

WILLIAM MISSOURI DOWNS

LOU ANNE WRIGHT

ERIK RAMSEY

the art of
THEATRE



FOURTH EDITION

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THE ART OF THEATRE

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THE ART OF THEATRE

FOURTH EDITION

WILLIAM MISSOURI DOWNS

LOU ANNE WRIGHT

ERIK RAMSEY



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and
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Barbara Rosenberg,
each a vital link
in the long chain that
brought this book
to publication.

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PREFACE

We live in a distracted age where technology has left a lot of digital distance between us. Yet, in this contemporary world theatre still thrives—an ancient art form that, at its very core, is driven by compassion and human-to-human contact.

As theatre professors we looked for a text that would speak to this new digital generation. Not finding one, we wrote our own. *The Art of Theatre* employs popular screen entertainments as a touchstone to exploring the unique art of theatre as it challenges students to analyze and appreciate the roles dramatic production plays in society. From theatre’s ritual origins to modern musicals, from controversies surrounding the NEA to the applicability of acting lessons to everyday life, this book provides a first step toward a deeper awareness of theatre’s enduring significance.

The Art of Theatre is divided into 17 standalone chapters that can be taught in any order, giving each professor unique flexibility. Using the custom option, you can design a textbook that explores the precise subjects you wish to cover. In addition, we have arranged the chapters into three sections, each embracing a distinct aspect of theatre:

Part 1: Theatre Literacy

Because most theatre departments stage their first play four to five weeks into the term, Part 1, “Theatre Literacy,” prepares students to be knowledgeable theatregoers. This section explores the differences between art and entertainment while illustrating the many diverse forms of world theatre: commercial, historical, political, experimental, and cultural. We explain how screen entertainment differs from theatre in purpose, medium, and financing, and describe theatre’s relationships to our many world cultures. We also discuss theatre etiquette, play analysis, and free speech. By introducing students to these fundamental topics early on, we provide a bridge between what students already know about screen entertainments and what they need to know about culture and theatre.

Part 2: The Arts within the Art

Part 2 opens the door to the timelines and techniques employed in creating theatre, exploring the nuts and bolts of the art form. We concentrate first on a day in the life of a typical theatre, and then move to playwriting, acting, directing, and design. We also include a chapter on how students, like theatre artists, can employ creativity, and how they can use acting and design techniques as well as character analysis and story structure in their own lives. In addition, this section includes a chapter on the evolution of the musical, a fun and popular theatrical form with which students are often familiar. By the time they are finished with this part, students should be ready to see their second production with a richer understanding of the full spectrum of skills, talents, arts, and creativity needed to stage a play.

Part 3: A Concise History

Part 3 provides students with a broader understanding of theatre’s role in society. Our approach ties the major episodes of world theatre history to the social, cultural, and

philosophical movements that the art has both sparked and reflected. We make theatre history interesting by drawing connections, making analogies, and joining together what might seem random events into a logical, unified whole.

Features of This Book

- Thorough coverage of the many forms of theatre and the people who create it
- Broad coverage of cultural and social events that illustrate theatre's place in world history
- A chapter devoted to what makes theatre different from film and television
- A chapter dedicated to creativity and how students can be more imaginative
- Spotlights that highlight the people, trends, and events that have shaped theatre
- Interesting and relevant timelines
- A detailed glossary (including pronunciation) of theatre terms
- Discussions on freedom of speech, censorship, and copyrights
- A chapter on how to attend the theatre, from etiquette to criticism
- A complete examination of everything that happens during the day and night at a typical theatre
- A wide-ranging look at the life and art of playwrights, actors, designers, and directors
- A chapter devoted to the history and art of musicals
- Chapters that make theatre history interesting and relevant

New to This Edition

There are many new features in the fourth edition, including new photographs, new and revised spotlights, and enhanced material:

Part 1: Theatre Literacy

Chapters 1 and 2 contain updated coverage about the art of theatre and its place in the modern world. Included is an expanded section on the difference between art and entertainment, updated information about the funding of theatre versus funding of film and television, more about the media moguls that control our screen entertainments and expanded coverage on copyrights. Chapter 3 has been extensively updated with more information about the diverse forms of theatre and how the theatre gives a voice to everyone, not just privileged groups. Chapter 4 has expanded information about how to find and attend the theatre, new information on curtain speeches, and expanded coverage of censorship.

