In the broadest sense, all the processes and products of human skill, imagination, and invention. In contemporary usage, definitions of art usually reflect art theory, and the term may encompass literature, music, drama, painting, and sculpture. Popularity, the term is most commonly used to refer to the visual arts. In Western culture, artistic thought and theories introduced by the ancient Greeks still influence our perceptions and judgements of art.

**Representation and inspiration** Two currents of thought run through our ideas about art. In one, first considered by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (c. 384 BC), art is concerned with mimesis (imitation), the representation of appearances, and gives pleasure through the accuracy and skill with which it represents the real world. The other view, derived from the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427 BC), holds that the artist is inspired by the Muses (or by God, or by the inner impulses, or by the collective unconscious) to express that which is beyond appearances – inner feelings, eternal truths, or the essence of the age.

**Art forms** In the visual arts of Western civilizations, painting and sculpture have been the main art forms for many centuries. This has not always been the case in other cultures. Islamic art, for example, is one of ornament, for under the Muslim religion artists were forbidden to imitate the divine right of creation by portraying living creatures. In some cultures masks, tattoos, pottery, and metalwork have been the main forms of visual art. Recent technology has made new art forms possible, such as photography and cinema, and today electronic media have led to entirely new ways of creating and presenting visual images. See also prehistoric art; the arts of ancient civilizations, for example Egyptian art; indigenous art traditions, for example Oceanic art; medieval art; the arts of individual countries, such as French art; individual movements, such as Romanticism, cubism, and Impressionism; and painting and sculpture.

**The liberal arts** In the Middle Ages in Europe, the term ‘art’ was used, chiefly in the plural, to signify a branch of learning which was regarded as an instrument of knowledge. The seven liberal arts consisted of the *trivium*, that is grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the *quadrivium*, that is arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy.

**Content and theme** An artwork is given meaning and significance by its content (subject matter) and theme (object or purpose). In art history, the study of the subject matter is often called iconography; many art historians choose to study artworks based on the theme or content rather than on the style. While some themes are ‘universal’, such as death, love, and nature, other themes are very subjective – only the artist knowing the true meaning of the depicted subject. In addition to universal themes, certain common topics are found repeatedly when studying the history of art; these include genre, landscape, still life, the human form (representational art or figurative art), and portraiture. Many artists devote their work to exploring one theme throughout the course of their careers, while others will focus more on applying their chosen style to a variety of subject matter.
Universal concepts Throughout history, the depiction of certain themes, such as death, birth, war, family, nature, and love, has been evident in works of art from all over the world. Sometimes painted in response to a historical event, such as Picasso’s Guernica (1937; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid), which was inspired by the bombing of a Basque city during the Spanish Civil War, universal concepts defy cultural identity, and instead hold meaning for individuals regardless of time and place. For example, although Guernica encapsulates a single event, the idea of devastation is not confined to a specific era; the emotions triggered when thinking about such a tragedy are similar regardless of culture and time. Whether it is the quiet depiction of a family outing or a turbulent seascape, universal concepts continue to hold significance for the viewer, from the time the works were created to the present moment.

Art and other disciplines The visual arts are often interrelated with other disciplines, such as mathematics, music, or science. One obvious association is the use of a visual medium, such as painting, to translate information pertaining to another discipline – many of Leonardo da Vinci’s paintings, for example, were simply studies of indigenous flora. Another common association between art and other disciplines can be seen in the precise mathematics and scientific theories used to create the flickering visual effects of op art, or when a viewer ‘sees’ rhythm in a painting, linking the language and emotion of music and art. Although paintings, prints, or sculptures may function on aesthetics alone, the understanding of a work’s relationship with other subject matter will broaden and deepen its conveyed meaning.

Art and culture Art reflects history and is an indispensable part of peoples’ culture. Art and culture are intricately connected, so that the art of a given place reflects not only the historical context in which it was made, but also the conditions under which it was produced. For example, in some cultures decorative tiles will be elaborately painted and glazed and fired in an electric kiln, while in others tiles may only be adorned with simple incised designs and then left in the sun to bake – the elementary process of the latter reflecting the available materials and environmental conditions of the surrounding geographical area. At the same time, art and culture tend to affect each other; cultural issues often play a major role in an artist’s work, while an artist’s work may influence an entire generation. For example, while pop art was a comment on consumerism, particularly that of the USA and UK, op art influenced ‘popular’ culture, as its basic concepts were used in areas such as fashion and contemporary design.

Artists and society Many artists use societal issues (events in a community) as their inspiration, content, and theme, either being motivated to address them or represent them. As a result, their work can sometimes cause a heightened awareness of political or social issues, or even a shift in contemporary attitudes. Artists often portray historical events by expressing their own feelings about them, and most social artists create works with the sole intention of demonstrating their concerns. As a consequence, an artist’s record of a battle, atrocity, or social problem may be more subjective (influenced by personal opinion) than other media. Many artists, such as Goya, Käthe Kollwitz, and Honoré Daumier, have used their talents often in political contexts, to affect change, appeal for a cause, or create awareness.

Regardless of creative intent, all artists’ work is deeply tied to and constrained by the societal conditions in which it is produced – an artist working deep in a rainforest will have different resources, concerns, inspiration, and intent than an artist working in an industrial city.

Idea development in art Content and idea come from a variety of sources, just as artists themselves
are driven to create for many different reasons. The final synthesis of an idea and the subsequent work of art are usually the product of a long thoughtful process, in which the artist considers how to approach and execute a theme before even touching a creative medium. Although an artist may consider that an initial idea has been crystallized, this will often change as the work progresses – the medium, environment, and artistic intent all being mutable. Inspiration may be gathered from an endless range of sources; some artists create works based on their physical surroundings, some are politically or culturally motivated, or driven by pure aesthetics, while others explore visual or pictorial puzzles. Many artists synthesize ideas by looking at the art of other cultures – Picasso, for example, drew inspiration from African art.

**essays**

Investigating techniques and subject matter

Graphic design piece on theme ‘twisting and turning’

Textile design piece on theme such as ‘change’

Developing a ceramic piece on theme such as ‘pattern’

Preparation for producing a drawing that shows form

Producing a drawing that shows form

Presenting coursework

Using image and text

Photography in preparatory studies

Creating imaginative designs with realistic drawings

Is Modern Art ‘A Load of Rubbish’?

Museums and Galleries

Colour schemes

Linear style

Sgraffito

Importance of sketching

Importance of explaining artwork in words

Importance of observational drawing in developing work

Importance of developing a variety of ideas

Importance of experimenting with a range of media

Importance of research

Looking at the work of other artists

Importance of layout and presentation of work
APA


Chicago


Harvard


MLA