

# [What is art? expressivism in art](https://assignbuster.com/what-is-art-expressivism-in-art/)

A definition of art would help to identify what art is in order for individuals to recognise and appreciate it, but there is controversy as to how to define art or whether art can be defined at all. It will become clear that features of what it takes to be art are not particularly simple to pinpoint. For example, the aestheticist would suggest that good art must look good, but it is not enough to say that something is art if it has the quality of being aesthetically pleasing. Beauty may apply to a large number of things that are not readily accepted as art, or on the contrary, not all art may be aesthetically pleasing at all. Furthermore, the aesthetic standard of art will only please a certain class of people.

There are many conceptual definitions of art that attempt to outline the necessary and sufficient conditions required for something to be considered a work of “ art”, though I will focus on the concept of expressivism as it proves to be the most convincing to me. I will set out to define art as understood by the expressivists Tolstoy and Collingwood, through which it will become clear that it takes much more than external features such as beauty to define art. Tolstoy makes some important contributions to the nature of expressivism, but exacerbates his views as he emphasises the significance of religion in defining art. It is here that Collingwood seems to have the edge, and the more appealing definition seems to be a combination of the benefits of both theories. I will therefore argue for the importance of having a definition of art, as although conceptual ones are tricky in themselves, it is equally as troubling to omit the use of a definition altogether.

Expressivism largely deals with the fact that art connects with people via their senses. It defines art through the expression of emotion that is entailed by the artist in their artwork and the emotional impact that it has on the audience. To Tolstoy, something is art if it creates an emotional link between the artist and its audience, uniting them insomuch that the emotion portrayed through the artwork affects the viewer. It is true that every man has the capacity to receive, through hearing or sight, another man’s emotions and feel those feelings himself, just as each man has the ability to affect another man through his expression of feeling, and Tolstoy infers that this is the heart of which the activity of art is based. But more specifically, the infection is characteristically indirect, in that it begins when one person, the artist, expresses through his artwork his emotion, which is communicated to the viewer through the artwork as a medium.

As a simple example, Tolstoy describes a boy who encounters a wolf and feels fear. On experiencing this, he describes the experience to others in such a way as to arouse the fear that he experienced in himself and infect the avid listeners with the particular emotion. This analogy shares with art three distinct characteristics: individuality, clarity and sincerity. It is individual because it focuses specifically on one emotion, creating emphasis and increasing infection. It is clear because the emotion portrayed is pure and communicated without distraction, making it all the more infectious. Lastly, it is sincere because the stronger the artist or storyteller feels when communicating the emotion, the more infectious the feeling will be to the viewer. All three are important contributors to the quality of art, as “ the stronger the infection, the better is the art as art”[1].

Tolstoy notes that many inaccurate definitions of art arise from that fact that they consider the pleasure that art gives, rather than the purpose that it serves in life and in humanity. To direct the aim of our endeavours at pleasure and to define it accordingly is like judging food based on the satisfaction of our tastes. Our taste buds are not an accurate basis for what can be universally known as good food, nor is beauty to good art.

Hence, Tolstoy maintains that the concept of beauty when looking to define art simply confuses matters, and in order to define art accurately, it is necessary to avoid considering it as a means of pleasure, but rather as one of the conditions of human life that we use to interact and to communicate emotion between one another.

So far, these discussions seem plausible as they allow for the objectivity of art and the basis of the definition to be intelligible and clear, rather than plainly aesthetic. Intelligent and clear expression of emotion enables us to grasp what is or is not art and maintains the meaning of art, otherwise any such expression of emotion could be defined as art and the definition steadily loses its meaning until it simply becomes a meaningless concept.

But the strength of Tolstoy’s reasoning seems to falter at the part of the explanation that he deems most fundamental. Central to his argument, Tolstoy criticises the art of his era and infers that art had lost its true meaning to be exchanged for a counterfeit concept of art, which sought only to please those of a certain class. Real art is led by religious perception, which must be accepted in order to influence our understanding of feelings expressed through art. By religion, Tolstoy explicitly means Christianity, and it is declared that the best emotions communicated through art are those that appeal to Christian teachings of man’s love for God and neighbour. Anything else, to Tolstoy, was “ insignificant art which aimed only at giving pleasure… (and) did not deserve such esteem and encouragement”[2]. He likens the replacement of real art with counterfeit art to worshipping false idols in God’s place.

