

What is Art?

2012, Argus, is this art (street art)



These are my reflections on what art is and its role in culture

- In the first sections, I will discuss What Art is- skill, imagination, power, progression and unity are present in great art.
- In the second section I will explain How art plays a role in the Progress and Unity and how these works create the canon of Modern art.
- In the third section, I will talk about Why copies matter,
- Finally, we will look at How Art has evolved from monolithic Modernism to rule breaking Post-Modernism.

Hopefully you will gain a fresh appreciation for the History of Art.

What is Art?

Explicitly asks poses the question
self-referential

This is the first time in history that art questions itself

Before the recently we could recognize art

This work raises the quintessential Post-Modern question how do we know what art is

Elements of art:

- Creative skill
- Imagination
- Beauty
- Emotion

In his 1897 essay "What Is Art?" Leo Tolstoy added from a Modernist perspective:

- Cultural progress
- Means of union

Creative skill

Paleolithic Period between 28,000 and 25,000 BCE, Venus of Willendorf, limestone and red ocre, 4-1/2" tall



Skill

The first civilizations begin in Mesopotamia and Egypt between 3,000 and 4,000 years ago

What is skill? Working with tools.

One of the reasons that history remembers skillful artists is because their work is still around to appreciate. Art is skillfully made and stands the test of time.

carved in limestone, the Venus is a prime example of an object that is skillfully made

Longevity

Imagination

1999. Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Typewriter Eraser



Once technical skills are mastered more possibilities opens up for creativity.

The product is something new- an original idea that makes the viewer think, “What made the artist think of that?”

Making art requires progressive, out-of-the-box thinking.

Beauty

1965, Saarinen, Gateway Arch

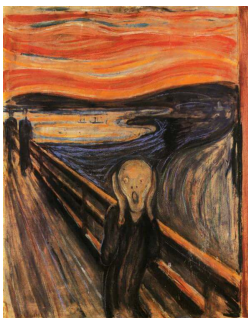


Parabolic arch found in mathematics and nature, stainless steel reflects stunning

Reflecting a form found in nature

Emotion

1893, Edvard Munch, The Scream



Inspired by a panic attack Munch had a year earlier

He is sensing nature screaming all around him

Art can capture emotional power and embody the horror of a moment or generation.

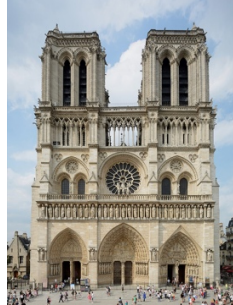
Cultural Progress

first church to employ bar tracery and rib vaults to achieve lacey illusion of lightness

1149 Saint-Denis



1163 Notre Dame



1211 Reims



doors and windows break up visually
massiveness decreases even as size increases
Size of front doors and rose window increases
Traditional stone construction to weight defying lace
Armies of stone masons working together

Unity

1886. Eiffel, Statue of Liberty



Unifying symbol of liberty and freedom in America
Given as a gift from the French
Art is a thing that is skillfully made, imaginatively conceived, beautiful to look at,
emotionally powerful and culturally unifying.

How Art effects Cultural Progress and Unity

1504, Michelangelo, The David



A good example of all these traits is The David
It is a larger than life size depiction of the young prince moments before he slays the giant “Goliath” in a battlefield duel

skill- 6 tons of marble

imagination- pregnant moment

beauty- accuracy of human form

Emotional Power- his stance is ready to pounce

Unity- It may seem like a one off, but this work, created in 1504, David connects with at least three hundred years of Florentine social and cultural tradition
At the time, Sculpture was the most powerful medium

Every so often there were competitions for which was best sculpture
You can think of this event as remaking Florence’s mascot

1200, Benedetto Antelami, “King David”



3 feet tall, Elderly King David fully robed upright and static.

1409, Donatello, David



6 feet tall

Held up as the state of the art in its time.

Ten years ahead of the painters in respect to rendering the human form.

With a modern critical eye for anatomy we can notice the long neck, the awkward wrist, hidden feet and head of Goliath. Clothing is meant to hide parts of the anatomy that are difficult to render.

David looks out at the audience as if looking for approval after the slaying

1440, Donatello, David



6 feet tall, bronze

Fifty years later, drapery is gone!

Artist is rendering the body in an anatomically correct way. Hat, sword and boots are mere props and don't hide the body.

David's gaze is introspective as if he is pondering the consequences of what he has just done

1504, "The David," Michelangelo



16 feet tall, the size of a two story building

It is as if his body was frozen at the moment of stillness when his next step is soon and could be anywhere.

None of his body is not hidden.

There is one the critical prop is.

His gaze is locked on his adversary and his stance exemplifies the pregnant moment between stillness and action

---David, David, David, David



1200



1409



1460



1504

Several progressions:

Formal → informal

Clothed → Nude

Anatomical correctness improves

Actual size 3' → 6' → 16' tall (The height of a two story building)

Static → dynamic stance

Hands get further and further apart, finally the hidden stone

Closed → opened posture

Elderly man → grown man after battle → boy after killing Goliath → before the fight

gaze posed → to snapshot → introspective → pregnant moment

mindset snapshot → what I did → preparation for battle

increasing emotional complexity

David is increasingly revealed physically and emotionally so we have a more intimate picture of David. Just as David's body is revealed in time, we see an increasing level of complexity of the implied thoughts of David.

Complexity is the hallmark of human thought. Greater complexity makes it easier for the viewer to put themselves in the shoes of the king/underdog.

By competing in this game of sculptural one-upmanship, these artists exemplified the state of the art in sculptural prowess for their time and have claimed their seat in art culture creating GREAT ART

Unity

One might ask why Florence has an obsession with The David

The culture of Italy was and is Christian and religious, so all of the viewers would recognize David as the young King David who did battle with Goliath in an Old Testament battle. Catholic viewers knew this story and made the connection with the Bible.

Since ancient times there had been a great rivalry between Florence and Rome. Both were major industrial and cultural centers, but Rome was always much larger than Florence. Like David, Florence sees itself as an underdog in its struggle with Rome, the Goliath, Rome David on the public square was a mark of pride and a warning to their southern rival. Through "The David" every Florentine could put themselves in the shoes of a hero, victorious over the overpowering adversary.

By connecting to religious and political culture, Michelangelo gives this piece cultural relevance and resonance elevating it to “ART.”

“The David” was culturally connected and represented respect for the past and was another step closer to an undefined perfection drawing the viewer in emotionally.

“GREAT ART”- Uniting the world

Perhaps most importantly, Michelangelo is making a universal connection with everyone who has ever seen themselves as an underdog. This timeless depiction of confidence in the face of danger, vaults The David into the category of the “GREAT ART.”

Other really great art

Other examples of art that unites a culture include Egypt’s Pyramids (4500 BCE) and Greece’s Acropolis Complex (432 BC) Machu Picchu (1450) and The Washington Mall (1791). Each of these projects went through countless renovations over hundreds of years occupying the attention of the masses while capturing the imagination of their culture.

2550 BCE, Pharaoh Khufu, Pyramid of Giza,



4500 BCE, Parthenon, Acropolis of Athens, Greece



1450 AD, Machu Picchu



1791, Pierre L'Enfant, The Washington Mall



Monuments that take generations to build can be a symbol of a country
Recently added National Museum of African American History and Culture

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(End of Part I)