

Philosophies of Art

These state how people may think about art and judge it. Philosophers of art are called aestheticians. They study the history of ideas about art. Most agree there are four traditional philosophies of art and how to judge it.

Art as Imitation Art is a way to imitate what you see. Accuracy & honesty are highly valued. If a work meets many of these criteria it is good:

The work looks real. The proportion of parts, colors and other elements seem natural and lifelike. The work is planned around patterns, rhythms and forms you see in nature or the human-made environment. The subject/theme seems to be based on a real event or something the artist observed, is more realistic than abstract, and is honestly shown, not idealized. The materials and techniques go with the mood rather than being the first things you notice, and you can see some of the natural qualities of the materials. The use or function of the art can be seen in the form or design (form follows function), and decorations are few or based on nature.

Art as Expression Based on a respect for intense human feelings and originality. Standards for judging include:

The work expresses a definite feeling. The proportion of parts, color and other elements is unexpected or exaggerated. The total design is dramatic or original (it gives you a definite feeling). The subject/theme is unique, dream-like or fantastic, or seems to come from the artist's desire to communicate a strong feeling (the great joys, sorrows or problems of people). The use of materials is original or unexpected. The materials & techniques are an important part of the mood or feeling of the work. The work has an unusual function or combines several functions. The design of the work is unexpected and causes you to react in new ways.

Art as Formal Order Based on a respect for logical order and idealized forms people can invent.

Standards include:

The work is beautiful, harmonious. The work is unified by a kind of invented or mathematical order. The proportion of parts, colors, and other elements are more perfect or idealized than you might see in life. The work is not filled with details you might see in life. The subject/theme is idealized or has a spiritual quality unlike everyday, ordinary life. The work is more abstract than realistic. You can see evidence of extreme care in using the materials and finishing the work. You sense the artist knew exactly what to do with materials and techniques. The form of art is elegant, refined or dignified. The practical use of the object seems less important than the design.

Art as Instrumental Emphasizes the use of art in everyday life or communication. Criteria for judging art are:

The work has an important message or function. The proportions of colors and other elements are planned to help you understand the message of the work. The total design is useful. It is part of the message the artist wants you to understand. The subject/theme is related to the life of a cultural group. The subject or theme is important to almost all people at some time in their lives. The material and techniques are practical and related to the function of the artwork. The work serves the purpose of communicating important ideas. The design or decoration is well-suited for its purpose. It is not too plain or fancy.

Art Response Outline:

Use these philosophies singly or in combination for your final objective Judgment step.

Experts use criteria flexibly when they judge art, combining criteria sometimes (especially to explain new kinds of art). What combination do you tend to use when you judge artworks? Disagreements about art are common. The most important reasons for difference are:

Differences in the process of judging (not using the same theories or standards, or not seeing & interpreting in the same way).

Differences in culture and time (criteria or standards are relative, not absolute).

Differences in personal background (differences in personal standards).

Masterpiece is important in the history of art for the idea it presents, a term of highest praise.