

Twelfth Edition

PREBLES' ARTFORMS

Patrick Frank



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Patrick Frank

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DEAR READER

I'm a visual person; I have two Instagram accounts. I love looking at things and thinking about them. For me, art from any period or culture is just about the most interesting thing on the planet. This is because art is a human product, made by people just like us. Looking at a work of art instantly leads me to imagining the mindset and working methods of whoever made it. Then I start comparing it, in my mind, with similar things that I have seen; and then I am hooked.

We form art. Art forms us. The title of this book has a dual meaning. As humans form works of art, we in turn are formed by what we have created. Such human creativity influences and stimulates us. Several editions ago, this book's title was changed to Prebles' *Artforms*, acknowledging the pioneering contribution of the original authors, Duane and Sarah Preble. They first posited the emphasis on our two-way interaction with works of art, and that emphasis continues to inform every page of this book.

Why study art? Because artists have dealt at one time or another with nearly every aspect of the human experience, from the common to the forbidden, the mundane to the sacred, the repugnant to the sublime. Artistic creativity is a response to being alive, and by experiencing such creativity, we enrich our experience of life. This is especially true of today's creations, which are more wide-ranging than ever before, and sufficiently accessible to almost any curious person. Artistic creativity is a human treasure, and in art we can see it in a very pure form.

From my post here in southern California, I try to keep up with what's going on in the art world; I also travel a lot. My notebook tells me that in just the last year, I saw 220 art exhibitions. These ranged from Native American rock art sites to the latest London galleries. (To see what I am enthused about lately, visit my Instagram feed @PatrickFrankAuthor.) From all of that looking I select the best for inclusion in *Artforms*. Behind all of the learning objectives, new terms, quizzes, flashcards, and writing prompts that accompany this book, there is a wealth of visual creativity that has constantly informed, surprised, inspired, challenged, or thrilled me. If some of that enthusiasm of mine comes through in this text, I will count it a success.

Patrick Frank
Venice, California

WHAT'S NEW

This New Edition Enhances Learning for Students:

To facilitate student learning and understanding of the arts, this twelfth edition is centered on **Learning Objectives** that introduce each chapter. These learning objectives are tailored to the subheadings so that the student will be continually reminded of the goals and objectives of study as they progress through each chapter.

The art world is changing, and *Artforms* is changing with it. The twelfth edition of this book is a deep and thorough revision which unveils a great deal of new content. I have bought a **record 196 new pictures**, adding new works in the vast bulk of the cases.

New Content in the 12th Edition:

- Following up on the discussions of creativity introduced in the last edition, a new essay feature in each chapter called **Creators** highlights the contributions of key artists. Many classic artists are featured, such as Michelangelo and Vincent Van Gogh, but 13 of the 25 essays discuss female creators, and eleven of them discuss creators of color.
- The interaction of **art and the digital world** has driven new content in several chapters, for example: Chapter 6 on Drawing has expanded treatment of interactive comics and digital drawing. Chapter 9 on Photography has expanded discussion of digital cameras and artists' use of software editing. Digital creativity is now a special focus in Chapter 10 on Cinema and Digital arts, with increased treatment of special effects, virtual reality cinema, and high-tech artists such as Lynn Hershman Leeson. The section on Interactive Design in Chapter 11 has been rewritten and expanded.
- Chapter 2 has been rewritten to deepen the focus on the **social functions of art**.
- The chapter on Craft Media (Chapter 13) has been rewritten to focus specifically artistic objects **meant for use**.
- The last section of Chapter 14 has been revamped to increase treatment of **contemporary sustainable architecture**.
- New dating of some cave paintings in Indonesia makes them the **world's oldest painted art**, older than European work by several thousand years. They are discussed in Chapter 15.
- Through a new subheading in Chapter 19, *Artforms* is now also the only book of its kind to include discussion of **Muslim modern art**.
- The final chapter on Contemporary Art is one of the most revised, with 17 new images along with discussion of **new topics** such as relational aesthetics, Post-Internet art, and a biographical essay on Ai Weiwei.

New to the Revel Edition of *Artforms*

All of the new material cited above is included in the Revel edition as well, but Revel's cross-platform digital environment allows us to offer many more aids to student learning in an interactive, engaging way.

- **Pan/zooms** appear with a simple click for almost all of the figures, allowing students to zoom in and examine details with high clarity and resolution, and then return to the overall view of the work of art, so they can relate these details to the whole.
- The pan/zooms' **scale feature** opens a window where works of art appear next to a scaled human figure (or, for small works, a scaled human hand), giving students an instant sense of the size of what they are studying.
- **3D animations of architectural and art historical techniques** depict and explain processes and methods that are difficult for students to grasp simply through narrative text.
- **Panoramas from global sites** have been integrated into the design, bringing students into the setting, both inside and out, of major buildings and monuments such as the Taj Mahal, Great Zimbabwe, and Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater.
- **The Closer Looks** been transformed into Revel video presentations, where students are guided through a detailed examination of key works.
- A new series of **Explore** videos go into further detail on select topics in each chapter. The topics run a wide gamut, including political art, the stages of construction at Stonehenge, why some artists opted for the radicalism of Dada, and the latest innovations in photography.
- The entire text is available on **streaming audio**, read by the author.

In addition a variety of self-tests, review features, and writing opportunities have been built into the platform. These are all designed to ensure the student's mastery of the material.

