Chapter 1

THE HUMANITIES: AN INTRODUCTION

THE HUMANITIES: A STUDY OF VALUES

Today we think of the humanities as those broad areas of human creativity and study, such as philosophy, history, social sciences, the arts and literature, that are distinct from mathematics and the "hard" sciences, mainly because in the humanities, strictly objective or scientific standards are not usually dominant.

The current separation between the humanities and the sciences reveals itself in a number of contemporary controversies. For example, the cloning of animals has been greeted by many people as a possible benefit for domestic livestock farmers. Genetically altered wheat, soybeans, and other cereals have been heralded by many scientists as a breakthrough that will produce disease-resistant crops and therefore permit us to continue to increase the world food supply. On the other hand, some people resist such modifications and purchase food identified as not being genetically altered. Scientific research into the human genome has identified certain genes for inherited diseases, such as breast cancer or Alzheimer's disease, that could be modified to protect individuals or their offspring. Genetic research also suggests that in a few years individuals may be able to "design" their children's intelligence, body shape, height, general appearance, and physical ability.

Scientists provide the tools for these choices. Their values are centered in science in that they value the nature of their research and their capacity to make it work in a positive way. However, the impact on humanity of such a series of dramatic
changes to life brings to the fore values that clash with one another. For example, is it a positive social value for couples to decide the sex of their offspring rather than following nature’s own direction? In this case, who should decide if “designing” one’s offspring is a positive value, the scientist or the humanist?

Even more profound is the question of cloning a human being. Once a sheep was cloned successfully, it was clear that this science would lead directly to the possibility of a cloned human being. Some proponents of cloning support the process because we could clone a child who dies in infancy or clone a genius who has given great gifts to the world. For these people, cloning is a positive value. For others, the very thought of cloning a person is repugnant on the basis of religious belief. For still others, the idea of human cloning is objectionable because it echoes the creation of an unnatural monster, and for them it is a negative value. Because this is a worldwide problem, local laws will have limited effect on establishing a clear position on the value of cloning of all sorts. The question of how we decide on such a controversial issue is at the heart of the humanities, and some observers have pointed to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s famous novel, *Frankenstein, Or the Modern Prometheus*, which in some ways enacts the conflict among these values.

These examples demonstrate that the discoveries of scientists often have tremendous impact on the values of society. Yet some scientists have declared that they merely make the discoveries and that others—presumably politicians—must decide how the discoveries are to be used. It is this last statement that brings us closest to the importance of the humanities. If many scientists believe they cannot judge how their discoveries are to be used, then we must try to understand why they give that responsibility to others. This is not to say that scientists uniformly turn such decisions over to others, for many of them are humanists as well as scientists. But the fact remains that many governments have made use of great scientific achievements without pausing to ask the “achievers” if they approved of the way their discoveries were being used. The questions are, Who decides how to use such discoveries? On what grounds should their judgments be based?

Studying the behavior of neutrinos or string theory will not help us get closer to the answer. Such study is not related to the nature of humankind but to the nature of nature. What we need is a study that will get us closer to ourselves. It should be a study that explores the reaches of human feeling in relation to values—not only our own individual feelings and values but also the feelings and values of others. We need a study that will increase our sensitivity to ourselves, others, and the values in our world. To be sensitive is to perceive with insight. To be sensitive is also to feel and believe that things make a difference. Furthermore, it involves an awareness of those aspects of values that cannot be measured by objective standards. To be sensitive is to respect the humanities, because, among other reasons, they help develop our sensitivity to values, to what is important to us as individuals.

There are numerous ways to approach the humanities. The way we have chosen here is the way of the arts. One of the contentions of this book is that values are clarified in enduring ways in the arts. Human beings have had the impulse to express their values since the earliest times. Ancient tools recovered from the most recent Ice Age, for example, have features designed to express an affection for beauty as well as to provide utility.

The concept of progress in the arts is problematic. Who is to say whether the cave paintings (Figure 1-1) of 30,000 years ago that were discovered in present-day
France are less excellent than the work of Picasso (see Figure 1-4)? Cave paintings were probably not made as works of art to be contemplated. To get to them in the caves is almost always difficult, and they are very difficult to see. They seem to have been made for some practical purpose, such as improving the prospects for the hunt. Yet the work reveals something about the power, grace, and beauty of all the animals they portrayed. These cave paintings function now as works of art. From the beginning, our species instinctively had an interest in making revealing forms.

Among the numerous ways to approach the humanities, we have chosen the way of the arts because, as we shall try to elucidate, the arts clarify or reveal values. As we deepen our understanding of the arts, we necessarily deepen our understanding of values. We will study our experience with works of art as well as the values others associate with them, and in this process we will also educate ourselves about our own values.

Because a value is something that matters, engagement with art—the illumination of values—enriches the quality of our lives significantly. Moreover, the subject matter of art—what it is about—is not limited to the beautiful and the pleasant, the bright sides of life. Art may also include and help us understand the dark sides—the ugly, the painful, and the tragic. And when it does and when we get it, we are better able to come to grips with those dark sides of life.

Art brings us into direct communication with others. As Carlos Fuentes wrote in *The Buried Mirror*, “People and their cultures perish in isolation, but they are born or reborn in contact with other men and women of another culture, another creed, another race. If we do not recognize our humanity in others, we shall not recognize it in ourselves.” Art reveals the essence of our existence.
The taste of the mass public shifts constantly. Movies, for example, survive or fail on the basis of the number of people they appeal to. A film is good if it makes money. Consequently, film producers make every effort to cash in on current popular tastes, often by making sequels until the public's taste changes—for example, the Batman series (1989, 1992, 1995, 1997, 2005, 2008, 2012).

Our study of the humanities emphasizes that commercial success is not the most important guide to excellence in the arts. The long-term success of works of art depends on their ability to interpret human experience at a level of complexity that warrants examination and reexamination. Many commercially successful works give us what we think we want rather than what we really need with reference to insight and understanding. By satisfying us in an immediate and superficial way, commercial art can dull us to the possibilities of complex, more deeply satisfying art.

Everyone has limitations as a perceiver of art. Sometimes we defend ourselves against stretching our limitations by assuming that we have developed our taste and that any effort to change it is bad form. An old saying—"Matters of taste are not disputable"—can be credited with making many of us feel righteous about our own taste. What the saying means is that there is no accounting for what people like in the arts, for beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Thus, there is no use in trying to educate anyone about the arts. Obviously we disagree. We believe that all of us can and should be educated about the arts and should learn to respond to as wide a variety of the arts as possible: from jazz to string quartets, from Charlie Chaplin to Steven Spielberg, from Lewis Carroll to T. S. Eliot, from folk art to Picasso. Most of us defend our taste because anyone who challenges it challenges our deep feelings. Anyone who tries to change our responses to art is really trying to get inside our minds. If we fail to understand its purpose, this kind of persuasion naturally arouses resistance.

For us, the study of the arts penetrates beyond facts to the values that evoke our feelings—the way a succession of Eric Clapton's guitar chords when he plays the blues can be electrifying or the way song lyrics can give us a chill. In other words, we want to go beyond the facts about a work of art and get to the values revealed in the work. How many times have we all found ourselves liking something that, months or years before, we could not stand? And how often do we find ourselves now disliking what we previously judged a masterpiece? Generally, we can say the work of art remains the same. It is we who change. We learn to recognize the values illuminated in such works as well as to understand the ways in which this is accomplished. Such development is the meaning of "education" in the sense in which we have been using the term.

**Responses to Art**

Our responses to art usually involve processes so complex that they can never be fully tracked down or analyzed. At first, they can only be hinted at when we talk about them. However, further education in the arts permits us to observe more closely and thereby respond more intensely to the content of the work. This is true, we believe, even with "easy" art, such as exceptionally beautiful works—for example, Giorgione
(see Figure 2-16), Cézanne (see Figure 2-4), and O’Keeffe (see Figure 4-11). Such
gorgeous works generally are responded to with immediate satisfaction. What more
needs to be done? If art were only of the beautiful, textbooks such as this would never
find many users. But we think more needs to be done, even with the beautiful. We
will begin, however, with three works that obviously are not beautiful.

The Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros’s *Echo of a Scream* (Figure 1-2) is a highly
emotional painting—in the sense that the work seems to demand a strong emotional

FIGURE 1-2
David Alfaro Siqueiros, Mexican,
Enamel on wood, 48 × 36 inches
(121.9 × 91.4 cm). Gift of Edward
M. M. Warburg. Museum of
Modern Art, New York.

Siqueiros, a famous Mexican
muralist, fought during the
Mexican Revolution and possessed
a powerful political sensibility,
much of which found its way into
his art. He painted some of his
works in prison, held there for his
political convictions. In the 1930s
he centered his attention on the
Spanish Civil War, represented
here.
response. What we see is the huge head of a baby crying and, then, as if issuing from its own mouth, the baby himself. What kinds of emotions do you find stirring in yourself as you look at this painting? What kinds of emotions do you feel are expressed in the painting? Your own emotional responses—such as shock, pity for the child, irritation at a destructive, mechanical society, or any other nameable emotion—do not sum up the painting. However, they are an important starting point, since Siqueiros paints in such a way as to evoke emotion, and our understanding of the painting increases as we examine the means by which this evocation is achieved.

PERCEPTION KEY *Echo of a Scream*

1. Identify the mechanical objects in the painting.
2. What is the condition of these objects? What is their relationship to the baby?
3. What are those strange round forms in the upper right corner?
4. How might your response differ if the angular lines were smoothed out?
5. What is the significance of the red cloth around the baby?
6. Why are the natural shapes in the painting, such as the forehead of the baby, distorted? Is awareness of such distortions crucial to a response to the painting?
7. What effect does the repetition of the baby's head have on you?

Study another work, very close in temperament to Siqueiros's painting: *The Eternal City* by the American painter Peter Blume (Figure 1-3). After attending carefully to the kinds of responses awakened by *The Eternal City*, take note of some background information about the painting that you may not know.