To suggest that art has departed from religious influence and has therefore lost all meaning seems irrational and slightly hypocritical. He accuses counterfeit art of appealing only to a certain class of people, but to place a religious constraint on the value of art does not, as Tolstoy intends, unite the classes, but places exclusivity on art too. The overbearing problem here is that good art doesn’t have to be religious, and rather than defining art objectively, Tolstoy seems to have defined it around his own moral and religious perspective. It seems particularly harsh to rule out those who don’t conform to his own form of Christianity as being in error and thus cannot appreciate true art.

As Tolstoy, Collingwood’s conception of art holds that it is essentially an expression of emotion, though perhaps provides a more sophisticated account. So, as Tolstoy does, Collingwood recognises that the expression of emotion is familiar to every artist. The realisation of this emotion, however, is imminent though not discernible. The artist is conscious of feeling something though he may not immediately realise what it is, so he expresses it as a way of not oppressing it. It is not until he has expressed it, that he realises what emotion it is.

Further, he lists individualisation as an important factor in the expression of emotion. There are names for the types of emotions that we experience: happiness, anger, sadness and so on, but these emotions also come in many forms. The happiness I may feel right now is different and distinct from the happiness I felt yesterday, or any other time. They are individual and not general. Collingwood illustrates this with the poet, who recognises the peculiarity of his emotions and makes efforts to individualise them by expressing them in terms that set them apart from other feelings of the same kind.[3]This distinguishes art from craft, craft being that which has a general aim, and however accurately attempts to describe it may be, will “ always be defined as the production of a thing having characteristics that could be shared by other things”[4]. He illustrates this quite succinctly: the joiner could make a table out of specific pieces of wood, with specific measurements that aren’t shared by any other table, but those factors could still, in principle, be shared by other tables. So the artist, in contrast, does not make, he creates ex nihilo. He does not aim to create an emotion in his audience but more specifically, an emotion of a certain kind.

At this point, Collingwood introduces the third important contributing factor to the definition of art. To create art ex nihilo would suggest that it begins in the mind, as the artist creates the artwork as a means of expressing what he is feeling. Hence, the third factor of art is imagination. Collingwood provides an important account of pinpointing real art, as he necessitates that the role of a true artist is not to instil or arouse emotion in his audience, but to produce an artwork, so if a musician, make a tune. It is easy to think of the music as art, but this is a common mistake. The tune exists perfectly and complete when it is still imaginary in the artist’s head. It doesn’t become real until it is played for its sound to be heard by an audience, but this is where the mistake is made. Collingwood maintains that there are two different and distinct things here and we often mistake the wrong one to be art. The music, or artwork, is not the assortment of noises played out by instruments, but rather the tune in the musician’s head.

As a result of distinguishing art from craft he upholds that “ expression is an activity of which there can be no technique”[5]as unlike craft, art has no preconceived end, coinciding with Collingwood’s view that the artist doesn’t know what emotion he is feeling until he has expressed it. This is possibly the most troubling part of his theory as we often consider art to be a demonstration of great skill. Perhaps Tolstoy can even recognise that the artist is skilful in communicating his emotion to an audience in a way that the ordinary person can’t. Good technique is consistent with helping artists express their feelings creatively, as the painter can communicate them much more effectively with the knowledge of different brush strokes to exhibit different visual effects, or the blending of different colours together to instil a variety of different moods in his artworks. It seems absurd to say that it is only thorough absence of technique that produces real art.

To conclude, the benefits that we can take from the two expressivists is that art requires a definition in order to retain the meaning of what real art is, and that art serves as a medium for communicating emotions. It is true that we feel certain emotions that artwork seem to convey. It is also true that these emotions can be infectious, for example on listening to a particularly upbeat song, we may suddenly feel a sense of happiness. It is also true that emotions consist of many different forms. Happiness stretches from satisfaction to elation and it is perhaps the individuality of feelings that artists experience that contribute to the individuality and quality of artwork. Collingwood’s distinction between art and craft is also quite key to the definition of art, as although both may require a certain level of skill, the artist is very much about expressing emotion through his skill while the craftsman is merely making for the sake of making.

So on this basis, a combination of the benefits of both expressivist theories seems to provide a valid definition of art. With omitting the defects of both theories, it would seem easy to suggest that if art really is so difficult to define, then maybe it is a subjective concept, and what it is should be left for people to determine for themselves. But that isn’t an adequate conclusion, as it makes for difficulty in talking meaningfully about art, or what one considers being good or bad art, as each will have a different idea of what art is. Further, to say that art is something that which cannot be defined is, in itself, defining it in a particularly unsatisfactory way, as it achieves nothing. It is for this reason that a conceptual definition of art is preferable to not having one at all.