- **Multiple-choice self-tests**, at the conclusion of each major section of a chapter, allow the student to assess quickly how well they have absorbed the material at hand.
- **Interactive learning tools**, in a variety of formats, review key terms and ideas, and make use of flashcards to test student retention.
- Each chapter contains three kinds of **writing prompts**. All are keyed to specific works of visual art and appear in conjunction with figures that illustrate the works. **Journaling** prompts focus on building skills of visual analysis; **Shared Writing** responses relate the material in the chapter to today's world; and **Writing Space** prompts encourage students to engage in cross-cultural thinking, often across chapters.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I greatly appreciate the help and encouragement of the many people who have been directly involved in the writing of this twelfth edition. Several deserve special mention for their contributions: Picture researcher Julia Ruxton tirelessly tracked down images and fulfilled the increasingly complex legal requirements of today's copyright-sensitive age. Helen Ronan, Melissa Danny, and Deborah Hercun served as project managers, keeping us all on track while preserving a wonderfully civilized attitude.

This book also benefitted from assistance in specialized content areas from Elizabeth East, Charles James, and Ken Smith. Many artists opened their studios to me as I was researching this book; I greatly appreciate their generosity, just as I hope that I have communicated the vigor and inspiration of their creativity.

I also express my sincere appreciation to the instructors who use this textbook as well as the following reviewers. All offered exceedingly valuable suggestions that were vital to the revising and updating of this edition:

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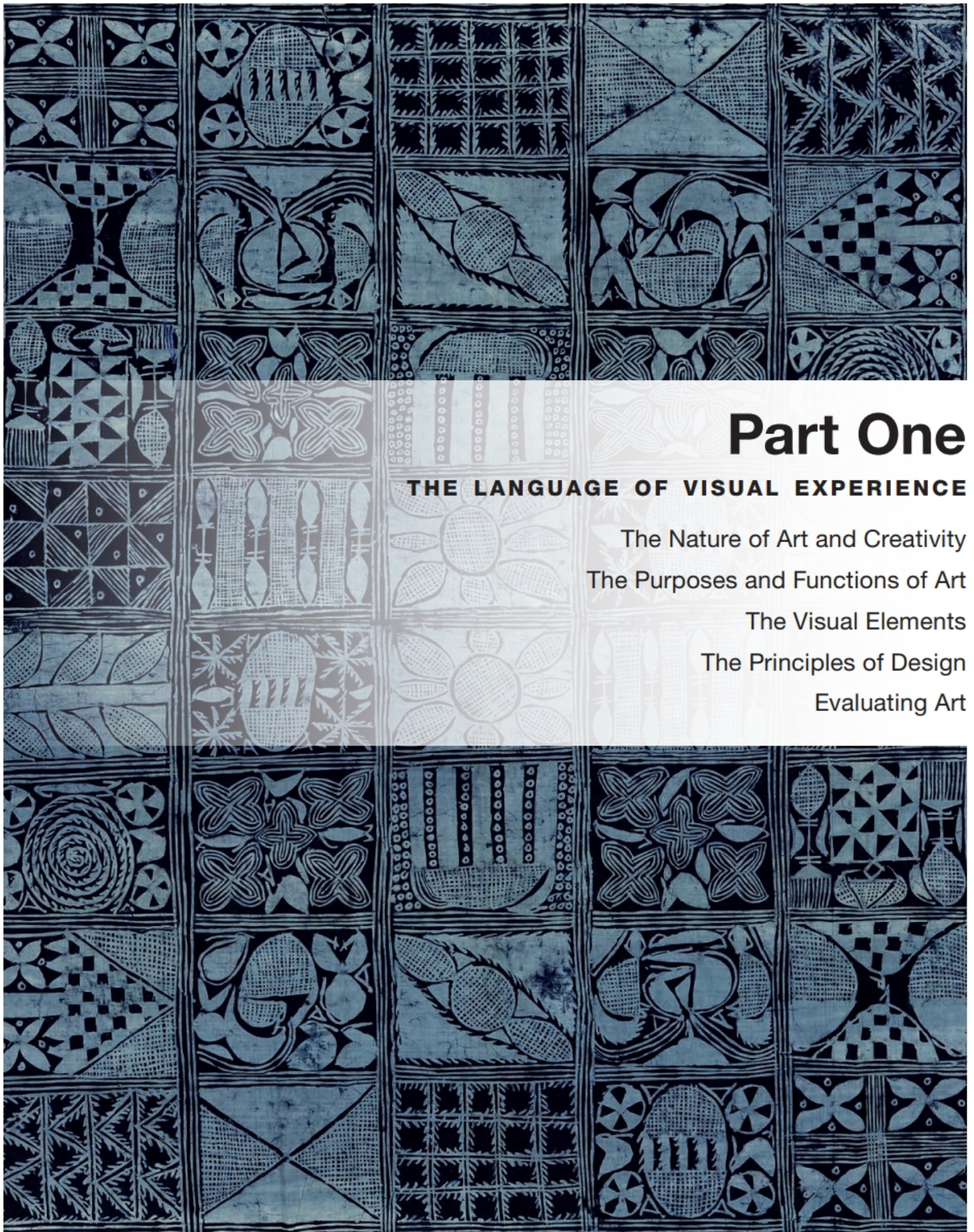
Patrick Frank has taught in many higher education environments, from rural community colleges to public and private research universities. Most recently, he was Regents' Lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles. His specialty as a scholar is modern art of Latin America, and he has authored or co-authored six books in this field. Most recently, he edited and translated *Manifestos and Polemics in Latin American Modern Art*, published in 2017 by University of New Mexico Press. He earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at George Washington University in Washington, DC.