**FIGURE 1-3**

Born in Russia, Blume came to America when he was six. His paintings are marked by a strong interest in what is now known as magic realism, interleaving time and place and the dead and the living in an emotional space that confronts the viewer as a challenge. He condemned the tyrant dictators of the first half of the twentieth century.
year of this painting is the same as that of *Echo of a Scream*: 1937. *The Eternal City* is a name reserved for only one city in the world—Rome. In 1937 the world was on the verge of world war: Fascists were in power in Italy and the Nazis in Germany. In the center of the painting is the Roman Forum, close to where Julius Caesar, the alleged tyrant, was murdered by Brutus. But here we see fascist Blackshirts, the modern tyrants, beating people. In a niche at the left is a figure of Christ, and beneath him (hard to see) is a crippled beggar woman. Near her are ruins of Roman statuary. The enlarged and distorted head, wriggling out like a jack-in-the-box, is that of Mussolini, the man who invented fascism and the Blackshirts. Study the painting closely again. Has your response to the painting changed?

**PERCEPTION KEY Siqueiros and Blume**

1. What common ingredients do you find in the Blume and Siqueiros paintings?
2. Is your reaction to the Blume similar to or distinct from your reaction to the Siqueiros?
3. Is the effect of the distortions similar or different?
4. How are colors used in each painting? Are the colors those of the natural world, or do they suggest an artificial environment? Are they distorted for effect?
5. With reference to the objects and events represented in each painting, do you think the paintings are comparable? If so, in what ways?
6. With the Blume, are there any natural objects in the painting that suggest the vitality of the Eternal City?
7. What political values are revealed in these two paintings?

Before going on to the next painting, which is quite different in character, we will make some observations about what we have done, however briefly, with the Blume. With added knowledge about its cultural and political implications—what we shall call the background of the painting—your responses to *The Eternal City* may have changed. Ideally, they should have become more focused, intense, and certain. Why? The painting is surely the same physical object you looked at originally. Nothing has changed in that object. Therefore, something has changed because something has been added to you, information that the general viewer of the painting in 1937 would have known and would have responded to more emotionally than viewers do now. Consider how a Fascist, on the one hand, or an Italian humanist and lover of Roman culture, on the other hand, would have reacted to this painting in 1937.

A full experience of this painting is not unidimensional but multidimensional. Moreover, “knowledge about” a work of art can lead to “knowledge of” the work of art, which implies a richer experience. This is important as a basic principle, since it means that we can be educated about what is in a work of art, such as its shapes, objects, and structure, as well as what is external to a work, such as its political references. It means we can learn to respond more completely. It also means that artists such as Blume sometimes produce works that demand background information if we are to appreciate them fully. This is particularly true of art that refers to
Ordinarily, Picasso was not a political painter. During World War II he was a citizen of Spain, a neutral country. But the Spanish Civil War excited him to create one of the world's greatest modern paintings, a record of the German bombing of a small Spanish town, Guernica. When a Nazi officer saw the painting he said to Picasso, “Did you do this?” Picasso answered scornfully, “No, you did.”

Picasso’s Guernica (Figure 1-4), one of the most famous paintings of the twentieth century, is also dated 1937. Its title comes from the name of an old Spanish town that was bombed during the Spanish Civil War—the first aerial bombing of noncombatant civilians in modern warfare. Examine this painting carefully.

**PERCEPTION KEY Guernica**

1. Distortion is powerfully evident in this painting. How does its function differ from that of the distortion in Blume's *The Eternal City* or Siqueiros's *Echo of a Scream*?
2. Describe the objects in the painting. What is their relationship to one another?
3. Why the prominence of the lightbulb?
4. There are large vertical rectangles on the left and right sides and a very large triangle in the center. Do these shapes provide a visual order to what would otherwise be sheer chaos? If so, how? As you think about this, compare one of many studies Picasso made for *Guernica* (Figure 1-5). Does the painting possess a stronger form than the study? If so, in what ways?
5. Because of reading habits in the West, we tend initially to focus on the left side of most paintings and then move to the right, especially when the work is very large. Is this the case with your perception of *Guernica*? In the organization or form of *Guernica*, is there a countermovement that, once our vision has reached the right side, pulls us back to the left? If so, what shapes in the painting cause this countermovement? How do these left–right and right–left movements affect the balance of the painting? Note that the actual painting is over twenty-five feet wide.
6. The bull seems to be totally indifferent to the carnage. Do you think the bull may be a symbol? For example, could the bull represent the spirit of the Spanish people? Could the bull represent General Franco, the man who ordered the bombing? Or could the bull represent both? To answer these questions adequately, do you need further background information, or can you defend your answers by referring to what is in the painting, or do you need to use both?

7. The bombing of Guernica occurred during the day. Why did Picasso portray it as happening at night?

8. Which are more visually dominant, human beings or animals? If you were not told, would you know that this painting was a representation of an air raid?

9. Is the subject matter—what the work is about—of this painting war? Death? Suffering? Fascism? Or a combination?

The next painting (Figure 1-6), featured in “Experiencing: The Mona Lisa,” is by Leonardo da Vinci, arguably one of the greatest painters of the Italian Renaissance. Da Vinci is a household name in part because of this painting. Despite the lack of a political or historically relevant subject matter, the Mona Lisa, with its tense pose and enigmatic expression, has become possibly the most famous work of art in the West.

**Structure and Artistic Form**

The responses to the Mona Lisa are probably different from those you have when viewing the other paintings in this chapter, but why? You might reply that the Mona Lisa is hypnotizing, a carefully structured painting depending on a subtle but basic geometric form, the triangle. Such structures, while operating subconsciously, are obvious on analysis. Like all structural elements of the artistic form of a painting, they affect us deeply even when we are not aware of them. We have the capacity to respond to pure form even in paintings in which objects and events are portrayed.
Thus, responding to *The Eternal City* will involve responding not just to an interpretation of fascism taking hold in Italy but also to the *sensuous* surface of the painting. This is certainly true of *Echo of a Scream*; if you look again at that painting, you will see not only that its sensuous surface is interesting intrinsically but also that it deepens our response to what is represented. Because we often respond to artistic form without being conscious that it is affecting us, the painter must make the structure interesting. Consider the contrast between the simplicity of the structure of the *Mona Lisa* and the urgent complexity of the structures of the Siqueiros and the Blume.

**EXPERIENCING The *Mona Lisa***

1. Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* is one of the most famous paintings in the history of art. What, in your opinion, makes this painting noteworthy?

2. Because this painting is so familiar, it has sometimes been treated as if it were a cliché, an overworked image. In several cases, it has been treated with satirical scorn. Why would any artist want to make fun of this painting? Is it a cliché, or are you able to look at it as if for the first time?

3. Unlike the works of Siqueiros, Blume, and Picasso, this painting has no obvious connections to historical circumstances that might intrude on your responses to its formal qualities. How does a lack of context affect your understanding of the painting?

4. It has been pointed out that the landscape on the left and the landscape on the right are totally different. If that judgment is correct, why do you think Leonardo made such a decision? What moods do the landscapes suggest?

5. The woman portrayed may be Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo, the wife of a local businessman, and the painting has long been known in Italy as *La Gioconda*. Is it necessary to your sense of participation that we know who the sitter is, or that we know that Leonardo kept this painting with him throughout his life and took it wherever he went?

Experiencing a painting as frequently reproduced as *Mona Lisa*, which is visited by millions of people every year at the Louvre in Paris, takes most of us some special effort. Unless we study the painting as if it were new to us, we will simply see it as an icon of high culture rather than as a painting with a formal power and a lasting value. Because it is used in advertisements, on mouse pads, playing cards, jigsaw puzzles, and a host of other banal locations, we might see this as a cliché.

However, we are also fortunate in that we see the painting as itself, apart from any social or historical events, and in a location that is almost magical or mythical. The landscape may be unreal, fantastic, and suggestive of a world of mystical opportunity. Certainly it emphasizes mystery. Whoever this woman is, she is concentrating in an unusual fashion on the viewer, whether we...
imagine it is we or it is Leonardo whom she contemplates. A study of her expression reminds us that for generations the “Gioconda smile” has teased authors and critics with its mystery. Is she making an erotic suggestion in that smile, or is it a smile of self-satisfaction? Or is it a smile of tolerance, suggesting that she is just waiting for this sitting to be done? Her expression has been the most intriguing of virtually any portrait subject in any museum in the world. It is no surprise, then, that Leonardo kept this for himself, although we must wonder whether or not he was commissioned for the painting and that for some reason did not want to deliver it.

The arresting quality of the painting is in part, to be sure, because of the enigmatic expression on Mona Lisa’s face, but the form of the painting is also arresting. Leonardo has posed her so that her head is the top of an isosceles triangle in which her face glows in contrast with her dark clothing. Her hands, expressive and radiant, create a strong diagonal leading to the base of the triangle. Her shoulders are turned at a significant angle so that her pose is not really comfortable, not easy to maintain for a long time. However, her position is visually arresting because it imparts a tension to the entire painting that contributes to our response to it as a powerful object.

The most savage satirical treatment of this painting is the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp’s L.H.O.O.Q. (Figure 14-14). By parodying this work, Duchamp thumbed his nose at high culture in 1919, after World War I, and after the Mona Lisa had assumed its role as an epitome of high art. His work was an expression of disgust at the middle and upper classes that had gone so enthusiastically into a war of attrition that brought Europe to the verge of self-destruction.

The composition of any painting can be analyzed because any painting has to be organized: Parts have to be interrelated. Moreover, it is important to think carefully about the composition of individual paintings. This is particularly true of paintings one does not respond to immediately—of “difficult” or apparently uninteresting paintings. Often the analysis of structure can help us gain access to such paintings so that they become genuinely exciting.

**PERCEPTION KEY The Eternal City**

1. Sketch the basic geometric shapes of the painting.
2. Do these shapes relate to one another in such a way as to help reveal the obscenity of fascism? If so, how?