Part 2: The Arts within the Art

All of the chapters in this section have new photos and examples to help students understand the many arts and techniques involved in producing a play. Chapter 6 has new information about the writer's life and expanded coverage of

the art and craft of writing a play and structuring a story. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 have been updated with the latest examples and information about acting, directing, and design; Chapter 10 has new information on the need for solitude in order to be creative and how multitasking interferes with creativity. This section of the book now contains the revised musical theatre chapter, which includes a new spotlight on women and the American musical.

Part 3: A Concise History

This section of the book has been revised to be more concise. Changes include new photos, updated timelines, and new spotlights, including one on Nell Gwyn. In addition we look at how theatre might fare in the digital age.

Teaching and Learning Resources

Cengage Learning's **MindTap for *The Art of Theatre*** brings course concepts to life with interactive learning, study, and exam preparation tools that support the printed textbook. Student comprehension is enhanced with the integrated eBook and interactive learning tools, including learning objectives, activities, quizzes, and videos.

The **Instructor Companion Website** is an all-in-one resource for class preparation, presentation, and testing for instructors. It is accessible by logging on to login.cengage.com with your faculty account. You will find an **Instructor's Resource Manual**, **Cognero**® test bank files, and **PowerPoint**® presentations specifically designed to accompany this edition.

The **Instructor's Resource Manual** provides you with assistance in teaching with the book, including sample syllabi, suggested assignments, chapter outlines, activities, and more.

Cengage Learning Testing Powered by Cognero® is a flexible online system that allows you to import, edit, and manipulate content from the text's test bank and deliver tests from your LMS, your classroom, or wherever you may be, with no special installation required.

PowerPoint® Lecture Tools are ready-to-use outlines of each chapter. They are easily customizable to your lectures.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

WILLIAM MISSOURI DOWNS is a playwright and director. His plays have been produced by The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, The Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, The InterAct Theatre in Philadelphia, The San Diego Rep, The Berkeley Repertory Theatre, the Salt Lake City Acting Company, the Actors Theatre of Charlotte, the International Theatre Festival in Israel, the Stadt Theater Walfischgasse in Austria, the Jewish Theatre of Toronto, The Bloomington Playwright's Project, the Detroit Rep, the New York City Fringe Festival, the Durban Performing Arts Center in South Africa, and 150 theatres worldwide. He has won numerous playwriting awards including two rolling premieres from the National New Play Network (*Women Playing Hamlet* & *The Exit Interview*), and twice been a finalist at the Eugene O'Neill (*Mad Gravity* & *How to Steal a Picasso*). Samuel French, Playscripts, Next Stage Press, and Heuer have published his plays. In addition, he has authored several articles and three other books, including *Screenplay: Writing the Picture* and *Naked Playwriting*, both published by Silman/James. In Hollywood he was a staff writer on the NBC sitcom *My Two Dads* (which starred Paul Reiser). He also wrote episodes of *Amen* (Sherman Helmsley), *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (Will Smith), and sold/optioned screenplays to Imagine Pictures and Filmways. He was trained in directing under the Oscar Nominated Polish Director Jerzy Antczak and has directed over 40 college and professional productions. Bill holds an MFA in acting from the University of Illinois, an MFA in screenwriting from UCLA; Lanford Wilson and Milan Stitt at the Circle Rep in New York City trained him in playwriting.

LOU ANNE WRIGHT is an actor, dialect coach, professor, and writer; she holds an MFA in Voice, Speech, and Dialects from the National Theatre Conservatory and is a certified Fitzmaurice Voicework teacher. Lou Anne has served as voice/ dialect coach for such companies as the Colorado Shakespeare Festival and the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. Film roles include Judy Shepard in HBO's *The Laramie Project* and Nell in *Hearsay*. As a playwright, she authored the play *Kabuki Medea*, which won the Bay Area Critics Award for Best Production in San Francisco. It was also produced at the Kennedy Center. She is the coauthor of the book *Playwriting: From Formula to Form*, and her screenwriting credits include the film adaptation of Eudora Welty's *The Hitch Hikers*, which featured Patty Duke and Richard Hatch (for which she was nominated for the Directors Guild of America's Lillian Gish Award). Lou Anne teaches acting, voice, speech, and dialects at the University of Wyoming, where she has won several teaching awards.