ABOUT THE COVER

Autoconstrucción Suites by Abraham Cruzvillegas. At first glance the installation seems like a highly disorderly scene. Wooden scaffolds dominate the view, with shirts tied together spanning the distance between them. A few television sets, primitive stairs, metal frameworks, a wheelbarrow, and other seemingly miscellaneous junk populate the gallery space. Cruzvillegas gathered these objects from the immediate neighborhood. Yet behind all of this apparent chaos is a story that relates to his personal history and, by extension, to most of us as viewers. The construction of the artwork parallels the story of the construction of Cruzvillegas's family home on the outskirts of Mexico City. There, in a neighborhood outside the reach of most city services, the artist's relatives built the house he grew up in, room by room, floor by floor, by themselves, using whatever they could find or buy.





Part One

THE LANGUAGE OF VISUAL EXPERIENCE

The Nature of Art and Creativity
The Purposes and Functions of Art
The Visual Elements
The Principles of Design
Evaluating Art

Fig. 2.3. X66.1149AB. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph by Don Cole.

1

THE NATURE OF ART AND CREATIVITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Describe art as a means of visual expression that uses various media and forms.
- 1.2 Explain what is meant by creativity.
- 1.3 Discuss the role creativity plays in the work of trained and untrained artists.
- 1.4 Assess the ways in which representational, abstract, and non-representational art relate to reality.
- 1.5 Contrast the terms looking and seeing.
- 1.6 Differentiate between form and content, and show how artists may use iconography to communicate the latter.

Is it necessary for us to give visual form to things we feel, think, and imagine? Must we gesture, dance, draw, speak, sing, write, and build? To be fully human, it seems we must. In fact, the ability to create is one of the special characteristics of being human. The urge to make and enjoy what we call art has been a driving force throughout human history. Art is not something apart from us. It grows from common—and uncommon—human insights, feelings, and experiences.

Art does not need to be “understood” to be enjoyed. Like life itself, it can simply be experienced. Yet the more we understand what art can offer, the richer our experience of it will be.

For example, when Janet Echelman’s huge artwork *Her Secret Is Patience* (fig. 1.1) was hoisted into the air above Phoenix, Arizona, in mid-2009, even most of the doubters became admirers once they experienced this stunning work. Suspended from three leaning poles between 40 and 100 feet above the ground, its colored circles of netting appear both permanent and ever changing, solid yet spacious, defying gravity as they dance and wave slowly in the breeze.

The artist chose the cactus-flower shape to symbolize the desert city of Phoenix. She was inspired by the patience of the saguaro cactus, she said, “a spiny cactus putting

down roots in search of water in the desert, saving up every ounce of energy until, one night, in the middle of the cool darkness, it unfurls one succulent bloom.”¹ The work also refers to the character of nature itself. Echelman took her title from the words of American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote, “Adopt the pace of nature; her secret is patience.”

The citizens who advocated the piece during the extended waiting time between conception and completion were patient as well. Doubters objected to the price tag (\$2.4 million), the shape (one said it resembled a giant jellyfish), and the artist’s origins (she is not from Arizona). Those misgivings and a few technical problems kept *Her Secret Is Patience* on the drawing board for a year and a half. But today most Arizonians look on the work with pride: This unique visual delight has become a landmark for the city of Phoenix just as the Eiffel Tower became one for Paris. The *Arizona Republic* editorialized: “This is just what Phoenix needs: a distinctive feature that helps create a real sense of place.”²

The creation and the reception of *Her Secret Is Patience* embody an important idea: artistic creation is a two-way street. That is, we form art, and then the art forms us by enriching our lives, teaching us, commemorating our human past, touching our spirits, and inspiring or



1.1 Janet Echelman. *Her Secret Is Patience*. 2009. Fiber, steel, and lighting. Height 100' with a top diameter of 100'.

Civic Space Park, Phoenix, AZ. Courtesy Janet Echelman, Inc. Photograph: Will Novak.

persuading us (see Chapter 2). It can also challenge us to think and see in new ways, and help each of us to develop a personal sense of beauty and truth.

While *Her Secret Is Patience* may not resemble the type of artwork that you are familiar with—it is not a painting, and it is not in a museum—it is art. In this chapter we will explore some definitions of what is meant by “art” and “creativity,” and look at how creativity is expressed through different types of art and through its form and content.

What is Art?

When people speak of the arts, they are usually referring to music, dance, theater, literature, and the visual arts. Our senses perceive each artform differently, yet all art comes from a common need to give expressive substance to feelings, insights, and experiences. The arts communicate meanings that go far beyond ordinary verbal exchange,

and artists use the entire range of thought, feeling, and observation as the subjects of their art.

The visual arts include drawing, painting, sculpture, film, architecture, and design. Some ideas and feelings can best be communicated only through visual forms. American painter Georgia O’Keeffe said: “I found that I could say things with colors and shapes that I couldn’t say in any other way—things I had no words for.”³

In this book, a **work of art** is the visual expression of an idea or experience, formed with skill, through the use of a **medium**. A medium is a particular material, along with its accompanying technique. (The plural is *media*.) Artists select media to suit the function of the work, as well as the ideas they wish to present. When a medium is used in such a way that the object or performance contributes to our understanding or enjoyment of life, we experience the final product as art.

For *Her Secret Is Patience*, Echelman sought to create a work that would say something about the Phoenix area, in a way that harmonized with the forces of nature. Thus, she chose flexible netting for the medium because it responds gracefully to the wind. She similarly chose the size, scale, shape, and color of the work that would best support and express her message.

Media in use for many centuries include clay, fiber, stone, wood, and paint. By the mid-twentieth century, modern technology had added new media, including video and computers, to the nineteenth-century contributions of photography and motion pictures. Many artists today combine media in a single work.

What is Creativity?

The source of all art, science, and technology—in fact, all of civilization—is human imagination, or creative thinking. But what do we mean by this talent we call “creativity”?