*Artistic form* is a composition or structure that makes something—a subject matter—more meaningful. The Siqueiros, Blume, and Picasso reveal something about the horrors of war and fascism. But what does the Mona Lisa reveal? Perhaps just the form and structure? For us, structures or forms that do not give us insight are not artistic forms. Some critics will argue the point. This major question will be pursued throughout the text.
We are not likely to respond sensitively to a work of art that we do not perceive properly. What is less obvious is what we referred to previously—the fact that we can often give our attention to a work of art and still not perceive very much. The reason for this should be clear from our previous discussion. Frequently, we need to know something about the background of a work of art that would aid our perception. Anyone who did not know something about the history of Rome, or who Christ was, or what fascism was, or what Mussolini meant to the world would have a difficult time making sense of *The Eternal City*. But it is also true that anyone who could not perceive Blume’s composition might have a completely superficial response to the painting. Such a person could indeed know all about the background and understand the symbolic statements made by the painting, but that is only part of the painting. From seeing what da Vinci can do with form, structure, pose, and expression, you can understand that the formal qualities of a painting are neither accidental nor unimportant. In Blume’s painting, the form focuses attention and organizes our perceptions by establishing the relationships between the parts.

Composition is basic to all the arts. To perceive any work of art adequately, we must perceive its structure. Examine the following poem—"l(a)—by e. e. cummings. It is unusual in its form and its effects.

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At first this poem looks like a strange kind of code, like an Egyptian hieroglyph. But it is not a code—it is more like a Japanese haiku, a poem that sets a scene or paints a picture and then waits for us to get it. And to “get it” requires sensitive perception.

**PERCEPTION KEY “l(a)”**

1. Study the poem carefully until you begin to make out the words. What are they?
2. One part of the poem refers to an emotion; the other describes an event. What is the relationship between them?
3. Is the shape of the poem important to the meaning of the poem?
4. Why are the words of the poem difficult to perceive? Is that difficulty important to the meaning of the poem?
5. Does the poem evoke an image or images?
6. With the emphasis on letters in the poem, is the use of the lowercase for the poet’s title fitting?
7. Once you have perceived the words and imagery of the poem, does your response change? Compare your analysis of the poem with ours, which follows.
In this poem a word is interrupted by parentheses: “l one l iness”—a feeling we have all experienced. Because of its isolating, biting power, we ordinarily do not like this feeling. Then, inside the parentheses, there is a phrase, “a leaf falls,” the description of an event. In poetry such a description is usually called an image. In this poem the image illustrates the idea or theme of loneliness, melding the specific with the abstract. But how is this melding accomplished? First of all, notice the devices that symbolize or represent oneness, an emblem of loneliness. The poem begins with the letter “l,” which in the typeface used in the original poem looks like the number “one.” Even the parenthesis separating the “a” from the “l” helps accent the isolation of the “l.” Then there is the “le,” which is the singular article in French. The idea of one is doubled by repetition in the “ll” figure. Then cummings brazenly writes “one” and follows it by “ll” and then the ultimate “iness.” Furthermore, in the original edition the poem is number one of the collection. Also notice how these representations of oneness are wedded to the image: “a leaf falls.”

As you look at the poem, your eye follows a downward path that swirls in a pattern similar to the diagram in Figure 1-7. This is merely following the parentheses and consonants. As you follow the vowels as well, you see curves that become spirals, and the image is indeed much like that of a leaf actually falling. This accounts for the long, thin look of the poem. Now, go back to the poem and reread it. Has your response changed? If so, how?

Of course, most poems do not work in quite this way. Most poems do not rely on the way they look on the page, although this is one of the most important strategies cummings uses. But what most poets are concerned with is the way the images or verbal pictures fit into the totality of the poem, how they make us experience the whole poem more intensely. In cummings’s poem the single, falling, dying leaf—one out of so many—is perfect for helping us understand loneliness from a dying person’s point of view. People are like leaves in that they are countless when they are alive and together. But like leaves, they die singly. And when one person separates himself or herself from the community of friends, that person is as alone as the single leaf.

ABSTRACT IDEAS AND CONCRETE IMAGES

“l(a” presents an abstract idea fused with a concrete image or word picture. It is concrete because what is described is a physical event—a falling leaf. Loneliness, on the other hand, is abstract. Take an abstract idea: love, hate, indecision, arrogance, jealousy, ambition, justice, civil rights, prejudice, revenge, revolution, coyness, insanity, or any other. Then link it with some physical object or event that you think expresses the abstract idea. “Expresses” here means simply making us see the object as portraying—and thus helping us understand—the abstract idea. Of course, you need not follow cummings’s style of splitting words and using parentheses. You may use any way of lining up the letters and words that you think is interesting.

In Paradise Lost, John Milton describes hell as a place with “Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Fens, Bogs, Dens, and shades of death.” Now, neither you nor the poet has ever seen “shades of death,” although the idea is in Psalm 23, “the valley of the shadow of death.” Milton gets away with describing hell this way because he has linked the
abstract idea of shades of death to so many concrete images in this single line. He is giving us images that suggest the mood of hell just as much as they describe the landscape, and we realize that he gives us so many topographic details in order to get us ready for the last detail—the abstract idea of shades of death.

There is much more to be said about poetry, of course, but on a preliminary level poetry worked in much the same way in the seventeenth-century England of Milton as it does in contemporary America. The same principles are at work: Described objects or events are used as a means of bringing abstract ideas to life. The descriptions take on a wider and deeper significance—wider in the sense that the descriptions are connected with the larger scope of abstract ideas, deeper in the sense that because of these descriptions the abstract ideas become vividly focused and more meaningful. Thus, cummings's poem gives us insight—a penetrating understanding—into what we all must face: the isolating loneliness of our death.

The following poem is highly complex: the memory of an older culture (simplicity, in this poem) and the consideration of a newer culture (complexity). It is an African poem by the contemporary Nigerian poet Gabriel Okara; and knowing that it is African, we can begin to appreciate the extreme complexity of Okara's feelings about the clash of the old and new cultures. He symbolizes the clash in terms of music, and he opposes two musical instruments: the drum and the piano. They stand respectively for the African and the European cultures. But even beyond the musical images that abound in this poem, look closely at the images of nature, the pictures of the panther and leopard, and see how Okara imagines them.

**PIANO AND DRUMS**

When at break of day at a riverside
I hear jungle drums telegraphing
the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw
like bleeding flesh, speaking of
primal youth and the beginning,
I see the panther ready to pounce,
the leopard snarling about to leap
and the hunters crouch with spears poised;
And my blood ripples, turns torrent,
topples the years and at once I'm
in my mother's lap a suckling;
at once I'm walking simple
paths with no innovations,
rugged, fashioned with the naked
warmth of hurrying feet and groping hearts
in green leaves and wild flowers pulsing.
Then I hear a wailing piano
solo speaking of complex ways
in tear-furrowed concerto;
of far-away lands
and new horizons with
coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,
crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth
of its complexities, it ends in the middle
of a phrase at a daggerpoint.
And I lost in the morning mist
of an age at a riverside keep
wandering in the mystic rhythm
of jungle drums and the concerto.

PERCEPTION KEY “Piano and Drums”

1. What are the most important physical objects in the poem? What cultural significance do they have?
2. Why do you think Okara chose the drum and the piano to help reveal the clash between the two cultures? Where are his allegiances?

Such a poem speaks directly to legions of the current generation of Africans. But consider some points in light of what we have said earlier. In order to perceive the kind of emotional struggle that Okara talks about—the subject matter of the poem—we need to know something about Africa and the struggle African nations have in modernizing themselves along the lines of more technologically advanced nations. We also need to know something of the history of Africa and the fact that European nations, such as Britain in the case of Nigeria, once controlled much of Africa. Knowing these things, we know then that there is no thought of the “I” of the poem accepting the “complex ways” of the new culture without qualification. The “I” does not think of the culture of the piano as manifestly superior to the culture of the drum. That is why the labyrinth of complexities ends at a “daggerpoint.”

The new culture is a mixed blessing.

We have argued that the perception of a work of art is aided by background information and that sensitive perception must be aware of form, at least implicitly. But we believe there is much more to sensitive perception. Somehow the form of a work of art is an artistic form that clarifies or reveals values, and our response is intensified by our awareness of those revealed values. But how does artistic form do this? And how does this awareness come to us? In the next chapter we shall consider these questions, and in doing so, we will also raise that most important question: What is a work of art? Once we have examined each of the arts, it will be clear, we hope, that the principles developed in these opening chapters are equally applicable to all the arts.

Participate and analyze and participate again with Edward Hopper’s Early Sunday Morning (Figure 1-8).

PERCEPTION KEY Early Sunday Morning

1. What is the subject matter of this painting?
2. Back up your judgment with reference to as many relevant details as possible before reading further.
3. What visual elements in the painting link its content with e. e. cummings’s poem?
FIGURE 1-8
Edward Hopper, *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 35 × 60 inches.

When the Whitney Museum of American Art purchased *Early Sunday Morning* in 1930, it was their most expensive acquisition. Hopper’s work, centered in New York’s Greenwich Village, revealed the character of city life. His colors—vibrant, intense—and the early morning light—strong and unyielding—created indelible images of the city during the Great Depression.

On one level the subject matter is a city street scene. But on a more basic level, we think, the subject matter is loneliness. Packed human habitation is portrayed, but no human being is in sight (incidentally but noteworthy, a human figure originally placed behind one of the windows was painted out). We seem to be at the scene alone on New York’s Seventh Avenue. We seem to be strangely located across the street at about the level of the second-story windows. Loneliness is usually accompanied by anxiety. And anxiety is expressed by the silent windows, especially the ominous dark storefronts, the mysterious translucent lighting, and the strange dark rectangle (what is it?) on the upper right. The street and buildings, despite their rectilinear format, seem to lean slightly downhill to the left, pushed by the shadows, especially the unexplainable weird flaglike one wrapping over the second window on the left of the second story. Even the bright barber pole is tilted to the left, the tilt accentuated by the uprightness of the door and window frames in the background and the wonderfully painted toadlike fire hydrant. These subtle oddities of the scene accent our “iness”—our separateness.

