing.

When you stand in front of a sculpture or a painting, you can feel it emanate out at you. You can just feel it wash over you. Or at least I can feel it. Our concept of "beauty" may vary from time to time, and from place to place. *But everything that is considered beautiful still always possesses order and a spirit.* Beauty is a product of order and a spirit, and cannot exist without these things.

The Use Of Color, Shape, And Form

Visual art must make use of color, shape, and form. Without these things, we have no object to look at. We have something not created by man. And man must create art: nature is nature, and may certainly be beautiful, but we are mistaken if we call the Grand Canyon "art." It is not. Neither is a rotting tree limb, or a glass of water. Matter untouched by the creative hand of man remains matter, nothing more.

The Need For Sincerity

Art must come from a sincere effort. The creator must believe in what he is doing. He must be the willing agent of the zeitgeist, discussed above. The artist channels the spirit of the age into his work, and gives it expression and voice. Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock truly believed that postwar pop culture had made fundamental changes to society. And they found ways of expressing this view in a sincere manner. If the "artist" is a cynical opportunist, we will feel it. His attempts to call his created garbage will fall flat. He may be able to weld together a few lumps of metal, but there will be no sincerity behind it. There will be no discipline behind it. And so it will fail the test for sincerity.

The Need For Effort And Labor

Art must take some effort to produce. A person should not be able to mount a television set on a platform and call it art. No significant effort has been put forth. Art must be the product of labor, struggle, and mental growth. The artist, like the boxer in the ring, must exert some element of his being in a fundamental way. Without effort, without struggle, we have no art, just as we have no life. The creative process must shape and mold the inanimate—that is, that which is lacking in spirit—into the animate, just as the potter transforms his heaps of clay into finished earthen vessels.

So these are the elements of art, as I see them. Let me summarize myself. For something to be called art, it must:

- 1 Possess order, as we have defined it
- 2 Possess a spirit
- 3 Use color, shape, and form
- 4 Be sincere
- 5 Require significant effort and labor

If any of these five elements are lacking, we do not have art. They must all exist at the same time. Take away even one of them, and we do not have art. These are my thoughts on this subject at the present time. ♦

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