Creativity is the ability to bring forth something new that has value. Mere novelty is not enough; the new thing must have some relevance, or unlock some new way of thinking.

Creativity also has the potential to influence future thought or action, and is vital to most walks of life. In 2010, the IBM corporation interviewed 1,500 chief executive officers (CEOs) from 60 countries, asking them what was the most important leadership skill for the successful



1.2 Robin Rhode. *He Got Game*. 2000. Twelve color photographs.

Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong. © Robin Rhode.

businesses of the future. Their answer was not economic knowledge, management skills, integrity, or personal discipline, but creativity.

While studying creative people in several disciplines, the authors of the 2011 book *Innovator's DNA*⁴ found five traits that seem to define creativity:

1. **Associating.** The ability to make connections across seemingly unrelated fields.
2. **Questioning.** Persistently challenging the status quo, asking why things function as they do now, and how or why they might be changed.
3. **Observing.** Intently watching the world around, without judgment, in search of new insights or ways of operating.
4. **Networking.** Being willing to interact with others, and learn from them, even if their views are radically different or their competencies seem unrelated.
5. **Experimenting.** Exploring new possibilities by trying them out, building models and then taking them apart for further improvement.

Creativity can be found in most human endeavors, but here we focus on artistic creativity, which can take many forms. A film director places actors and cameras on a sound stage in order to emphasize a certain aspect of the script. A Hopi potter decorates a water jar by combining traditional designs in new ways. A graphic designer seated at a computer creates an arrangement of type, images, and colors in order to communicate a message. A carver in Japan fashions wood into a Buddha that will

aid meditation at a monastery. Most of us have at some time arranged images on our walls or composed a picture for a photograph. All these actions involve visual creativity, the use of imagery to communicate beyond what mere words can say.

He Got Game (fig. 1.2) is a good example of visual creativity using simple means. Contemporary South African artist Robin Rhode drew a basketball hoop on the asphalt surface of a street, then photographed himself lying down in 12 positions as if he were flipping through the air performing an impossible slam dunk. The artist here imitates the slow-motion and stop-motion photography often seen in sports television to create a piece with transcendent dramatic flair. The work cleverly uses low-tech chalk drawing and a slangy title to celebrate the cheeky boastfulness of street culture. As it clearly shows, creativity is an attitude, one that is as fundamental to experiencing and appreciating a work of art as it is to making one.

Twentieth-century American artist Romare Bearden showed a different type of creativity in his depictions of the daily life he witnessed in the rural South. In *Prevalence of Ritual: Tidings* (fig. 1.3) he created a work using borrowed picture fragments with a few muted colors to portray a mood of melancholy and longing. In the work, a winged figure seems to comfort an introspective woman who holds a flower, suggesting the story of the Christian Annunciation; a train implies departure, perhaps from this world or simply to a better life in the North. In this work, as in many of his others, Bearden was concerned with the effectiveness of his communication to the viewer, but equally important was his own inner need for creative expression.



1.3 Romare Bearden.
*Prevalence
of Ritual:
Tidings*. 1967.
Photomontage.
36" × 48".

© Romare Bearden
Foundation/Licensed by
VAGA, New York, NY.

Trained and Untrained Artists

Most of us tend to think of “art” as something produced only by “artists”—uniquely gifted people—and, because art is often separated from community life in contemporary society, many people believe they have no artistic talent. Yet we all have the potential to be creative.

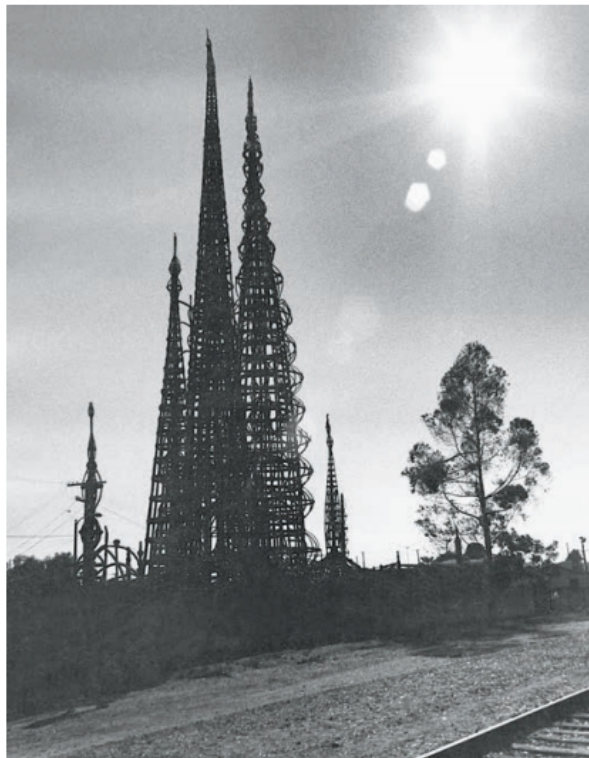
In the past, the world’s trained artists generally learned by working as apprentices to accomplished masters. (With a few notable exceptions, women were excluded from such apprenticeships.) Through practical experience, they gained necessary skills and developed knowledge of their society’s art traditions. Today most art training takes place in art schools, or in college or university art departments. Learning in such settings develops sophisticated knowledge of alternative points of view, both contemporary and historical, and often trained artists show a self-conscious awareness of their relationship to art history. Romare Bearden, for example, learned his skills at the Art Students League in New York and the Sorbonne in Paris; Janet Echelman earned a Master of Fine Arts degree at Bard College, New York.