**Summary**

Unlike scientists, humanists generally do not use strictly objective standards. The arts reveal values; other humanities study values. Artistic form refers to the structure or organization of a work of art. Values are clarified or revealed by a work of art.
Judging from the most ancient efforts to make things, we can assert that the arts represent one of the most basic human activities. They satisfy a need to explore and express the values that link us together. By observing our responses to a work of art and examining the means by which the artist evokes those responses, we can deepen our understanding of art. Our approach to the humanities is through the arts, and our taste in art connects with our deep feelings. Yet our taste is continually improved by experience and education. Background information about a work of art and increased sensitivity to its artistic form intensify our responses.
Chapter 2

WHAT IS A WORK OF ART?

No definition for a work of art seems completely adequate, and none is universally accepted. We shall not propose a definition here, therefore, but rather attempt to clarify some criteria or distinctions that can help us identify works of art. Since the term “work of art” implies the concept of making in two of its words—“work” and “art” (short for “artifice”)—a work of art is usually said to be something made by a person. Hence sunsets, beautiful trees, “found” natural objects such as grained driftwood, “paintings” by insects or songs by birds, and a host of other natural phenomena are not considered works of art, despite their beauty. You may not wish to accept the proposal that a work of art must be of human origin, but if you do accept it, consider the construction shown in Figure 2-1, Jim Dine’s Shovel.

Shovel is part of a valuable collection and was first shown at an art gallery in New York City. Furthermore, Dine is considered an important American artist. However, he did not make the shovel himself. Like most shovels, the one in his construction, although designed by a person, was mass-produced. Dine mounted the shovel in front of a painted panel and presented this construction for serious consideration. The construction is described as “mixed media,” meaning it consists of several materials: paint, wood, a cord, and metal. Is Shovel a work of art?

We can hardly discredit the construction as a work of art simply because Dine did not make the shovel; after all, we often accept objects manufactured to specification by factories as genuine works of sculpture (see the Calder construction, Figure 5-11). Collages by Picasso and Braque, which include objects such as paper and nails mounted on a panel, are generally accepted as works of art. Museums have even accepted objects such as a signed urinal by Marcel Duchamp, one of the Dadaist artists of the early
twentieth century, which in many ways anticipated the works of Dine, Warhol, and others in the Pop Art movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

**IDENTIFYING ART CONCEPTUALLY**

Three criteria for determining whether something is a work of art are that (1) the object or event is made by an artist, (2) the object or event is intended to be a work of art by its maker, and (3) recognized experts agree that it is a work of art. Unfortunately, one cannot always determine whether a work meets these criteria only by perceiving it. In many cases, for instance, we may confront an object such as Shovel and not know whether Dine constructed the shovel, thus not satisfying the first criterion that the object be made by an artist; or whether Dine intended it to be a work of art; or whether experts agree that it is a work of art. In fact, Dine did not make this particular shovel, but because this fact cannot be established by perception, one has to be told.

**PERCEPTION KEY Identifying a Work of Art**

1. Why not simply identify a work of art as what an artist makes?
2. If Dine actually made the shovel, would Shovel then unquestionably be a work of art?
3. Suppose Dine made the shovel, and it was absolutely perfect in the sense that it could not be readily distinguished from a mass-produced shovel. Would that kind of perfection make the piece more a work of art or less a work of art? Suppose Dine did not make the shovel but did make the panel and the box. Then would it seem easier to identify Shovel as a work of art?
4. Find people who hold opposing views about whether Shovel is a work of art. Ask them to point out what it is about the object itself that qualifies it for or disqualifies it from being identified as a work of art.

Identifying art conceptually seems to the authors as not very useful. Because someone intends to make a work of art tells us little. It is the *made* rather than the *making* that counts. The third criterion—the judgment of experts—is important but debatable.

**IDENTIFYING ART PERCEPTUALLY**

*Perception*, what we can observe, and *conception*, what we know or think we know, are closely related. We often recognize an object because it conforms to our conception of it. For example, in architecture we recognize churches and office buildings as distinct because of our conception of what churches and office buildings are supposed to look like. The ways of identifying a work of art mentioned above depend on the conceptions of the artist and experts on art and not enough on our perceptions of the work itself.
We suggest an approach here that is simple and flexible and that depends largely on perception. The distinctions of this approach will not lead us necessarily to a definition of art, but they will offer us a way to examine objects and events with reference to whether they possess artistically perceivable qualities. And, in some cases at least, it should bring us to reasonable grounds for distinguishing certain objects or events as art. We will consider four basic terms related primarily to the perceptual nature of a work of art:

*Artistic form:* the organization of a medium that results in clarifying some subject matter.

*Participation:* sustained attention and loss of self-awareness.

*Content:* the interpretation of subject matter.

*Subject matter:* some value expressed in the work of art.

Understanding any one of these terms requires an understanding of the others. Thus we will follow—please trust us—what may appear to be an illogical order: artistic form; participation; participation and artistic form; content; subject matter; subject matter and artistic form; and, finally, participation, artistic form, and content.

**ARTISTIC FORM**

All objects and events have form. They are bounded by limits of time and space, and they have parts with distinguishable relationships to one another. Form is the interrelationships of part to part and part to whole. To say that some object or event has form means it has some degree of perceptible unity. To say that something has *artistic form,* however, usually implies a strong degree of perceptible unity. It is artistic form that distinguishes a work of art from objects or events that are not works of art.

Artistic form implies that the parts we perceive—for example, line, color, texture, shape, and space in a painting—have been unified for the most profound effect possible. That effect is revelatory. Artistic form reveals, clarifies, enlightens, gives fresh meaning to something valuable in life, some subject matter. A form that lacks a significant degree of unity is unlikely to accomplish this.

Our daily experiences usually are characterized more by disunity than by unity. Consider, for instance, the order of your experiences during a typical day or even a segment of that day. Compare that order with the order most novelists give to the experiences of their characters. One impulse for reading novels is to experience the tight unity that artistic form usually imposes, a unity almost none of us comes close to achieving in our daily lives. Much the same is true of music. Noises and random tones in everyday experience lack the order that most composers impose.

Since strong, perceptible unity appears so infrequently in nature, we tend to value the perceptible unity of artistic form. Works of art differ in the power of their unity. If that power is weak, then the question arises: Is this a work of art? Consider Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (Figure 4-9) with reference to its artistic form. If its parts were not carefully proportioned in the overall structure of the painting, the tight balance that produces a strong unity would be lost. Mondrian was so
concerned with this balance that he often measured the areas of lines and rectangles in his works to be sure they had a clear, almost mathematical, relationship to the totality. Of course, disunity or playing against expectations of unity can also be artistically useful at times. Some artists realize how strong the impulse toward unity is in those who have perceived many works of art. For some people, the contemporary attitude toward the loose organization of formal elements is a norm, and the highly unified work of art is thought of as old-fashioned. However, it seems that the effects achieved by a lesser degree of unity succeed only because we recognize them as departures from our well-known, highly organized forms.

Artistic form, we have suggested, is likely to involve a high degree of perceptible unity. But how do we determine what is a high degree? And if we cannot be clear about this, how can this distinction be helpful in distinguishing works of art from things that are not works of art? A very strong unity does not necessarily identify a work of art. That formal unity must give us insight into something important.

Consider the news photograph—taken on one of the main streets of Saigon in February 1968 by Eddie Adams, an Associated Press photographer—showing Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, then South Vietnam’s national police chief, killing a Vietcong captive (Figure 2-2). Adams stated that his picture was an accident, that his hand moved the camera reflexively as he saw the general raise the revolver. The lens of the camera was set in such a way that the background was thrown out of focus. The blurring of the background helped bring out the drama of the foreground scene. Does this photograph have a high degree of perceptible unity? Certainly the experience of the photographer is evident. Not many amateur photographers would have had enough skill to catch such a fleeting event with such

FIGURE 2-2

Adams captured General Loan’s execution of a Vietcong captive. He said later, “The general killed the Vietcong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world.”
stark clarity. If an amateur had accomplished this, we would be inclined to believe that it was more luck than skill. Adams’s skill in catching the scene is even more evident, and he risked his life to get it. But do we admire this work the way we admire Siqueiros’s *Echo of a Scream* (Figure 1-2)? Do we experience these two works in the same basic way?

Compare a painting of a somewhat similar subject matter—Goya’s *May 3, 1808* (Figure 2-3). Goya chose the most terrible moment, that split second before the crash of the guns. There is no doubt that the executions will go on. The desolate mountain pushing down from the left blocks escape, while from the right the firing squad relentlessly hunches forward. The soldiers’ thick legs—planted wide apart and parallel—support like sturdy pillars the blind, pressing wall formed by their backs. These are men of a military machine. Their rifles, flashing in the bleak light of the ghastly lantern, thrust out as if they belonged to their bodies. It is unimaginable that any of these men would defy the command of their superiors. In the dead of night, the doomed are backed up against the mountain like animals ready for slaughter. One man flings up his arms in a gesture of utter despair—or is it defiance? The uncertainty increases the intensity of our attention. Most of the rest of the men bury their faces, while a few, with eyes staring out of their sockets, glance out at what they cannot help seeing—the sprawling dead smeared in blood.

With the photograph of the execution in Vietnam, despite its immediate and powerful attraction, it takes only a glance or two to grasp what is presented. Undivided
attention, perhaps, is necessary to become aware of the significance of the event, but not sustained attention. In fact, to take careful notice of all the details—such as the patterns on the prisoner’s shirt—does not add to our awareness of the significance of the photograph. If anything, our awareness will be sharper and more productive if we avoid such detailed examination. Is such the case with the Goya? We believe not. Indeed, without sustained attention to the details of this work, we would miss most of what is revealed. For example, block out everything but the dark shadow at the bottom right. Note how differently that shadow appears when it is isolated. We must see the details individually and collectively, as they work together. Unless we are aware of their collaboration, we are not going to grasp fully the total form.

Close examination of the Adams photograph reveals several efforts to increase the unity and thus the power of the print. For example, the flak jacket of General Loan has been darkened so as to remove distracting details. The buildings in the background have been “dodged out” (held back in printing so that they are not fully visible). The shadows of trees on the road have been softened so as to lead the eye inexorably to the hand that holds the gun. The space around the head of the victim is also dodged out so that it appears that something like a halo surrounds the head. All this is done in the act of printing, enhancing the formal unity.