ERIK RAMSEY is an Associate Professor of Playwriting in the MFA Playwriting Program at Ohio University. His plays have been developed at various theaters including Cleveland Public Theatre, American Stage, Victory Gardens, and Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre, and been published by Samuel French

and Dramatic Publishing. As a new play dramaturg, he has worked in diverse settings from Steppenwolf Theater to WordBridge Lab. Over the past decade he has been a guest artist and taught playwriting, new play development, and narrative theory in a variety of national and international venues, including the St. Petersburg Academy of Dramatic Arts “New American Plays” Conference and Lubimovka Playwrights Laboratory at Teatr.doc in Moscow. Erik’s newest play, a two-hander for actresses in their 40s, explores the intersection of rodeo clowning and time-travel.

The theatre often expresses points of view not easily found in mainstream movies and television. Plays will typically explore themes and issues that film and T.V. gloss over or ignore such as religion, sexuality and politics. Pictured here are some of the cast of the mega hit musical *The Book of Mormon* at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in New York.

Chapter 1

THEATRE, ART, AND ENTERTAINMENT



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux

Outline

Art, or Not Art, That Is the Question

The Qualities of Art

- Human Expression
- Subject and Medium
- Response
- Perception of Order

The Politics of Art

Art versus Entertainment

What Is Theatre? What Is Drama?

The Common Categories of Theatre

Curtain Call

On a recent January morning in Washington, D.C., at the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station, a street musician began to play beside a trash can. A thousand commuters rushed by over the next hour. Many failed to hear the recital—barely six people stopped to listen, and only one person realized that the musician was no ordinary violinist, but the internationally acclaimed virtuoso and heartthrob Joshua Bell. The violin he played was a one-of-a-kind Stradivarius made in 1713, worth over \$3.5 million. Only three days before, Mr. Bell had played to a standing-room-only crowd at Boston's Symphony Hall. Cheap tickets for that performance cost \$100, meaning Bell's concert raked in approximately \$1,000 per minute. But three days later, in the cold D.C. Metro station,

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Mr. Bell's open violin case pocketed \$32.17 in donations. It would have been \$12.17, except that the one person who did recognize him tossed in a twenty.

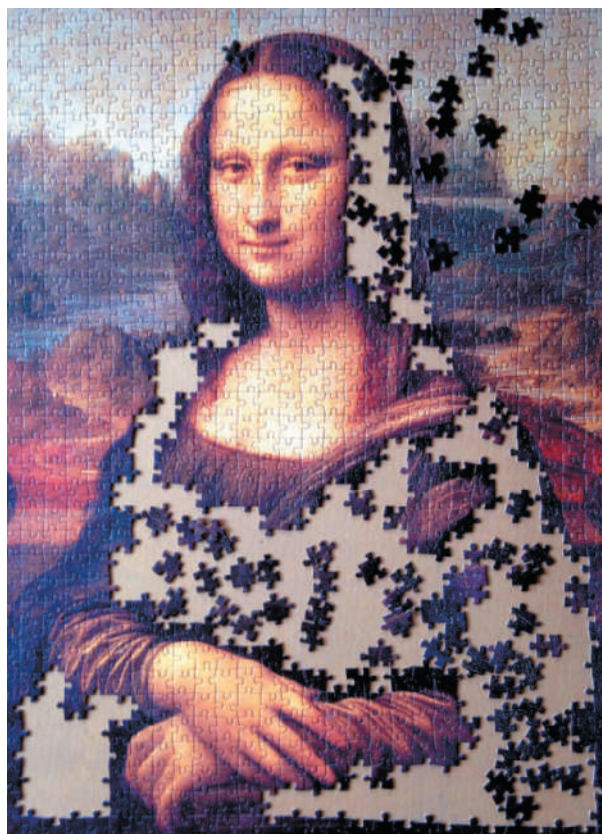
Two hundred years ago, a performance by a great artist like Joshua Bell would have been, for the majority of us, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Today, if you want to hear Joshua Bell you can download his music to your smartphone. Two hundred years ago, if you wanted to see the great painting *Mona Lisa*, you would have had to travel hundreds, perhaps thousands, of miles. Today, in seconds you can make the *Mona Lisa* the screen saver you never look at.