While training, skills, and intelligence are helpful in creativity, they are not always necessary. The urge to create is universal and has little to do with art training. Those with a small amount of or no formal art education—usually described as untrained artists or **folk artists**—and children can be highly creative. Art by untrained artists, also called **outsider artists**, is made by people who are largely unaware of art history or the art trends of their time. Unlike folk art, which is made by people working within a tradition, art by outsider artists is personal expression created apart from any conventional practice or style.

Outsider Art

One of the best-known (and largest) pieces of outsider art in the United States is *Nuestro Pueblo* (*Our Town*), more commonly known as the Watts Towers (**fig. 1.4**). Its creator, Sabatino “Simon” Rodia, exemplifies the artist who visualizes new possibilities for ordinary materials. He worked on his cathedral-like towers for 33 years, making the fantastic structures from cast-off materials such as metal pipes and bed frames held together with steel reinforcing rods, mesh, and mortar. Incredibly, he built the towers without power tools, rivets, welds, or bolts.

As the towers rose in his triangular backyard, he methodically covered their surfaces with bits and pieces

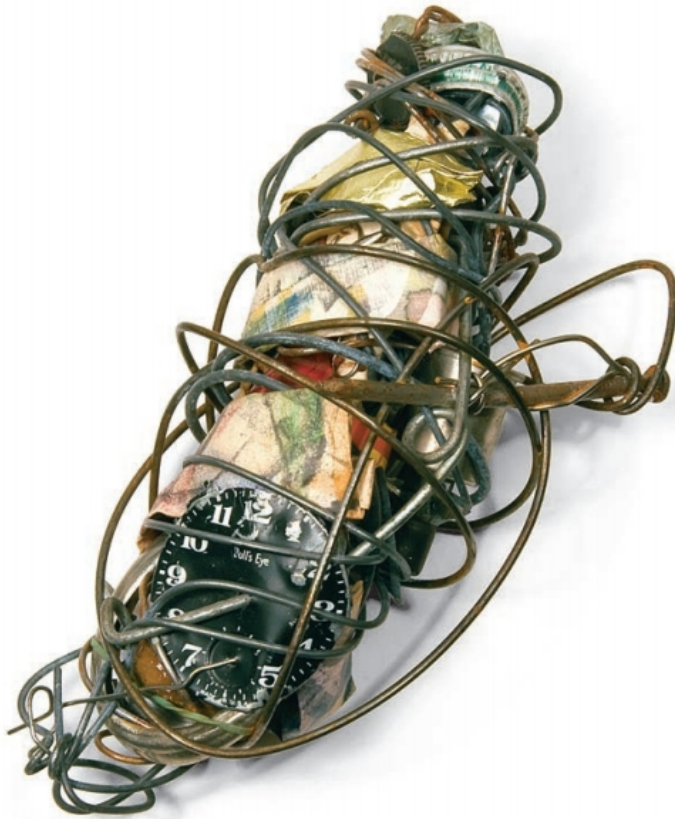


1.4 Sabatino “Simon” Rodia. *Nuestro Pueblo*.
Top: distant view. Bottom: detail of enclosing wall
with construction tool impressions. 1921–54.
Mixed media. Height 100'. Watts, California.

Photographs: Duane Preble.

of broken dishes, tile, melted bottle glass, shells, and other colorful junk from the vacant lots in his neighborhood. Rodia’s towers are testimony to the artist’s creativity and perseverance. He said, “I had it in mind to do something big, and I did it.”⁵

Some creative people are so far outside the art world that even their names are unknown to us. In 1982, an art



1.5 Philadelphia Wireman. *Untitled (Watch Face)*. c.1970. Watch face, bottle cap, nail, drawing on paper, and wire. 7" × 3½" × 2¼".

Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

student in Philadelphia found several boxes of hand-sized sculptures that had been set out among the trash in a run-down neighborhood. Numbering more than a thousand, the sculptures were collections of refuse and other small objects, all wrapped in wire (fig. 1.5). Dubbed the Philadelphia Wireman, the creator of these works is still unknown, as no one has yet claimed authorship after several exhibitions of the works. Because of the force required to bend the wire, the artist is generally thought to have been male. In any case, he created compelling conglomerations of debris that stir memory and imagination.

Folk Art

In contrast to outsider artists, folk artists are part of established traditions of style, theme, and craftsmanship. Simply put, folk art is art by the folks. Most folk artists have little systematic art training, and their work often shows great enthusiasm or devotion to tradition. Folk art can take many forms, including quilts, embroidered handkerchiefs, decorated weather vanes, sculptures, or customized cars.

In many areas of the United States, quilting has long been a flourishing form of folk art, usually practiced by women. Often working together, the women embellish bed covers to make them into finely crafted and eye-catching works, as we see in *Peony* (fig. 1.6). In this quilt the decorations are made from fabric overlays that the artist stitched down. Often the imagery is traditional to the culture or region; this work shows influence from Pennsylvania German pottery. The artist suggested the bright, many-petaled blooms of peonies in the design, which she abstracted to six-pointed star shapes.



1.6 Mary Wallace. *Peony*. Quilt: pieced, appliquéd, and quilted cotton. 100¾" × 98".

Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Rhea Goodman (M.75.133)

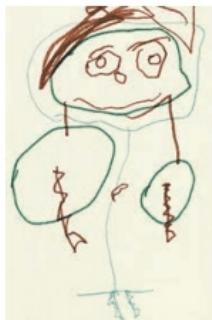
1.7 *Retablo*. 1915. Paint on tin. 9" × 11".
Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph by Don Cole.