Yet we are suggesting that the Goya has a much higher degree of perceptible unity than Adams’s photograph, that perhaps only the Goya has artistic form. We base these conclusions on what is given for us to perceive: the fact that the part-to-part and the part-to-whole relationships are much stronger in the Goya. Now, of course, you may disagree. No judgment about such matters is indisputable. Indeed, that is part of the fun of talking about whether something is or is not a work of art—we can learn how to perceive from one another.

**PERCEPTION KEY  Goya and Adams**

1. Is the painting different from Adams’s photograph in the way the details work together? Be specific.
2. Could any detail in the painting be changed or removed without weakening the unity of the total design? What about the photograph?
3. Does the photograph or the painting more powerfully reveal human barbarity?
4. Are there details in the photograph that distract your attention?
5. Do the buildings in the background of the photograph add to or subtract from the power of what is being portrayed? Compare the effect of the looming architecture in the painting.
6. Do the shadows on the street add anything to the significance of the photograph? Compare the shadows on the ground in the painting.
7. Does it make any significant difference that the Vietcong prisoner’s shirt is checkered? Compare the white shirt on the gesturing man in the painting.
8. Is the expression on the soldier’s face, along the left edge of the photograph, appropriate to the situation? Compare the facial expressions in the painting.
9. Can these works be fairly compared when one is in black and white and the other is in full color? Why or why not?
10. What are some basic differences between viewing a photograph of a real man being killed and a painting of such an event? Does that distinction alone qualify or disqualify either work as a work of art?
Both the photograph and the Goya tend to grasp our attention. Initially for most of us, probably, the photograph has more pulling power than the painting, especially as the two works are illustrated here. In its setting in the Prado in Madrid, however, the great size of the Goya and its powerful lighting and color draw the eye like a magnet. But the term “participate” is more accurately descriptive of what we are likely to be doing in our experience of the painting. With the Goya, we must not only give but also sustain our undivided attention so that we lose our self-consciousness, our sense of being separate, of standing apart from the painting. We participate. And only by means of participation can we come close to a full awareness of what the painting is about.

Works of art are created, exhibited, and preserved for us to perceive with not only undivided but also sustained attention. Artists, critics, and philosophers of art (aestheticians) generally are in agreement about this. Thus, if a work requires our participation in order to understand and appreciate it fully, we have an indication that the work is art. Therefore—unless our analyses have been incorrect, and you should satisfy yourself about this—the Goya would seem to be a work of art. Conversely, the photograph is not as obviously a work of art as the painting, and this is the case despite the fascinating impact of the photograph. Yet these are highly tentative judgments. We are far from being clear about why the Goya requires our participation and the photograph may not. Until we are clear about these “whys,” the grounds for these judgments remain shaky.

Goya’s painting tends to draw us on until, ideally, we become aware of all the details and their interrelationships. For example, the long dark shadow at the bottom right underlines the line of the firing squad, and the line of the firing squad helps bring out the shadow. Moreover, this shadow is the darkest and most opaque part of the painting. It has a forbidding, blind, fateful quality that, in turn, reinforces the ominous appearance of the firing squad. The dark shadow on the street just below the forearm of General Loan seems less powerful. The photograph has fewer meaningful details. Thus our attempts to keep our attention on the photograph tend to be forced—which is to say that they will fail. Sustained attention or participation cannot be achieved by acts of will. The splendid singularity of what we are attending to must fascinate and control us to the point that we no longer need to will our attention. We can make up our minds to give our undivided attention to something. But if that something lacks the pulling power that grasps our attention, we cannot participate with it.

The ultimate test for recognizing a work of art, then, is how it works in us, what it does to us. Participative experiences of works of art are communions—experiences so full and fruitful that they enrich our lives. Such experiences are life-enhancing not just because of the great satisfaction they may give us at the moment but also because they make more or less permanent contributions to our future lives. Does da Vinci’s Mona Lisa (Figure 1-6) heighten your perception of a painting’s underlying structure, the power of simplicity of form, and the importance of a figure’s pose? Does cummings’s “l(a” (Figure 1-7) heighten your perception of falling leaves and deepen your understanding of the loneliness of death? Do you see shovels differently, perhaps, after experiencing Shovel by Dine (Figure 2-1)? If not, presumably they are not works of art. But this assumes that we have really
participated with these works, that we have allowed them to work fully in our experience, so that if the meaning or content were present, it had a chance to reveal itself to our awareness. Of the four basic distinctions—subject matter, artistic form, content, and participation—the most fundamental is participation. We must not only understand what it means to participate but also be able to participate. Otherwise, the other basic distinctions, even if they make good theoretical sense, will not be of much practical help in making art more important in our lives. The central importance of participation requires further elaboration.

As participators, we do not think of the work of art with reference to categories applicable to objects—such as what kind of thing it is. We grasp the work of art directly. When, for example, we participate with Cézanne’s *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 2-4), we are not making geographical or geological observations. We are not thinking of the mountain as an object. For if we did, Mont Sainte-Victoire pales into a mere instance of the appropriate scientific categories. We might judge that the mountain is a certain type. But in that process, the vivid impact of Cézanne’s mountain would be lessened as the focus of our attention shifted beyond in the direction of generality. This is the natural thing to do with mountains if you are a geologist.

When we are participators, our thoughts are dominated so much by something that we are unaware of our separation from that something. Thus the artistic form initiates and controls thought and feeling. When we are spectators, our thoughts dominate something, and we are aware of our separation from that something.
We set the object into our framework. We see the Cézanne—name it, identify its maker, classify its style, recall its background information—but this approach will not lead us into the Cézanne as a work of art. Of course, such knowledge can be very helpful. But that knowledge is most helpful when it is under the control of the work of art working in our experience. This happens when the artistic form not only suggests that knowledge but also keeps it within the boundaries of the painting. Otherwise, the painting will fade away. Its splendid specificity will be sacrificed for some generality. Its content or meaning will be missed.

These are strong claims, and they may not be convincing. In any case, before concluding our search for what a work of art is, let us seek further clarification of our other basic distinctions—artistic form, content, and subject matter. Even if you disagree with the conclusions, clarification helps understanding. And understanding helps appreciation.

**PARTICIPATION AND ARTISTIC FORM**

The participative experience—the undivided and sustained attention to an object or event that makes us lose our sense of separation from that object or event—is induced by strong or artistic form. Participation is not likely to develop with weak form because weak form tends to allow our attention to wander. Therefore, one indication of a strong form is the fact that participation occurs. Another indication of artistic form is the way it clearly identifies a whole or totality. In the visual arts, a whole is a visual field limited by boundaries that separate that field from its surroundings.

Both Adams’s photograph and Goya’s painting have visual fields with boundaries. No matter what wall these two pictures are placed on, the Goya will probably stand out more distinctly and sharply from its background. This is partly because the Goya is in vibrant color and on a large scale—eight feet nine inches by thirteen feet four inches—whereas the Adams photograph is normally exhibited as an eight by ten-inch print. However carefully such a photograph is printed, it will probably include some random details. No detail in the Goya, though, fails to play a part in the total structure. To take one further instance, notice how the lines of the soldiers’ sabers and their straps reinforce the ruthless forward push of the firing squad. The photograph, however, has a relatively weak form because a large number of details fail to cooperate with other details. For example, running down the right side of General Loan’s body is a very erratic line that fails to tie in with anything else in the photograph. If this line were smoother, it would connect more closely with the lines formed by the Vietcong prisoner’s body. The connection between killer and killed would be more vividly established.

Artistic form normally is a prerequisite if our attention is to be grasped and held. Artistic form makes our participation possible. Some philosophers of art, such as Clive Bell and Roger Fry, even go so far as to claim that the presence of artistic form—what they call “significant form”—is all that is necessary to identify a work of art. And by significant form, in the case of painting, they mean the interrelationships of elements: line to line, line to color, color to color, color to shape, shape to shape, shape to texture, and so on. The elements make up the artistic medium, the “stuff” the form organizes. According to Bell and Fry, any reference of these
elements and their interrelationships to actual objects or events should be basically irrelevant in our awareness.

According to the proponents of significant form, if we take explicit notice of the executions as an important part of Goya’s painting, then we are not perceiving properly. We are experiencing the painting not as a work of art but rather as an illustration telling a story, thus reducing a painting that is a work of art to the level of commercial communications. When the lines, colors, and the like pull together tightly, independently of any objects or events they may represent, there is a significant form. That is what we should perceive when we are perceiving a work of art, not a portrayal of some object or event. Anything that has significant form is a work of art. If you ignore the objects and events represented in the Goya, significant form is evident. All the details depend on one another and jell, creating a strong structure. Therefore, the Goya is a work of art. If you ignore the objects and events represented in the Adams photograph, significant form is not evident. The organization of the parts is too loose, creating a weak structure. Therefore, the photograph, according to Bell and Fry, would not be a work of art. “To appreciate a work of art,” according to Bell, “we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions.”

Does this theory of how to identify a work of art satisfy you? Do you find that in ignoring the representation of objects and events in the Goya, much of what is important in that painting is left out? For example, does the line of the firing squad carry a forbidding quality partly because you recognize that this is a line of men in the process of killing other men? In turn, does the close relationship of that line with the line of the long shadow at the bottom right depend to some degree upon that forbidding quality? If you think so, then it follows that the artistic form of this work legitimately and relevantly refers to objects and events. Somehow artistic form goes beyond itself, referring to objects and events from the world beyond the form. Artistic form informs us about things outside itself. These things—as revealed by the artistic form—we shall call the “content” of a work of art. But how does the artistic form do this?