If you wanted to attend a play 200 years ago, it meant making detailed plans, buying tickets, waiting weeks, and dressing up. Today you can push a button and see great actors in an instant on your tablet without having to get out of bed. Technology makes enjoying art an almost effortless activity, but has that same technology also devalued the arts? Have we cheapened the *Mona Lisa*, made dramatic performances commonplace, and made Joshua Bell playing his Stradivarius on the street little better than an annoyance on our rush to work?

The *Washington Post* staged Bell's Metro station violin concert as an experiment to test people's perceptions and priorities. It led to many questions. Perhaps the most important question was, "If we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the best musicians in the world, playing some of the finest music ever written, on one of the most beautiful and expensive instruments ever made . . . how many other things are we missing?" The true value of art is not its price tag, but its ability to make us feel and think. Because of this, art can be a powerful force within our lives, but there is one obstacle art cannot overcome: an individual's *inability* to perceive and enjoy it. Before you read this first chapter, take a moment to watch Bell's Metro station concert on YouTube. Would you have been one of the walking masses who never heard him, or one of the rare few who knew how to appreciate fine art?

The reason most people don't appreciate the arts is because art takes time and education. The philosopher, mathematician, and social critic Bertrand Russell wrote, "When the public cannot understand a picture or a poem, they conclude that it is a bad picture or a bad poem. When they cannot understand the theory of relativity they conclude (rightly) that their education has been insufficient." There is no difference between art and the theory of relativity in that they both take time and education to fully experience.

In this book, you will learn about one of the most unique art forms humankind has ever invented, including its history, techniques, and methods. If you take the time you will discover an art brimming with creativity, philosophy, emotion, intellect, and inspiration that will lead to a greater understanding of yourself and the world around you.



William Missouri Downs

Art is a puzzle that must be assembled by the individual. The fact that millions of people think that the *Mona Lisa* is the greatest painting ever made should not be your only justification for calling it "art." You must create your own definition.

Art, or Not Art, That Is the Question

Think about how often the word *art* appears in everyday conversation. It is used in a wide array of contexts but generally conveys three main ideas: art as "skill," art as "beauty," and art as "meaning." Recently, a sports reporter on

ESPN described the American Women’s World Cup champions as “artists.” In this sense, the word *art* means “skill,” and it is derived from the Latin word *ars*, synonymous with the ancient Greek word *techne*, which means “skill” or “technique.” An *artist* is a person who has a great deal of skill or talent or whose work shows considerable technical proficiency or creativity. This is why we have phrases such as “the art of war” or the “mechanical arts.”

We use *art* in the second sense when we make such comments as “The sunset at the beach was a work of art.” When we use the word *art* to describe something of great beauty, whether it’s a real and magnificent sunset or an exact watercolor replica of that same sunset, we are talking about aesthetics. **Aesthetics** is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature and expression of beauty. Aestheticians ask questions such as: Does beauty have objective existence outside the human experience? What environmental factors or moral judgments affect our perception of beauty? What purpose does art serve other than to delight the eye, please the ear, and soothe the senses? The highest level of aesthetic beauty is often called the **sublime**. This happens when beauty is so intense that it gives us the sense of awe and grandeur, as if we are in the presence of the divine.

In the third sense, *art* can be defined as conveying “meaning.” Artists commonly view their art as their own interpretation or judgment of existence, rather than simply as an act of skill or a work of beauty. When the word *art* is used in this way, the implicit meaning is “this is life as I, the artist, see it. This is my personal take on things.” Certainly, when artists set out to create meanings, they may choose to do so in a socially acceptable manner. They may even choose to support their meanings with great skill and beauty. However, an artist may also choose to ignore, challenge, or utterly defy traditional social values and disregard common standards of technique and beauty. The idea that art can reflect no skill, contain little beauty, and be unpleasant is hard for some to comprehend.