In Mexico and the American Southwest, the folk art of *retablo* painting is a customary way of giving thanks to God when someone escapes from danger or recovers from an illness. Such paintings generally depict the scene of salvation along with a narrative of the events. In this example (fig. 1.7), a man falsely accused of a crime escaped execution and created the painting. The inscription credits the “fervent prayers of my dear parents and my aggrieved wife” for saving him from the ultimate punishment. The spelling errors in the inscription combine with the sincere and charming painting style to yield a highly attractive work.



Children’s Art

Children use a universal visual language. All over the world, drawings by children aged 2–6 show similar stages of mental growth, from exploring with mark-making, to inventing shapes, to symbolizing things seen and imagined. Until they are about 6 years old, children usually depict the world in symbolic rather than realistic ways. Their images are more mental constructions than records of visual observations. The drawing *Grandma* (fig. 1.8) by 3-year-old Alana shows enthusiasm and self-assurance in the repeated circles of green and brown. She found a rhythm in the eyes and the head, and she followed it exuberantly out to the sleeves.



Young children often demonstrate an intuitive ability to combine diverse elements into a whole. Unfortunately, much of this intuitive sense of balanced design is lost when they begin to look at the world from a

1.8 Alana, age 3. *Grandma*.

conceptual and self-conscious point of view. Most children who have been given coloring books, workbooks, and pre-drawn printed single sheets become overly dependent on such impersonal stereotyped props. In this way, children often lose the urge to invent unique images based on their own experiences. Recent research shows that many children begin to doubt their creativity at about the age of 9 or 10 years. But creative people, be they artists or CEOs, retain their creativity into adulthood.

Whether trained, outsider, or folk, the most interesting artists are independent thinkers who have the courage to go beyond group mentality. In this way artists can offer fresh insights that extend the experiences of viewers.

Art and Reality

Artists may depict what they see in the physical world, they may alter appearances, or they may invent something that no one has yet seen. Regardless of their approach, most artists invite viewers to see beyond mere appearances. The terms **representational**, **abstract**, and **nonrepresentational** are used to describe an artwork’s relationship to the physical world.

Representational Art

Representational art depicts the appearance of things. (When the human form is the primary subject, it is called **figurative art**.) It represents—or “presents again”—objects we recognize from the natural, everyday world. Objects that representational art depicts are called **subjects**.

There are many ways to create representational art. The most “real”-looking paintings are in a style called *trompe l'oeil* (pronounced “trompt loy”)—French for “fool the eye.” Paintings in this illusionistic style impress us because they look so “real.” In William Harnett’s painting *A Smoke Backstage* (fig. 1.9), the assembled objects are close to life-size, which contributes to the illusion. We almost believe that we could touch the pipe and match.

Belgian painter René Magritte shows a different relationship between art and reality (fig. 1.10). The subject of the painting appears to be a pipe, but written in French on the painting are the words, “This is not a pipe.” The viewer may wonder, “If this is not a pipe, what is it?” The answer, of course, is that it is a painting! Magritte’s title, *The Treachery of Images* (*La Trahison des Images*), suggests the visual game that the artist had in mind.

California artist Ray Beldner further complicated the relationship between art and reality. He created a reproduction of Magritte’s painting out of sewn dollar bills, and



1.9 William Harnett. *A Smoke Backstage*. 1877.
Oil on canvas. 7" × 8½".
Honolulu Museum of Art, Gift of John Wyatt Gregg Allerton, 1964 (32111).



1.10 René Magritte. *La Trahison des Images* (*Ceci N'est Pas une Pipe*). 1929. Oil on canvas. 25½" × 37".

Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Purchased with funds provided by the Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection (78.7). © 2018 Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence. © 2018 C. Herscovici, London/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

called it *This Is Definitely Not a Pipe* (fig. 1.11). Modern artists are so famous these days, and their work sells for such high prices, that they may as well be “made of money,” just as this work is. Beldner’s point is that even representational art has a complex relationship to reality; artists almost never merely depict what they see. Rather, they select, arrange, and compose reality to fit their personal vision. The process can take them several steps away from the fact of a pipe on a tabletop.



1.11 Ray Beldner. *This Is Definitely Not a Pipe*. 2000.
After René Magritte’s *The Treason of Images* (1929).
Sewn US currency. 24" × 33".

Courtesy of the artist.

Abstract Art

The verb “to abstract” means “to take from”; it means to extract the essence of an object or idea. In art, the word “abstract” can mean either (1) works of art that have no reference at all to natural objects, or (2) works that depict natural objects in simplified, distorted, or exaggerated ways. Here we use abstract in the second sense.

In abstract art the artist changes the object’s natural appearance in order to emphasize or reveal certain qualities. Just as there are many approaches to representational art, there are many approaches to abstraction. We may be able to recognize the subject matter of an abstract work quite easily, or we may need the help of a clue such as a title. The interaction between how the subject actually looks and how an artist presents it is part of the pleasure and challenge of abstract art (see *Alma Thomas: Devoted to Abstraction*, opposite).

Abstraction in one form or another is common in the art of many cultures. The chief’s stool (fig. 1.12) from Cameroon shows repeated abstractions of the human form. We still recognize, of course, that the principal subject of the sculpture is people. They symbolize the community of the Cameroon grasslands that supports the chief who sits on this stool. This piece was regarded as the chief’s “seat of power.” No one else was allowed to use it, and when he died, according to custom, the stool was buried or thrown away.

Early modern artists in Europe also embraced abstraction. We see stages of abstraction in Theo van Doesburg’s series of drawings and paintings, *Abstraction of a Cow* (fig. 1.13). The artist apparently wanted to see how far he could abstract the cow through simplification and still have his



1.12 Chief’s stool. Late 19th–early 20th century. Wood plant fiber. Height 16½”. Western Grasslands, Cameroon. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph by Don Cole.

image symbolize the essence of the animal. He used the subject as a point of departure for a composition made up of colored rectangles. If we viewed only the final painting and none of the earlier ones, we would probably see it as a nonrepresentational painting.