**Content**

Let us begin to try to answer the question posed in the previous section by examining more closely the meanings of the Adams photograph and the Goya painting. Both basically, although oversimply, are about the same abstract idea—barbarity. In the case of the photograph, we have an example of this barbarity. Since it is very close to any knowledgeable American’s interests, this instance is likely to set off a lengthy chain of thoughts and feelings. These thoughts and feelings, furthermore, seem to lie “beyond” the photograph. Suppose a debate developed over the meaning of this photograph. The photograph itself would play an important role primarily as a starting point. From there on, the photograph would probably be ignored except for dramatizing points. For example, one person might argue, “Remember that this occurred during the Tet offensive and innocent civilians were being killed by the Vietcong. Look again at the street and think of the consequences if the terrorists had not been eliminated.” Another person might argue, “General Loan was one of the highest officials in South Vietnam’s government, and he was taking the law into
his own hands like a Nazi.” What would be very strange in such a debate would be a discussion of every detail or even many of the details in the photograph.

In a debate about the meaning of the Goya, however, every detail and its interrelationships with other details become relevant. The meaning of the painting seems to lie “within” the painting. And yet, paradoxically, this meaning, as in the case of the Adams photograph, involves ideas and feelings that lie beyond the painting. How can this be? Let us first consider some background information. On May 2, 1808, guerrilla warfare had flared up all over Spain against the occupying forces of the French. By the following day, Napoleon’s men were completely back in control in Madrid and the surrounding area. Many of the guerrillas were executed. And, according to tradition, Goya portrayed the execution of forty-three of these guerrillas on May 3 near the hill of Principe Pio just outside Madrid. This background information is important if we are to understand and appreciate the painting fully. Yet notice how differently this information works in our experience of the painting compared with the way background information works in our experience of the Adams photograph.

The execution in Adams’s photograph was of a man who had just murdered one of General Loan’s best friends and had then knifed to death his wife and six children. The general was part of the Vietnamese army fighting with the assistance of the United States, and this photograph was widely disseminated with a caption describing the victim as a suspected terrorist. What shocked Americans who saw the photograph was the summary justice that Loan meted out. It was not until much later that the details of the victim’s crimes were published.

With the Goya, the background information, although very helpful, is not as essential. Test this for yourself. Would your interest in Adams’s photograph last very long if you completely lacked background information? In the case of the Goya, the background information helps us understand the where, when, and why of the scene. But even without this information, the painting probably would still grasp and hold the attention of most of us because it would still have significant meaning. We would still have a powerful image of barbarity, and the artistic form would hold us on that image. In the Prado Museum in Madrid, Goya’s painting continually draws and holds the attention of innumerable viewers, many of whom know little or nothing about the rebellion of 1808. Adams’s photograph is also a powerful image, of course—and probably initially more powerful than the Goya—but the form of the photograph is not strong enough to hold most of us on that image for very long.

With the Goya, the abstract idea (barbarity) and the concrete image (the firing squad in the process of killing) are tied tightly together because the form of the painting is tight. We see the barbarity in the lines, colors, masses, shapes, groupings, and lights and shadows of the painting itself. The details of the painting keep referring to other details and to the totality. They keep holding our attention. Thus the ideas and feelings that the details and their organization awaken within us keep merging with the form. We are prevented from separating the meaning or content of the painting from its form because the form is so fascinating. The form constantly intrudes, however unobtrusively. It will not let us ignore it. We see the firing squad killing, and this evokes the idea of barbarity and the feeling of horror. But the lines, colors, mass, shapes, and shadowings of that firing squad form a pattern that keeps exciting and guiding our eyes. And then the pattern leads us to the pattern formed by the victims. Ideas of fatefulness and feelings of pathos are evoked, but they, too, are fused with the
form. The form of the Goya is like a powerful magnet that allows nothing within its range to escape its pull. Artistic form fuses or embodies its meaning with itself.

In addition to participation and artistic form, then, we have come upon another basic distinction—content. Unless a work has content—meaning that is fused or embodied with its form—we shall say that the work is not art. Content is the meaning of artistic form. If we are correct (for our view is by no means universally accepted), artistic form always informs—has meaning, or content. And that content, as we experience it when we participate, is always ingrained in the artistic form. We do not perceive an artistic form and then a content. We perceive them as inseparable. Of course, we can separate them analytically. But when we do so, we are not having a participative experience. Moreover, when the form is weak—that is, less than artistic—we experience the form and its meaning separately. We see the form of the Adams photograph, and it evokes powerful thoughts and feelings. But the form is not strong enough to keep its meaning fused with itself. The photograph lacks content, not because it lacks meaning but because the meaning is not merged with the form. Idea and image break apart.

PERCEPTION KEY  Goya and Adams Revisited

We have argued that the painting by Goya is a work of art and the photograph by Adams is not. Even if the three basic distinctions we have made so far—artistic form, participation, and content—are useful, we may have misapplied them. Bring out every possible argument against the view that the painting is a work of art and the photograph is not.

SUBJECT MATTER

The content is the meaning of a work of art. The content is embedded in the artistic form. But what does the content interpret? We shall call it subject matter. Content is the interpretation—by means of an artistic form—of some subject matter. Thus subject matter is the fourth basic distinction that helps identify a work of art. Since every work of art must have a content, every work of art must have a subject matter, and this may be any aspect of experience that is of human interest. Anything related to a human interest is a value. Some values are positive, such as pleasure and health. Other values are negative, such as pain and ill health. They are values because they are related to human interests. Negative values are the subject matter of both Adams's photograph and Goya's painting. But the photograph, unlike the painting, has no content. The less-than-artistic form of the photograph simply presents its subject matter. The form does not transform the subject matter, does not enrich its significance. In comparison, the artistic form of the painting enriches or interprets its subject matter, says something significant about it. In the photograph, the subject matter is directly given. But the subject matter of the painting is not just there in the painting. It has been transformed by the form. What is directly given in the painting is the content.

The meaning, or content, of a work of art is what is revealed about a subject matter. But in that revelation you must infer or imagine the subject matter. If
someone had taken a news photograph of the May 3 executions, that would be a record of Goya’s subject matter. The content of the Goya is its interpretation of the barbarity of those executions. Adams’s photograph lacks content because it merely shows us an example of this barbarity. That is not to disparage the photograph, for its purpose was news, not art. A similar kind of photograph—that is, one lacking artistic form—of the May 3 executions would also lack content. Now, of course, you may disagree with these conclusions for very good reasons. You may find more transformation of the subject matter in Adams’s photograph than in Goya’s painting. For example, you may believe that transforming the visual experience in black and white distances it from reality and intensifies content. In any case, such disagreement can help the perception of both parties, provided the debate is focused. It is hoped that the basic distinctions we are making—subject matter, artistic form, content, and participation—will aid that focusing.

**Subject Matter and Artistic Form**

Whereas a subject matter is a value—something of importance—that we may perceive before any artistic interpretation, the content is the significantly interpreted subject matter as revealed by the artistic form. Thus the subject matter is never directly presented in a work of art, for the subject matter has been transformed by the form. Artistic form transforms and, in turn, informs about life. The conscious intentions of the artist may include magical, religious, political, economic, and other purposes; the conscious intentions may not include the purpose of clarifying values. Yet underlying the artist’s activity—going back to cavework (Figure 1-1)—is always the creation of a form that illuminates something from life, some subject matter.

Artistic form draws from the chaotic state of life, which, as van Gogh describes it, is like “a sketch that didn’t come off”—a distillation. In our interpretation, Adams’s photograph is like “a sketch that didn’t come off,” because it has numerous meaningless details. Goya’s form eliminates meaningless detail. A work of art creates an illusion that illuminates reality. Thus such paradoxical declarations as Delacroix’s are explained: “Those things which are most real are the illusions I create in my paintings.” Or Edward Weston’s “The photographer who is an artist reveals the essence of what lies before the lens with such clear insight that the beholder may find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object.” Camus: “If the world were clear, art would not exist.” Artistic form is an economy that produces a lucidity that enables us better to understand and, in turn, manage our lives. Hence the informing of a work of art reveals a subject matter with value dimensions that go beyond the artist’s idiosyncrasies and perversities. Whether or not Goya had idiosyncrasies and perversities, he did justice to his subject matter: He revealed it. The art of a period is the revelation of the collective soul of its time.

**Participation, Artistic Form, and Content**

Participation is the necessary condition that makes possible our insightful perception of artistic form and content. Unless we participate with the Goya, we will fail to see the power of its artistic form. We will fail to see how the details work together
to form a totality. We will also fail to grasp the content fully, for artistic form and content are inseparable. Thus we will have failed to gain insight into the subject matter. We will have collected just one more instance of barbarity. The Goya will have basically the same effect upon us as Adams’s photograph except that it may be less important to us because it happened long ago. But if, on the contrary, we have participated with the Goya, we probably will never see such things as executions in quite the same way again. The insight that we have gained will tend to refocus our vision so that we will see similar subject matters with heightened awareness.

Look, for example, at the photograph by Kevin Carter (Figure 2-5), which was published in the New York Times on March 26, 1993, and which won the Pulitzer Prize for photography in 1994. The form isolates two dramatic figures. The closest is a starving Sudanese child making her way to a feeding center. The other is a plump vulture waiting for the child to die. This powerful photograph raised a hue and cry, and the New York Times published a commentary explaining that Carter chased away the vulture and took the child to the feeding center. Carter committed suicide in July 1994.

**PERCEPTION KEY Adams, Carter, and Goya**

1. Does our discussion of the Adams photograph affect your response to Carter’s photograph?
2. To what extent does Carter’s photograph have artistic form? Are there as many meaningless details in the Carter as in the Adams?

*continued*
3. Why are your answers to these questions fundamentally important in determining whether Adams's photograph or Carter's photograph or Goya's painting or all of them are works of art?

4. Describe your experience regarding your participation with either Adams's or Carter's photograph or Goya's painting. Can you measure the intensity of your participation with each of them? Which work do you reflect upon most when you relax and are not thinking directly on the subject of art?

5. The intensity of your reactions to the Adams and Carter photographs may well be stronger than the intensity of your experience with the Goya. If so, should that back up the assertion that the photographs are works of art?

