

Stacie mueller

[History](#), [Middle Ages](#)



Stacie Mueller Art 100 Professor Morris 24 February 2012 The Evolution of Art To even begin to define art, we must have a starting point in history where something was first perceived as art. The question begs, though, why do we perceive it as art? To look up the word in a dictionary, you will find the term aesthetics almost always applied to its definition; however, much of what we call art today is not exactly pleasing to the eye. Our shifting social attitudes have affected how art has been presented to us over time. We see depictions of hate, of war, of death, and many other forms of sorrow and horror. Moreover, we must consider how technology and modern conveniences have allowed a greater realm in the world of art: Photography and Photoshop programs, computer generated graphics, and applications for use with tablets and smart phones that allow us to modify images in an infinite number of ways. Loosely defined, the word art seems to be applied to almost anything: The written word, photography, performance arts, computer graphics, commercial art, fashion, culinary, comics, and so on. For purposes of this research paper, however, the focus will be on the more concrete forms of art that we've come to know throughout history. The definition of art has certainly shifted and changed over time and across cultures; in this research paper we will explore how art has evolved. Art is many things to one person, and certainly carries different meanings for another person. However, anything and everything cannot be art or it would be difficult to appreciate art's true essence; the quality that brings forth contemplation and deliberation. Besides creativity, art takes deep thought, imagination, and accomplishes a specific goal. Artists help us see things that matter and give us a different perspective with a specific goal in mind. The

earliest art was discovered on cave walls in Lascaux, France. Paintings on the walls included large numbers of animals in various activities, as well as humans. In *Art: A New History*, Paul Johnson shows us the ingenuity of early artists: Pestles and mortars were found at Lascaux, with the discovery of “no less than 158 different mineral fragments from which the mixtures were made” (9). Techniques of these early artists included engraving with flakes of sharp flint, spraying paint, and the use of stencils. The use of colors, binding agents and tools to get the material to the walls such as brushes, and blow tools, is remarkable for the time period. It appears that the purpose of the cave paintings was to tell a story; as if the artists were attempting to make a connection with the animals they hunted and also feared (Getlein, 5). In the years since, many things have occurred in history affording great influence on art. The introduction of Christianity into the Roman Empire created a dynamic, cultural shift over religious beliefs (Getlein, 345). Realism, which centered around depictions of everyday life, was seen in art during that period of time. As the Roman Empire shifted into the Byzantine Empire in the early Middle Ages, Emperor Constantine ruled that Christianity was to become the state religion. Hence, Byzantium art glorified Christianity in attempt to express its mystery. The subject matter became primarily religious and imperial, moving away from realism, while showing a more compressed, abstract style. Rather than depicting images of ordinary daily life, artists created more complex scenes that represented spiritual and heavenly splendor. Mosaic was a favored technique of Byzantium artists: An example of this is the mosaic depicting Christ as Pantokrator in the Santa Maria la Nuova (Getlein, 350). During the early Middle Ages we saw emotions

in art shift back to realism in Carolingian art. When the emperor Charlemagne was crowned king in 800, uniting Christianity with Roman beliefs, chapels were designed to rival Roman and Byzantine architecture. The Chapel of Charlemagne is a mighty example of Carolingian art: Massive stone structure with an octagonal plan, mosaic decoration, and an interior framed by massive arches (Getlein, 15. 13). Some competition with Byzantium may also be implicit in Charlemagne's promotion of figural painting and carving, for he embraced and encouraged representational art at precisely the time when Byzantine rulers were renouncing images in favor of iconoclasm. The Romanesque period (1050 to 1200) gave us the proliferation of churches with thick stone walls, round arches and barrel vaulted stone ceilings. One such example is Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy (Getlein, 15. 14). Evolving from Romanesque style, Gothic art is more ornate. Churches are characterized by soaring interiors and large stained-glass windows. The Chartres Chapel exemplifies Gothic art in its flying buttresses and ornate towers (Getlein, 15. 18). During the late Middle ages, art became an even more powerful means of storytelling. This was a common device of religious art of the Middle ages, for example in the frescoes by Giotto from the Church of San Francesco de Assisi, where sequences of panels were used to tell stories from the Scriptures or lives of saints (Getlein, 15. 26). The definition of art continues to change as we cross continents. The symbolism in African art, for example, was quite strong. The use of masks was one of the most interesting parts of their everyday life. Masks were meant to be kept in motion, as Getlein explains, because they represent “ the head or face of a spirit being that has appeared in the community" (420). The nowo

mask was used to represent the guiding spirit of Bondo, a women's organization that regulates female affairs. Bondo is an initiation that prepares young girls for womanhood. An important feature of the nowo mask is the rings around its base; they are meant to represent a chrysalis, as girls emerge as women at the conclusion of Bondo (Getlein, 420). In more modern times we've seen various forms of "isms": Impressionism, Expressionism, Naturalism, Realism, Modernism, and Surrealism — to name a few. Impressionist painting was perceived as working from outer appearances. Expressionistic artists intended to show a more inner dialogue, particularly with their use of color. The objective attention to appearances places Impressionism within the context Naturalism. While Naturalism and Realism are terms which are used interchangeably, the Naturalist is more impressed by the surface of things, such as the textures of fabric, the play of light, or the sheen of gold. The Realist tends to probe deeper into appearances, seeking the essence. Twentieth century Modernism is a reaction to Naturalism. Trevor Pateman describes Modernism as that which " can be defined as being concerned with the inner, or subjective, at the expense of the outer, or objective" (Pateman). The modernist viewed art as an agent of social change and even helped shape many political movements. The Surrealist movement sought techniques which would permit essence to break through the illusions of appearance, emphasizing imagery from dreams and fantasy. In this, Surrealists sought to act like Realists of the inner rather than the outer world. In all of these "isms," however, there is a certain common ground: a focus on people, nature scenes, and everyday items. We can see that art has gone through many evolutions, but even

though the technology of today has created more mediums for the creation of art, I wouldn't say it has been transformed. Art, it seems, has forever been intended to speak the language of the unconscious mind. The human condition, nature, and events continue to capture the attention of artists.

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