1.13 Theo van Doesburg (born C.E.M. Küpper). *Abstraction of a Cow* series.

Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Purchase 227.1948.1 (a.), 227.1948.6 (b.), 226.1948 (c.), and 225.1948 (d). © 2018 Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.



a. *Composition (The Cow)*. c.1917. Pencil on paper. 4¾” × 6¼”.



b. *Study for Composition (The Cow)*. 1917. Pencil on paper. 4¾” × 6¼”.



c. *Study for Composition (The Cow)*. c.1917 (dated 1916) Tempera, oil, and charcoal on paper. 15¾” × 22¾”.



d. *Composition VIII (The Cow)*. c.1917. Oil on canvas. 14¾” × 25”.

CREATORS

Alma Thomas: Devoted to Abstraction



1.14 Alma Thomas at an opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1972.

Alma Thomas papers, 1894–2000, bulk 1936–1982. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

When asked if she saw herself as a black artist, Alma Thomas (1891–1978) replied, “No, I do not. I am an American.”¹⁶ Through a lifelong devotion to abstraction, her creativity reached beyond accepted definitions, and it also unfolded in an unusual way. She was born in western Georgia into a middle-class home. Racial prejudice motivated her father to uproot the family and settle in Washington, D.C., in 1907. There she obtained a teaching degree and taught kindergarten for several years before realizing a dream to study art. She was the first graduate of the Howard University art program in 1924, and for the next 60 years she taught art in a junior high school in the nation’s capital.

Thomas painted on the side, exhibiting her representational watercolors only occasionally. But she played an active part in

the art scene in Washington; in 1943, she became the founding vice-president of the first private gallery in that city to show work by artists of all races. Further study at American University in the late 1950s exposed her to recent currents in modern art.

Only after her retirement from teaching in 1960 did Thomas begin to devote herself full-time to her art. She also had her first solo exhibition in that year, at age 69. Then her work progressed quickly toward the abstract style that she practiced for the rest of her life.

Thomas said she was inspired by the flickering movement of leaves and flowers under differing light conditions in her garden, and she titled many of her paintings after such observations. Small strokes or patches of paint, rhythmically set down, in mostly brilliant colors, became her signature style. Sometimes these strokes resemble stones in a mosaic, as we see in *White Roses Sing and Sing* (fig. 1.15). Although the work seems nonrepresentational at first, the title gives the key to its inspiration: roses moving on their stems in a light breeze. Aerial vantage points also inspired the artist to avoid detailed depictions. She told an interviewer, “I began to think about what I would see if I were in an airplane. You look down on things. You streak through the clouds so fast, you don’t know whether the flower below is a violet or what. And so I began to paint as if I were in that plane.”¹⁷

Further recognition came in the 1970s, when Thomas became

the first African-American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. President Jimmy Carter invited her to the White House. She remarked on her success in museums, comparing it to her earlier life under segregation, when “the only way to go in there as a Negro would be with a mop and bucket.”¹⁸

Thomas always believed that creativity was a human universal, not bound by race or nation. She said, “We artists are put on God’s green earth to create. Some of us may be black, but that’s not the important thing. The important thing is for us to create, to give form to what we have inside us. We can’t accept any barriers, any limitations of any kind, on what we create or how we do it.”¹⁹



1.15 Alma Thomas. *White Roses Sing and Sing*. 1976. Acrylic on canvas. 72½" × 52¾"

National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C. 1980.36.3. © 2018. Photo Smithsonian American Art Museum/Art Resource/Scala, Florence

Nonrepresentational Art

A great deal of the world's art was not meant to be representational at all. Amish quilts, many Navajo textiles, and most Islamic wood carvings consist primarily of flat patterns that give pleasure through mere variety of line, shape, and color. Nonrepresentational art (sometimes called nonobjective or nonfigurative art) presents visual forms with no specific references to anything outside themselves. Just as we can respond to the pure sound forms of music, so we can respond to the pure visual forms of nonrepresentational art.

The following two contrasting works show that in nonrepresentational art, a wide variety of forms, compositions, moods, and messages is possible. The Pair of Doors (fig. 1.16) from an Egyptian mosque is a dazzling piece of wood carving that is centered on two twelve-sided stars. Radiating out we see a web of carved straight lines that ricochet off the edges and cross each other to create an array of polygonal panels. Curving symmetrical designs within these panels, carved of wood and ivory, interweave and overlap. Without representing anything or telling any story, the doors draw and hold our attention for the virtuosic display of skill and the tremendous intricacy of the lines, shapes, and patterns.

The Pair of Doors is symmetrical and obviously handcrafted of natural materials, but *Yellow and Black* by Carmen Herrera (fig. 1.17) is asymmetrical and sleek, while also nonrepresentational. We may see a hint of a subject in this work (a lightning bolt?), but the artist was only experimenting with the juxtaposition of two strong colors. The work communicates vigorous energy and an agitated state of mind. This impact is strengthened by the work's large size, 6 feet across.

While nonrepresentational art may at first seem more difficult to grasp than representational or abstract art, it can offer fresh ways of seeing and new visual experiences. In the absence of subject matter, we can direct our attention to the shapes and forms before us in themselves. Once we learn how to read this language of vision, we can respond to both art and the world with greater understanding and enjoyment.



1.16 Pair of doors. Egypt, c.1325–1330. Wood (rosewood and mulberry); carved, inlaid with carved ivory, ebony, and other woods. 77¼" × 35" × 1¾", encased in weighted freestanding mount.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 91.1.2064.