**Artistic Form: Examples**

Let us examine artistic form in a series of examples taken from the work of the late Roy Lichtenstein, in which the subject matter, compared with Goya's *May 3, 1808*, is not so obviously important. With such examples, a purely formal analysis should seem less artificial. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Lichtenstein became interested in comic strips as subject matter. The story goes that his two young boys asked him to paint a Donald Duck "straight," without the encumbrances of art. But much more was involved. Born in 1923, Lichtenstein grew up before the invention of television. By the 1930s, the comic strip had become one of the most important of the mass media. Adventure, romance, sentimentality, and terror found expression in the stories of Tarzan, Flash Gordon, Superman, Wonder Woman, Steve Roper, Winnie Winkle, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Batman and Robin, and the like.

The purpose of the comic strip for its producers is strictly commercial. And because of the large market, a premium has always been put on making the processes of production as inexpensive as possible. And so generations of mostly unknown commercial artists, going far back into the nineteenth century, developed ways of quick, cheap color printing. They developed a technique that could turn out cartoons like the products of an assembly line. Moreover, because their market included a large number of children, they developed ways of producing images that were immediately understandable and of striking impact.

Lichtenstein reports that he was attracted to the comic strip by its stark simplicity—the blatant primary colors, the ungainly black lines that encircle the shapes, the balloons that isolate the spoken words or the thoughts of the characters. He was struck by the apparent inconsistency between the strong emotions of the stories and the highly impersonal, mechanical style in which they were expressed. Despite the crudity of the comic strip, Lichtenstein saw power in the directness of the medium. Somehow the cartoons mirrored something about our selves. Lichtenstein set out to clarify what that something was. At first people laughed, as was to be expected. He was called the "worst artist in America." Today he is considered one of our best.

The accompanying examples (Figures 2-6 to 2-15) pair the original cartoon with Lichtenstein’s transformation.¹ Both the comic strips and the transformations

¹These examples were suggested to us by an article on Lichtenstein's balloons. Albert Boime, “Roy Lichtenstein and the Comic Strip,” *Art Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Winter 1968–69): 155–159.
The exploration of popular forms of graphic art gave Pop artists of the 1960s a source of inspiration that appealed to a wide audience. Originally were in color, and Lichtenstein’s paintings are much larger than the comic strips. For the purpose of analysis, however, our reproductions are presented in black and white, with the sizes equalized. The absence of color and the reduction of size all but destroy the power of Lichtenstein’s work, but these changes will help
Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein treats anonymous comic strip panels as if they were early sketches that need development to make them visually stronger.

FIGURE 2-10
Pair 3a

FIGURE 2-11
Pair 3b

FIGURE 2-12
Pair 4a

FIGURE 2-13
Pair 4b

FIGURE 2-14
Pair 5a

us compare the structures. They will also help us understand the most obvious element of two-dimensionality. All of the comic strips and their covers have been scrambled so that each example may be on the left or the right.

PERCEPTION KEY Comic Strip Transformations

Decide which are the comic strips and which are not.

Defend your decisions with reference to the key.

Lichtenstein's works will possess much stronger structures, more unified shapes as they work together in each example. The elements of artistic form are something that must work instantaneously. Compare your judgments with our analysis.

Compare your analysis of Pair 1 with our analysis. Pair of Pair 1, we think, has a much stronger structure: the parts of a is much more tightly unified. The cover in a have a graceful, rhythmic contour lines, formed by the overlapping of long sweeping effect. These lines look as if they had been drawn with the aid of...
us compare the structures. They will also help us concentrate upon what is usually
the most obvious element of two-dimensional visual structure—line. The five pairs
of examples have been scrambled so that either the comic strip or Lichtenstein’s
painting of it may be on the left or the right.

PERCEPTION KEY  Comic Strips and Lichtenstein’s
Transformations (Figures 2-6 through 2-15)

Decide which are the comic strips and which are Lichtenstein’s transformations.
Defend your decisions with reference to the strength of organization. Presumably,
Lichtenstein’s works will possess much stronger structures than those of the
commercial artists. Be specific and detailed. For example, compare the lines and
shapes as they work together in each example. Take plenty of time, for the perception
of artistic form is something that must “work” in you. Such perception never comes
instantaneously. Compare your judgments with those of others, and only then study
our analysis.

Compare your analysis of Pair 1 with ours (Figures 2-6 and 2-7). Example \(a\)
of Pair 1, we think, has a much stronger structure than \(b\). The organization of
the parts of \(a\) is much more tightly unified. The circles formed by the peephole
and its cover in \(a\) have a graceful, rhythmic unity lacking in \(b\). Note how in \(a\) the
contour lines, formed by the overlapping of the cover on the right side, have a
long sweeping effect. These lines look as if they had been drawn by a human hand.
In \(b\) the analogous contours, as well as the circles to which the contours belong,
look as if they had been drawn with the aid of a compass. In \(a\) the circular border
of the cover is broken at the right edge and by the balloon above, helping to soften the hard definiteness not only of this circle but also of the contours it forms with the circle of the peephole. In a, also, the man's fingers and most of his face are shadowed. These contrasts help give variety and irregularity to the peephole circle, which blends in smoothly with its surroundings compared to the abrupt insularity of the peephole in b. Notice, too, that in b a white outline goes almost completely around the cover, whereas in a this is avoided. Moreover, the balloon in a overlies a significant portion of the cover. In b the balloon is isolated and leaves the cover almost alone.

In a no part remains isolated. Thus the balloon as it extends over the breadth of the painting helps bind the lower parts together. At the same time, the shape and contours of the balloon help accent the shape and contours of the other details. Even the shape of the man's mouth is duplicated partially by the shape of the balloon. Conversely, the balloon in b is more isolated from the other details. It just hangs there. Yet notice how the tail of the balloon in a, just below the exclamation point, repeats the curve of the latch of the cover and also how the curve of the tail is caught up in the sweep of the curves of the peephole and cover. In a the latch of the cover unobtrusively helps orbit the cover around the peephole. In b the latch of the cover is awkwardly large, which helps block any sense of dynamic interrelationship between the peephole and its cover. Whereas the cover seems light and graceful in a and only the top of a finger is needed to turn it back, in b a much heavier finger is necessary. Similarly, the lines of face and hand in a lightly integrate, whereas in b they are heavy and fail to work together very well. Compare, for example, the eye in a with the eye in b. Finally, there are meaningless details in b—the bright knob on the cover, for instance. Such details are eliminated in a. Even the shape and size of the lettering in a belong to the whole in a way completely lacking in b.

Now turn to Pair 2 (Figures 2-8 and 2-9). Limit your analysis to the design functioning of the lettering in the balloons of Pair 2.

PERCEPTION KEY Comic Strips and Lichtenstein's Transformation, Pair 2

1. Does the shape of the lettering in a play an important part in the formal organization? Explain.
2. Does the shape of the lettering in b play an important part in the formal organization? Explain.

Compare your analysis of Pair 2 with ours. We think it is only in b that the shape of the lettering plays an important part in the formal organization. Conversely, the shape of the lettering is distracting in a. In b the bulky balloons are eliminated and only two important words are used—"torpedo" and "LOS!" The three letters of "LOS" stand out very vividly. A regular shape among so many irregular shapes, the balloon's simple shape helps the letters stand out. Also, "LOS" is larger, darker, and more centrally located than "torpedo." Notice how
no word or lettering stands out vividly in a. Moreover, as Albert Boime points out in his study of Lichtenstein, the shapes of the letters in “LOS” are clues to the structure of the panel:

The “L” is mirrored in the angle formed by the captain’s hand and the vertical contour of his head and in that of the periscope. The “O” is repeated in the tubing of the periscope handle and in smaller details throughout the work. The oblique “S” recurs in the highlight of the captain’s hat just left of the balloon, in the contours of the hat itself, in the shadow that falls along the left side of the captain’s face, in the lines around his nose and in the curvilinear tubing of the periscope. Thus the dialogue enclosed within the balloon is visually exploited in the interests of compositional structure. 2

Now analyze Pair 3 (Figures 2-10 and 2-11), Pair 4 (Figures 2-12 and 2-13), and Pair 5 (Figures 2-14 and 2-15).

PERCEPTION KEY Comic Strips and Lichtenstein’s Transformations, Pairs 3, 4, and 5

1. Decide once again which are the comic strips and which the transformations.

2. If you have changed any of your decisions or your reasons, how do you account for these changes?

Don’t be surprised if you have changed some of your decisions; perhaps your reasoning has been expanded. Other people’s analyses, even when you disagree with them, will usually suggest new ways of perceiving things. In the case of good criticism, this is almost always true. The correct identifications follow, and they should help you test your perceptive abilities.

Pair 1b Panel from William Overgard’s comic strip *Steve Roper*.
Pair 2a Anonymous comic book panel.
Pair 3a Anonymous comic book panel.
Pair 4a Anonymous comic book panel.
Pair 5b Panel from Martin Branner’s comic strip *Winnie Winkle*.

2 Boime, “Roy Lichtenstein and the Comic Strip.”
PERCEPTION KEY  I Can See the Whole Room . . . and There’s Nobody in It! (Figure 2-6)

Lichtenstein’s painting (Figure 2-6) recently sold for $45 million. Do you consider this strong evidence that this painting is a work of art? Or is it conceivable that the art world (dealers, collectors, and critics) has been taken? If Figure 2-6 is worth $45 million, then how much do you think the comic strip panel, Figure 2-7, should sell for? Do you think collectors will be willing to pay a million dollars for it? If not, why not?

Subject Matter and Content

While the male nude was a common subject in Western art well into the Renaissance, images of the female body have since predominated. The variety of treatment of the female nude is bewildering, ranging from the Greek idealization of erotic love in the Venus de Milo to the radical reordering of Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2. A number of female nude studies follow (Figures 2-16 through 2-25).

FIGURE 2-16

Giorgione established a Renaissance ideal in his painting of the goddess Venus asleep in the Italian countryside.
See the Whole Room... and There's nobody in it! (Figure 2-6)

Recently sold for $45 million. Do you consider this a work of art? Or is it conceivable that the art has been taken? If Figure 2-6 is worth $45 million, the comic strip panel, Figure 2-7, should sell for? To pay a million dollars for it? If not, why not?

Subject in Western art well into the Renaissance, it predominated. The variety of treatment of erotic love recurred in much of the art of the Italian countryside.

