

Humanities today – define humanities and give current examples essay sample

[Art & Culture](#), [Music](#)



The Encyclopedia Britannica (2006) defines the humanities as “ Branches of knowledge that investigate human beings, their culture, and their self-expression.” (Humanities). Those branches of knowledge include philosophy, literature, languages, the arts, religion and history. The humanities examine the human condition by studying the elements of culture that describe what is or was valued and considered important at a particular point in time.

15th century Italian humanists referred to the humanities as studia humanitas which means the studies of humanity, indicating “ secular literary and scholarly activities (in grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, moral philosophy, and ancient Greek and Latin studies)” that that they thought to be more humane and classical rather than divine (Humanities, 2006). In contrast, the physical sciences tend to examine the world and its phenomena objectively, without reference to or consideration of human meaning and purpose, a key aspect of the humanities. Scholars further argue that the humanities are distinguished from other modes of study by either their subject mater and by the method of investigation used. One philosopher called the humanities “ the spiritual sciences” and “ the human sciences” (Humanities, 2006). He described them as “ areas of knowledge” outside of the physical sciences.

On the other hand, another turn-of-the-century philosopher instead characterized the humanities according to their method of study. He argued that the humanities do not seek or follow general laws, as the sciences do; and that they focus on values within human and cultural contexts, which is directly contrary to scientific methodologies. As described above, the

humanities seek to understand the values of a people and their perceptions based on their direct expression through the arts, their language, and philosophies. Science is motivated by the desire to understand natural phenomena and dependent on empirical observation (Talk: Humanities, 2006).

The 21st century brings a variety of social, economic, and technological changes. Following is a demonstration of the humanities in the 21st century through the examination of its art, music, architecture, philosophy, and literature.

Art

Is modern art in crisis? A new philosophical criticism emerged in the person of American critic Arthur Danto, who came out with the idea that “ the objects [of art] approach zero as their theory approaches infinity” –that is, “ art really is over, having become transmuted into philosophy” (Art Criticism, 2006). In his book *The End of Art*, author Donald Kuspit (2005) suggests that, “ Art has been replaced by postart, [...] as a new visual category that elevates the banal over the enigmatic, the scatological over the sacred, cleverness over creativity.”

Contemporary art, or art that is done now, is largely characterized by its indefinability. It tends to include art made from the late 1960s to the present, or after the supposed or putative end of modern art or the Modernist period (Contemporary Art, 2006). Today’s art, like most of the humanities, has been transformed by technological, economical, and

sociological advancements. It may or may not use traditional forms such as painting or drawing, and often includes the use of any variety of materials, video, or even performance as a part of it. One trend seems to be a focus on world issues such as cloning, the price of oil, gender and sexuality, human rights, and war.

A representative example is one of the most talked-about sales in the contemporary market. Maurizio Cattelan's *The Ballad of Trotsky* (1996), a stuffed horse hanging in a leather sling from the ceiling, sold for \$2, 080, 000 in 2005 (Art and Exhibitions, 2006).

Music

Contemporary music has also been greatly influenced by 21st century globalism. It has seen a development and acceptance of world music, or music that features or originates in a different culture. American artists such as Paul Simon and Sting featured musicians and singers from other countries and went on to win Grammy's and American Music Awards. Simon's Grammy Award-winning album *Graceland* (1986) featured black South African Musicians who controversially recorded and toured with him despite a widespread trade boycott of South Africa, selling more than five million copies since its release (World Music, 2006). Sting featured Farhat Bouallagui on his *Brand New Day* album and Vicente Amigo and Anoushka Shankar on his *Scared Love* album. In the wake of their success, record stores became more willing to stock music of their kind.

Architecture

Critics have described one trend in 21st century architecture as “deconstructivist architecture”. In popular usage, the term has come to mean a critical dismantling of tradition and traditional modes of thought (Deconstruction, 2006). Technology has played a significant role in the development of deconstructivist architectural methodologies. Architects such as Frank Gehry, who designed the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain used computer modeling to develop its angular, anthropomorphic exterior. Made mostly of titanium, the museum was designed to represent the industrial heritage of the city’s past. The museum was an international success and helped put Bilbao on the world’s cultural map.

Philosophy –

A notable philosophy of the 21st century is that of the democratic community. Community in this case is defined globally. Philosophers such as American John Dewey believed in social planning, in conscious intelligent intervention to produce desirable social change; and he proposed a new “guide to enlightened public action to promote the aims of a democratic community” (Philosophy, 2006).

Dewey’s writings and teachings have brought modern society to a place where it considers that it is only as strong as its individual members and their willingness to work together to evolve and to meet the challenges facing it. Technological advancements in travel and communication alone have created a new world where anyone can send anything just about anywhere in a matter of minutes, days, or hours – including explosives and

disease. In addition to diseases like HIV and the Bird Flu, this world community is faced with issues of severe weather such as killer tsunamis and hurricanes, and world terrorism. Modern philosophies like that of Dewey support the more pragmatic view and approach to solutions to societal issues of this type as the only way to successfully meet them is as a community.

Literature

Like many of the arts in contemporary society, literature is plagued by commercialism and by the desire for a quick paycheck. Contemporary literature features a great deal of writings about true events – the more sensational and graphic the better. In addition, it features a trend in crime study and investigation, beyond that of the mystery and private eye novels of the past. Today's novels get into the science and methodology of solving violent crimes. Authors like James Patterson, Sue Grafton and John Grisham have enjoyed great popularity. Their success can be attributed to many things. The content and subject matter of these authors' works feeds society's desensitization to extreme violence and its increasing demand for subject matter that is more violent and more shocking in order to be more compelling. Further, several of these authors' stories have been made into movies.

The humanities are distinguished by their examination of the aspects of culture and the human condition through the eyes of the humans who experience and create them. The approach to their study differs from that of

others areas of study, as does their focus on the reflection on human meaning and purpose. 21st century humanities continue to reinforce the idea that current culture and the human condition is reflected in them, no matter what century.

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