Theatre, or any kind of art that confronts or violates the popular understanding of skill, aesthetics, and meaning, can be dangerous to create. What if

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Art is not supposed to repeat what you already know. It is supposed to ask questions.

Kutluğ Ataman,
Filmmaker, artist

“Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.”

David Hume,
Philosopher



William Missouri Downs

According to most dictionary definitions, only humans can make art. This untitled painting was created by “Add,” a nine-year-old elephant in Thailand. Would you call it art?

SPOTLIGHT ON Plato, Aristotle, and the Theatre Arts

The debate over the purpose of theatre has been going on for centuries. Over two thousand years ago great philosophers like Plato and Aristotle pondered the subject—their arguments sound a lot like those we hear today in the modern media.

Plato (427–347 BCE) was a teacher, a philosopher, and an amateur playwright. However, early in his career he was persuaded by the philosopher

Socrates (ca. 469–399 BCE) that playwriting was a waste of time, so he burned all of his plays. Later he wrote a series of dialogues between Socrates and others. These dialogues, conversation-like plays meant to be read rather than performed, deal with art, metaphysics, immortality, religion, morals, and drama. Plato also founded “The Academy,” which is often called the first university. His most famous student was Aristotle.

The philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) wrote on such diverse topics as logic, natural philosophy (what we would call physics today), astronomy, zoology, geography, chemistry, politics, history, psychology, and playwriting. His treatise *Poetics* is the first known text on how to write a play. Aristotle founded a rival school to Plato’s Academy called the “Lyceum.” His most famous student was Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE).

Plato accused those involved with the theatre of promoting “vice and wickedness.” In his book *The Republic* he says that people forget themselves and are highly manipulated—even irrational—when under the influence of the arts.



Plato and Aristotle (l to r), detail from Raphael's *The School of Athens* (1510–1511)

When people are confronted with a real work of art, they discover that they don't believe what they thought they believed all along. In a way, the great art, the great subversive art, is art that makes you realize that you don't think what you thought you did.

David Hare,
Playwright

the audience disagrees with the artist's interpretation, finds it offensive, or simply refuses to pay attention? For example, when playwright and filmmaker Neil LaBute was a student at Brigham Young University, he directed David Mamet's controversial play *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. The strong reaction made him think that the purpose of drama is to confront the audience. He now often writes plays and movies about homophobes and misogynists. His play *Filthy Talk for Troubled Times* was so controversial that some audience members shouted, “Kill the playwright!” Later LaBute said that performance was one of the best theatre experiences he has ever had. Many audience members disagreed.

This is nothing new. For millennia people have been debating whether art is simply a means to create objects of beauty, a tool to educate, or designed to incite. Two thousand and four hundred years ago the Greek playwright Aristophanes (ca. 450–ca. 388 BCE) argued that, “The dramatist should not only offer pleasure but should also be a teacher of morality and a political adviser.” Yet his near contemporary, Greek astronomer and mathematician Eratosthenes

He felt that the danger of the theatre is its power to instill values hostile to the community, so he banished the poets (by which he meant “playwrights,” but the word did not yet exist) from the ideal state in order to protect citizens from being mindlessly spellbound. He worried that when people join together in an audience, particularly young people, their thoughts can be swept away by the power of the crowd and as a result they lose the ability to reason for themselves. He said, “The poet is a sophist, a maker of counterfeits that look like the truth.”

If there had to be theatre, Plato felt that it must be subservient to the state and to society: playwrights should be of high moral character, appointed by official decree, and their writing should be closely supervised and their plays checked by a government-appointed panel of judges. He said, “The poet shall compose nothing contrary to the ideas of the lawful, or just, or beautiful, or good . . . nor shall he be permitted to show his composition to any private individual, until he shall have shown them to the appointed censors and the guardians of the law, and they are satisfied with them.” Plato justified this call for censorship by asserting that man is an imitative animal and tends to become what he imitates. He cautioned, therefore, that if we allow theatre we should ensure that it only contains characters that are suitable as role models.