FIGURE 2-17

Renoir's impressionist interpretation of the nude provides a late-nineteenth-century idealization of a real-life figure who is not a goddess.

FIGURE 2-18

Since its discovery in 1820 on the island of Cyclades, the Venus de Milo has been thought to represent the Greek ideal in feminine beauty. It was originally decorated with jewelry and may have been polychromed.

Consider, as you look at them, how the form of the work interprets the female body. Does it reveal it in such a way that you have an increased understanding of and sensitivity to the female body? In other words, does it have content? Also ask yourself whether the content is different in the two paintings by women compared with those by men.

Most of these works are highly valued—some as masterpieces—because they are powerful interpretations of their subject matter, not just presentations of the human body as in *Playboy*. Notice how different the interpretations are. Any important subject matter has many different facets. That is why shovels and soup cans have limited utility as subject matter. They have very few facets to offer for interpretation. The female nude, however, is almost limitless. The next artist interprets something about the female nude that had never been interpreted before, because the female nude seems to be inexhaustible as a subject matter, more so perhaps than the male nude.

More precisely, these works all have somewhat different subject matters. All are about the nude, but the painting by Giorgione is about the nude as idealized, as a goddess, as Venus. Now there is a great deal that all of us could say in trying to describe Giorgione's interpretation. We see not just a nude but an idealization that presents the nude as Venus, the goddess who the Romans felt best expressed the ideal of woman. She represents a form of beautiful perfection that humans can only strive toward. A description of the subject matter can help us perceive the content if we have missed it. In understanding what the form worked on—that is, the subject matter—our perceptive apparatus is better prepared to perceive the *form-content*, the work of art's structure and meaning.
Ingres's *Odalisque* is a frank portrait of a prostitute idealized by the addition of three extra vertebrae, achieving a lengthened torso.

Wesselmann's study leaves the face blank and emphasizes the telephone as a suggestion of this nude's availability in the modern world.
FIGURE 2-21


This painting provoked a riot in 1912 and made Duchamp famous as a chief proponent of the distortions of cubism and modern art at that time.

FIGURE 2-22

Standing Woman. Ivory Coast. Nineteenth or twentieth century. Wood and beads, 20⅜ × 7¼ × 5¾ inches. Detroit Institute of Arts.

*Standing Woman* was once owned by Tristan Tzara, a friend of Picasso. Sculpture such as this influenced modern painters and sculptors in France and elsewhere in the early part of the twentieth century. It is marked by a direct simplicity, carefully modeled and polished.

FIGURE 2-23


Valadon interprets the nude simply, directly. To what extent is the figure idealized?
The subject matter of Renoir’s painting is the nude more as an earth mother. In the *Venus de Milo*, the subject matter is the erotic ideal, the goddess of love. In the Duchamp, it is a mechanized dissection of the female form in action. In the Wesselmann, it is the nude as exploited. In the Ingres, it is the nude as prostitute. In all eight paintings the subject matter is the female nude—but qualified in relation to what the artistic form focuses upon and makes lucid.

The two paintings by Suzanne Valadon and Alice Neel treat the female nude somewhat differently from the others, which were painted by men. Neel’s painting emphasizes an aspect of femaleness that the men usually ignore—pregnancy. Her painting does not show the alluring female but the female who is beyond allure. Valadon’s nude is more traditional, but a comparison with Renoir and Giorgione should demonstrate that she is far from their ideal.

**PERCEPTION KEY  Ten Female Nudes (Figures 2-16 to 2-25)**

1. Which of these nudes is most clearly idealized? What visual qualities contribute to that idealization?
2. Which of these nudes seem to be aware of being seen? How does their awareness affect your interpretation of the form of the nude?
Pearlstein’s attention to anatomy, his even lighting, and his unsensuous surroundings seem to eliminate the erotic content associated with the traditional female nude.

3. *Nude Descending a Staircase* caused a great uproar when it was exhibited in New York in 1913. Do you feel it is still a controversial painting? How does it interpret the female nude in comparison with the other paintings in this group? Could the nude be male? Why not? Suppose the title were *Male Descending* or *Body Descending*. Isn’t the sense of human movement the essential subject matter?

4. If you were not told that Suzanne Valadon and Alice Neel painted Figures 2-23 and 2-24, would you have known they were painted by women? What are the principal differences of treatment of the nude figure on the part of all these artists? Does their work surprise you?

5. Decide whether *Standing Woman* (Figure 2-22) is the work of a male artist or a female artist. What criteria do you use in your decision?
EXPERIENCING Interpretations of the Female Nude

1. Is there an obvious difference between the representation of the female nude by male and female artists?
2. Does distortion of the human figure help distance the viewer from the subject?
3. To what extent does the represented figure become a potential sexual object?

Some suggestions for analysis:

First, working backward, we can see that the question of the figure being a sexual object is to a large extent parodied by Tom Wesselmann’s study for Great American Nude (Figure 2-20). The style and approach to painting is couched in careful design including familiar objects—the telephone, the rose, the perfume bottle, the sofa cushions, the partial portrait—all of which imply the boudoir and the commodification of women and sex. The figure’s face is totally anonymous, implying that this is not a painting of a woman, but of the idea of the modern American woman, with her nipple carefully exposed to accommodate advertising’s breast fetish as a means of selling goods.

Even Ingres’s Large Odalisque, (Figure 2-19), a painting whose subject is supposedly a high-class prostitute, is less a sexual object than Wesselmann’s. For one thing, her body is less revealed than Wesselmann’s, and her face, with its remarkable gaze obviously examining the person who observes her, suggests she is in command of herself and is not to be taken lightly. The objects in the painting are sumptuous and sensuous—rich fabrics, a gold-handled peacock feather duster, silks behind her, a jeweled belt on the divan and a jeweled headpiece, and in the lower right, a rack of what may be pipes to increase the pleasure of the evening.

Then, the question of the distortion of the subject is powerfully handled by Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 (Figure 2-21). This painting provoked a riot in 1912 because it seemed to be a contemptuous portrait of the nude at a time when the nude aesthetic was still academic in style. Duchamp was taunting the audience for art, while also finding a modern technological representation of the nude on canvas that mimed the cinema of his time. Philip Pearlstein’s study of two nudes (Figure 2-25) moves toward a de-idealization of the nude. He asks us to look at the nudes without desire, yet with careful attention to form and color.

Finally, we may partly answer the question of whether women paint nude females differently by looking at Suzanne Valadon’s (Figure 2-23) and Alice Neel’s (Figure 2-24) paintings. Neel represents Margaret Evans in a manner emphasizing her womanness, not her sexual desirability. Hers is the only pregnant female figure—emphasizing the power of women to create life. Valadon’s nude makes an effort to cover herself while looking at the viewer. She is relaxed yet apprehensive. There is no attempt at commodification of either of these figures, which means we must look at them very differently from the rest of the paintings represented here.

Further Thoughts on Artistic Form

Artistic form is an organized structure, a design, but it is also a window opening on and focusing our world, helping us to perceive and understand what is important. This is the function of artistic form. The artist uses form as a means to understanding some subject matter, and in this process, the subject matter exerts its own imperative. A subject matter has, as Edmund Husserl puts it, a
“structure of determination” that to some significant degree is independent of the artist. Even when the ideas of the artist are the subject matter, they challenge and resist, forcing the artist to discover their significance by discarding irrelevancies.

Subject matter is friendly, for it assists interpretation, but subject matter is also hostile, for it resists interpretation. Otherwise there would be no fundamental stimulus or challenge to the creativity of the artist. Only subject matter with interesting latent or uninterpreted values can challenge the artist, and the artist discovers these values through form. If the maker of a work takes the line of least resistance by ignoring the challenge of the subject matter—pushing the subject matter around for entertaining or escapist effects instead of trying to uncover its significance—the maker functions as a decorator rather than an artist.

Whereas decorative form merely pleases, artistic form informs about subject matter embedded in values that to an overwhelming extent are produced independently of the artist. By revealing those values, the artist helps us understand ourselves and our world, provided we participate, or “think from.”

Thinking from is a flowing experience. One thought or image or sensation merges into another, and we don’t know where we are going for certain, except that what we are thinking from is moving and controlling the flow, and clock time is irrelevant. Instead of objects being fixed points of reference, from which our “thinking at” proceeds in a succession of stops, there is no stopping when we think from, because each thing unfolds in a duration in which beginning, middle, and end meld.

Thinking from is often interrupted—someone moves in front of the painting, the telephone call breaks the reading of the poem, someone goes into a coughing fit at the concert—but as long as we keep coming back to thinking from as dominant over thinking at, we have something of the wonder of participation.

**Summary**

A work of art is a form-content. An artistic form is a form-content. An artistic form is more than just an organization of the elements of an artistic medium, such as the lines and colors of painting. The artistic form interprets or clarifies some subject matter. The subject matter, strictly speaking, is not in a work of art. When participating with a work of art, one can only imagine the subject matter, not perceive it. The subject matter is only suggested by the work of art. The interpretation of the subject matter is the content, or meaning, of the work of art. Content is embodied in the form. The content, unlike the subject matter, is in the work of art, fused with the form. We can separate content from form only by analysis. The ultimate justification of any analysis is whether it enriches our participation with that work, whether it helps that work “work” in us. Good analysis or criticism does just that. But, conversely, any analysis not based on participation is unlikely to be helpful. Participation is the only way to get into direct contact with the form-content, so any analysis that is not based upon a participative experience inevitably misses the work of art. Participation and good analysis, although necessarily occurring at different times, end up hand in hand.
In this chapter, we have elaborated one set of guidelines. Other sets are possible, of course. We have discussed one other set very briefly: that a work of art is significant form. If you can conceive of other sets of guidelines, make them explicit and try them out. The ultimate test is clear: Which set helps you most in appreciating works of art? We think the set we have proposed meets that test better than other proposals. But this is a large question indeed, and your decision should be delayed. In any event, we will now investigate the principles of criticism. These principles will help show us how to apply our set of guidelines to specific examples. Then we will be properly prepared to examine the extraordinary uniqueness of the various arts.