1.17 Carmen Herrera. *Yellow and Black*. 2010. Acrylic on canvas. 36" × 72".

© Carmen Herrera; Courtesy Lisson Gallery. Photographer: Ken Adlard.

Looking and Seeing

Whether a work of art is representational, abstract, or non-representational, we access it primarily through our eyes; thus we must consider how we use them.

The verbs “look” and “see” indicate varying degrees of visual awareness. Looking is habitual and implies taking in what is before us in a generally mechanical or goal-oriented way. If we care only about function, we simply need to look quickly at a doorknob in order to grasp and turn it. But if we find ourselves excited about the shape and finish of a doorknob, or of the bright quality of a winter day, or we empathize with the creator of an artwork, we go beyond simple, functional looking to a higher level of perception; this is “seeing.”

Seeing is a more open, receptive, and focused version of looking. In seeing, we look with our memories, imaginations, and feelings attached. We take in something with our eyes, and then we remember similar experiences, or we imagine other possible outcomes, or we allow ourselves to feel something about it. We are doing more than looking.

The twentieth-century French artist Henri Matisse wrote about how to see intently:

To see is itself a creative operation, requiring an effort. Everything that we see in our daily life is more or less distorted by acquired habits, and this is perhaps more evident in an age like ours when cinema, posters, and magazines present us every day with a flood of readymade images which are to the eye what prejudices are to the mind. The effort needed to see things without distortion takes something very like courage.¹⁰

Because words and visual images are two different languages, talking about visual arts with words is always an act of translation one step removed from actually experiencing art. In fact, our eyes have their own connections to our minds and emotions. By cultivating these connections, we can take better advantage of what art has to offer.

Ordinary things become extraordinary when we see them deeply. Is Edward Weston's photograph of a pepper (fig. 1.18) meaningful to us because we like peppers so much? Probably not. To help us truly see, Weston created a memorable image on a flat surface with the help of a common pepper. A time exposure of over two hours gave *Pepper #30* a quality of glowing light—a living presence that resembles an embrace. Through his sensitivity to form, Weston revealed how this pepper appeared to him. Notes from his *Daybook* communicate his enthusiasm about this photograph:

August 8, 1930

I could wait no longer to print them—my new peppers, so I put aside several orders, and

yesterday afternoon had an exciting time with seven new negatives.

First I printed my favorite, the one made last Saturday, August 2, just as the light was failing—quickly made, but with a week's previous effort back of my immediate, unhesitating decision. A week?—Yes, on this certain pepper,—but twenty-eight years of effort, starting with a youth on a farm in Michigan, armed with a No. 2 Bull's Eye [Kodak] $3\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$, have gone into the making of this pepper, which I consider a peak of achievement.

It is a classic, completely satisfying—a pepper—but more than a pepper: abstract, in that it is completely outside subject matter . . . this new pepper takes one beyond the world we know in the conscious mind.¹¹



Weston's photograph of a seemingly common object embodies a particularly intent way of seeing. The artist was uniquely aware of something in his surroundings; indeed, he seems to have gazed at the pepper for a long time. He worked over an extended period (perhaps 28 years!) to achieve the image he wanted. The photograph that he created communicates a sense of wonder about the natural world. It may also stimulate us to participate in his prolonged seeing.

Finally, seeing is a personal process. No two people will see the same thing in the same way, because each of us brings our own background, temperament, and feelings to bear. Confronted with the same visual information, different people will evaluate it differently, and come to differing conclusions about its meaning, worth, or importance (see Chapter 5).

1.18 Edward Weston. *Pepper #30*. 1930. Gelatin silver print. $9\frac{7}{8}'' \times 7\frac{1}{2}''$.

Photograph by Edward Weston. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of David H. McAlpin (1913.1968) © 2018. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence © 2018 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Form and Content

In Weston's *Pepper #30* the texture, light, and shadow, and shape of the pepper is the form that we see, and the content is the meaning (or meanings) the work communicates—for example, a sense of wonder about the natural world. **Form** thus refers to the total effect of the combined visual qualities within a work, including such components as materials, color, shape, line, and design. **Content** refers to the message or meaning of the work of art—what the artist expresses or communicates to the viewer. Content determines form, and form expresses content; thus the two are inseparable.



1.19 Auguste Rodin. *The Kiss*. 1886. Marble. 5'11¼".
Musée Rodin, Paris. Photograph akg-images / Erich Lessing.



1.20 Constantin Brancusi. *The Kiss*. 1916.
Limestone. 23" × 13" × 10".

Photograph: The Philadelphia Museum of Art/
Art Resource/Scala, Florence. © Succession Brancusi –
All rights reserved (ARS) 2018.

One way to better understand the relationship is to compare works that have the same subject but differ greatly in form and content. *The Kiss* (fig. 1.19) by Auguste Rodin and *The Kiss* (fig. 1.20) by Constantin Brancusi show how two sculptors interpret an embrace. In Rodin's work, the life-size human figures represent Western ideals of the masculine and the feminine. Rodin captures the sensual delight of that highly charged moment when lovers embrace. We may remember or hope for such encounters ourselves. Our emotions are engaged as we overlook the hardness of the marble from which he carved it. The natural softness of flesh is heightened by the rough texture of the unfinished marble supporting the figures.

In contrast to Rodin's sensuous approach, Brancusi used the solid quality of a block of stone to express lasting love. Through minimal cutting of the block, Brancusi symbolized—rather than illustrated—the concept of two becoming one. He chose geometric abstraction rather than representational naturalism to express love of a solid, enduring kind. We might say that Rodin's work expresses the *feelings* of love, while Brancusi's expresses the *idea* of love.