Over the centuries, other philosophers have occasionally agreed with Plato. Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) disliked the theatre because he felt that the consciences of audience members stop functioning during performances. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) said that the arts “spread flowers over the chains that bind people, smothering their desire for liberty.”

Aristotle disagreed with his mentor, Plato. He felt that art and theatre do not stir undesirable passions, but rather they awaken the soul. He argued that seeing a play in which a son marries his mother, as in the ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, doesn’t cause the young men in the audience to run out and propose marriage to their mothers. (As modern independent film director John Waters once said, “No story is that good.”) Instead, he believed that good theatre fortifies us because it allows us to release repressed emotions in a controlled, therapeutic way.

Nature, according to Aristotle, tends toward perfection but doesn’t always attain it. We tend to be healthy but we become sick. We tend to be nonviolent but there is war. We tend toward love but there is hate. Therefore, we need art and theatre to correct the deficiencies of nature by clarifying, interpreting, and idealizing life.

(276–194 BCE), said the function of the theatre arts was to “charm the spirits of the listeners, but never to instruct them.” Similarly, Greek philosophers Plato (427–347 BCE) and his student Aristotle (384–322 BCE) disagreed about the nature of theatre. Aristotle believed theatre is a creation meant to interpret the world and awake the soul, but Plato maintained that art should be a tool of the state and promote the well-being of the body politic. The debate over what art is has been going on for centuries and will continue for centuries to come. (See Spotlight, “Plato, Aristotle, and the Theatre Arts.”)

The Qualities of Art

A few years ago, a janitor in a modern art gallery accidentally left his grimy mop and bucket on the gallery floor overnight. The next morning the gallery manager was shocked to find patrons gathered around the mess, admiring it as

Art was basically functional in far earlier times, a tool by which people could express their inner feelings. Just as they might demonstrate certain desires through dance, or voice joy or sorrow through song, so the mystical, unknown world of these early artists came alive in their drawing and paintings. This search into the visible and unknown worlds was mirrored in their artist creations; not art for art's sake, perhaps, but a tool to find a way, a connection, to the unknown.

Rabbi Moshe
Carmilly-Weinberger

a work of art. This story illustrates how difficult it is to provide an exact definition of a word like *art*. In fact, defining any abstract word can be a challenge, as you've probably noticed when you've looked up certain words in the dictionary and found that they mean a number of different things. In his book *Philosophical Investigations*, British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) points out that trying to find all-encompassing definitions is not only difficult but also introduces boundaries that limit our imagination. Instead, he suggests we define words by pointing out their “family resemblances,” or the ways in which the many different meanings of a word resemble one another. So rather than nailing down the exact definition of the word *art*, let's list the five basic qualities that all works of art share to a certain extent: human creation, subject and medium, structure, and reaction.

Human Expression

Human beings and only human beings can make art. The *American Heritage Dictionary* says art is “a *human effort* to imitate, supplement, alter, or counteract the work of nature.” *Webster's Deluxe Unabridged Dictionary* says that art is “the disposition or modification of things by *human skill* . . .” (emphasis added). From these definitions it is easy to see how the word *art* springs from the same root as the word *artificial*. It is not the real thing but rather a human creative endeavor that involves the perceptions and imagination of an artist who is trying to say something in his or her own particular way. And so every work of art has an individual style that reflects a person's talent, technique, historical period, and unique way of looking at the world. Therefore, the snow-capped Rocky Mountains, no matter how beautiful, meaningful, or inspiring, are *not* art because humans did not create them, and those same mountains cannot become art until a person interprets them through a medium such as oil paint on canvas.

Subject and Medium

Every work of art has a subject and a medium. The **subject** of the work is what that work is about, what it reflects or attempts to comprehend. The **medium** is the method, substance, style, and technique used to create the work. In other words, the medium is the vehicle for communication. For example, the subject of a painting may be a flower, but the medium is paint on canvas. The subject of a dance might be the beginning of spring, and its medium is choreographed physical movement. The subject of a song might be an “Achy Breaky Heart,” but the medium is a combination of words, tone, pitch, and volume. Every genre of art has a different medium that defines it and makes it unique. The **spatial arts**, such as sculpture and architecture, are created by manipulating material in space. The **pictorial arts**, such as drawing and painting, are created by applying line and color to two-dimensional surfaces. The **literary arts** are created with written language. Theatre is classified as a performing art, as are music, opera, and dance. The medium of the **performing arts** is an act performed by a person. In this way the performing arts are unique because they exist only in the time it takes an actor, singer, musician, or dancer to complete a performance. Therefore they also have a beginning, middle, and end. Once a performance ends, the work of art no longer exists, leaving behind no tangible object such as a painting or a statue.

Theatre is unique because it is the only art for which the medium and subject are exactly the same: the subjects of a play are human beings and human acts, and the mediums of a play are also human beings and human acts. The actors' bodies are like canvas and paint to the painter—they are the mediums of the art. But you might ask yourself: what about the musical *Cats*? That's not about humans and human acts; it's about felines, right? Actually, the emotions, thoughts, and actions staged for the musical are purely human—invented by humans to represent an idea of what cats might think and feel. Ultimately, people can only experience the world through their own senses and thoughts, and therefore any “animal,” “monster,” or even a child dressed up like a “tornado” in a school play is really a human idea of how an animal, monster, or tornado might think, feel, and behave.

Response

The power of art comes from its capacity to evoke a response. Art does not come to life until a spectator, a listener, or an audience breathes life into it by experiencing it. Art provokes in us a reaction that causes us to consider, judge, emote, or perceive meaning in some way. This reaction may be spiritual, emotional, intellectual, rational, or irrational. And that reaction, whatever it may be, often lingers long after the initial encounter. Yet each person views a work of art through the lenses of his or her own experiences, education, preconceptions, assumptions, and interests. And because each of us is unique, what constitutes *art* for one person may not be *art* for another. This is at the root of the difficulty in finding a definition of art on which most can agree. But it also means that arts education is critical. According to the educator and art philosopher Harold Taylor (1914–1993), the spectator must know how to “respond to other people

In one sense the aim of the scientist and the aim of the artist are the same since both are in pursuit of what they call truth; but the difference between them may be said to consist in this, that while for science there is only one truth, for the artist there are many.

Joseph Wood Krutch,
Author and philosopher



AP Images/Keystone/Georgios Keifalias

Like many artists, playwright and Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka has played an active role in politics. His efforts to broker a peace agreement during the 1967 Nigerian Civil War resulted in his arrest and 22 months in solitary confinement. Today, Soyinka continues to be an outspoken critic of political tyranny.

Life is very nice, but it lacks form. It's the aim of art to give it some.

Jean Anouilh,
Playwright

The world of the theatre is a world of sharper, clearer, swifter impressions than the world we live in.

Robert Edmond Jones,
Set designer

and other ideas, different from his own,” rather than react against them. Spectators must “learn to accept difference as natural rather than as a threat to their whole style of life.” In essence, Taylor is saying that art depends on the open minds of those who experience it. We need not approve of any given piece of art, yet we must attempt to understand the perspective of the artist who created it before we can dismiss it or judge it.

Perception of Order

It is often said that artists “select and arrange” their perceptions of the world and in doing so find or create a structure—a meaningful order or form. “It is the function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing order upon it,” said poet T. S. Eliot.

American philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand (1905–1982) interpreted the notion of structure in art quite elegantly with the following example. Imagine that a beautiful woman in a lovely evening gown enters a ballroom. She is perfect in every way except for the fact that she has a rather large, ugly cold sore on her lip. What do we make of it? What does it mean? Not much—many people are afflicted with cold sores, and they are perhaps unfortunate but have little meaning. However, if a painter paints a picture of a beautiful woman in a lovely evening gown and portrays her with the same ugly cold sore, the blemish suddenly takes on great importance.

This minor imperfection, says Rand, “acquires a monstrous significance by virtue of being included in the painting. It declares that a woman’s beauty and her efforts to achieve glamour are futile and that all our values and efforts are impotent against the power, not even of some great cataclysm, but of a miserable little physical infection.”

By including the cold sore—by emphasizing certain parts of life and de-emphasizing others—the artist finds order and imposes meaning. This editorial process troubles some who believe the artist’s duty is, as Shakespeare’s Hamlet says, to hold a “mirror up to nature.” Some people believe art should merely imitate life, nothing more. Yet, if art simply imitates, then it would serve only to reflect what we already see and experience, not help us understand it. Additionally, the process of “holding up a mirror” is inherently editorial anyway—even if one does set out to simply hold up a mirror to nature, what one chooses to reflect in the mirror is, in itself, an editorial process or value judgment that focuses our eyes on one particular setting or idea instead of another.

Art is never a slavish copy. It always is a selective re-creation that is given form by the artist’s individual view of existence. Perhaps the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman said it best: “To be an artist means to give form and shape to what otherwise would be shapeless and formless. To manipulate probabilities. To impose an ‘order’ on what otherwise would be ‘chaos’; to ‘organize’ an otherwise chaotic—random, haphazard and so unpredictable—collection of things and events by making certain events more likely to happen than all others.” When artists find order they also cultivate insight and understanding about our world and ourselves. (See Spotlight, “To Be an Artist Means Finding Form and Structure.”) This means that inherent in any work of art are the artist’s opinions, interpretations, philosophy, and beliefs. In short, art is inherently political and often has political consequences.

SPOTLIGHT ON To Be an Artist Means Finding Form and Structure

French novelist Gustave Flaubert said that emotions are important in art, but that feelings are not everything: “Art is nothing without form.” Our need for form and structure is really the need to simplify. At nearly fifteen hundred pages, *War and Peace* is a condensed version of the French invasion of Russia, the play *Long Day’s Journey into Night* is an edited version of Eugene O’Neill’s family traumas, and $E = mc^2$ is an abbreviated version of Einstein’s insights. Why do we need a simplified structure? The great Russian writer Dostoyevsky said humans “crave miracles, mystery, and authority.” In other words, we crave a well-structured map through the confounding experiences of life.

Our need for structure shows itself in common phrases like “Everything happens for a reason,” “What goes around comes around,” or “God helps those who help themselves.” Each statement takes the raw data of nature, edits it, and adds structure. The result is theme. Theme comes when one begins to see patterns in nature and life—whether those patterns are imagined or real. Anthropologist Pascal Boyer called this the “hypertrophy of social cognition,” which is our tendency to see purpose, intention, and design where only randomness exists.

For example, the first day you walk to your new job, it is novel. Perhaps you pass a house with a red door, a tree shaped like a Y, and a park bench near a bus stop. At first the door, the tree, and the bench

have no meaning. But as you walk to work the next day and the next, the walk develops a structure. The red door means you are at the beginning of your walk; the tree denotes the midway point, while the bench signifies the end. If you begin to dislike your employment, the door, tree, and bench can take on new significance. The red door symbolizes how you hate to leave your house, the tree the missed opportunity to take the “Y” in the road, and the park bench your desire to retire. Your walk now has structure, and, as a result, theme and meaning. Years later, long after you have left the job, when you see a similar door, tree, or bench you will read meaning into it even though no inherent meaning, theme, or structure exists.

Humans need structure and theme because the world in which we find ourselves appears to be disorganized or at least lacking in purposeful design. Nature, says Adam Phillips in his book *Darwin’s Worms*, does not “have what we could call a mind of its own, something akin to human intelligence. Nor does nature have a project for us; it cannot tell us what to do; only we can. It doesn’t bear us in mind because it doesn’t have a mind. . . .” Some argue that there is a chaos to nature, others that nature has too much structure. Either way, we must simplify in order to find meaning or to create it.

Art, along with science and religion, helps us find structure; with structure comes meaning.



Shozo Sato



William Missouri Downs

On the right is a photo of Sawtooth Mountain in Colorado, on the left Sumi-E artist Shozo Sato’s painting of the same mountain. An artist takes the raw data of life and edits it into order to find or impose order and meaning.