Artistic Process and Training

This module explores the artistic process and the art industry surrounding it: from individual artists turning ideas into works of art to collaborative creative projects, public art and the viewer. It covers the following topics:

- The Artistic Process
- The Individual Artist
- Artistic Training Methods and Cultural Considerations
- Support Networks
- The Role of Museums and Critics
- Art as a Social Activity

The Artistic Process

How many times have you looked at a work of art and wondered “how did they do that”? Some think of the artist as a solitary being, misunderstood by society, toiling away in the studio to create a masterpiece, and yes, there is something fantastic about a singular creative act becoming a work of art. The reality is that artists rely on a support network that includes family, friends, peers, industries, business and, in essence, the whole society they live in. For example, an artist may need only a piece of paper and pencil to create an extraordinary drawing, but depends on a supplier in order to acquire those two simple tools. Whole industries surround art making, and artists rely on many different materials in order to realize their work, from the pencil and paper mentioned above to the painter’s canvas, paints and brushes, the sculptor’s wood, stone and tools and the photographer’s film, digital camera and software or chemicals used to manipulate an image.

After the artwork is finished there are other support networks in place to help exhibit, market, move, store and comment on it. Commercial art galleries are a relatively recent innovation, springing up in Europe and America during the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. As these societies concentrated their populations in cities and formed a middle class, there was a need for businesses to provide works of art for sale to a population that began to have more spare time and some discretionary income. As art became more affordable, the gallery became a place to focus solely on buying and selling, and, in the process, making art a commodity.

Museums have a different role in the world of visual art. Their primary function is in the form of a cultural repository – a place for viewing, researching and conserving the very best examples of artistic cultural heritage. Museums contain collections that can reflect a particular culture or that of many, giving all of us the chance to see some of the great arthumanity has to offer.
The role of the critic commenting on art is another function in the process. Critics offer insight into art’s meaning and make judgments determining ‘good’ or ‘bad’ art based on the intellectual, aesthetic and cultural standards they reflect. We will take a closer look at the role of the critic when we explore meaning in another module.

In this way, museums, galleries and critics have become gatekeepers in helping to determine what is considered art within a culture like our own.

**The Individual Artist**

Inasmuch as we have seen art as a community or collaborative effort, many artists work alone in studios, dedicated to the singular idea of creating art through their own expressive means and vision. In the creative process itself there are usually many steps between an initial idea and the finished work of art. Artists will use sketches and preliminary drawings to get a more accurate image of what they want the finished work to look like. Even then they’ll create more complex trial pieces before they ultimately decide on how it will look. View and read about some of the sketches for Picasso’s masterpiece *Guernica* from 1937 to see how the process unfolds. Artists many times will make different versions of an artwork, each time giving it a slightly different look.

Some artists employ assistants or staff to run the everyday administration of the studio; maintaining supplies, helping with set up and lighting, managing the calendar and all the things that can keep an artist away from the creative time they need in order to work.

Some artists don’t actually make their own works. They hire people with specialized skills to do it for them under the artist’s direction. Fabricators and technicians are needed when a work of art’s size, weight or other limitations make it impossible for the artist to create it alone. Glass artist Dale Chihuly employs many assistants to create and install his glass forms.

**Becoming an Artist: Training**

For centuries craftsmen have formed associations that preserve and teach the ‘secrets’ of their trade to apprentices in order to perpetuate the knowledge and skill of their craft. In general, the training of artists has historically meant working as an apprentice with an established artist. The Middle Ages in Europe saw the formation of guilds that included goldsmiths, glassmakers, stonemasons, medical practitioners and artists, and were generally supported by a king or the state, with local representatives overseeing the quality of their production. In many traditional cultures, apprenticeship is still how the artist learns their craft, skills and expressions specific to that culture. Some nations actually choose which artists have learned their skill to such a degree that they are allowed and encouraged to teach others. An example would be artists considered National Treasures in Japan. In the developed nations, where education is more available and considered more important that experience, art schools have developed. The model for these schools is the French Royal Academy founded by Louis XIV in the 17th century. In the 19th century, the Victorians first introduced art to the
grade schools, thinking that teaching the work of the masters would increase morality and that teaching hand-eye coordination would make better employees for the Industrial Revolution. These ideas still resonate, and are one of the reasons art is considered important to children’s education. A recent New York Times article by Steve Lohr explains how this notion has carried into the realm of high technology and the digital arts. A woman quoted in the article says that a proficiency in digital animation is an asset less for technical skills than for what she learned about analytic thinking.

Like most skilled professions and trades, artists spend many years learning and applying their knowledge, techniques and creativity. Art schools are found in most colleges and universities, with degree programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. There are independent art schools offering two and four year programs in traditional studio arts, graphic arts and design. The degree earned by students usually ends with a culminating exhibition and directs them towards becoming exhibiting artists, graphic designers or teachers. Such degrees also consider the marketing and sales practices of art in contemporary culture. Click the hyperlink to view some of the different art schools.

Many artists learn their craft on their own through practice, study and experimentation. Whether they come from art schools or not, it takes a strong desire to practice and become an artist today. There are no longer the historical opportunities to work under church, state or cultural sponsorships. Instead the artist is driven to sell their work in some other venue, from a craft fair to a big New York City gallery (New York City is the official center of art and culture in the United States). There are very few communities that can support the selling of art on a large scale, as it is generally considered a luxury item often linked to wealth and power. This is a modern reflection of the original role of the art gallery.

What is required to become an artist? Skill is one of the hallmarks that we often value in a work of art. Becoming skilled means a continual repetition of a craft or procedure until it becomes second nature. Talent is certainly another consideration, but talent alone does not necessarily produce good art. Like any endeavor, becoming an artist takes determination, patience, skill, a strong mental attitude and years of practice.

Creativity is another element necessary to become an artist. What exactly is creativity? It’s linked to imagination and the ability to transcend traditional ways of thinking, with an exaggerated use of alternatives, ideas and techniques to invent new forms and avenues of expression. The music composer Leo Ornstein described creativity this way:

“Once you’ve heard what you’ve created you can’t explain how it’s done. But you look at it and say ‘there’s the evidence’.”

Creativity is used in traditional art forms as well as more innovative ones. It’s what an artist uses to take something ordinary and make it extraordinary. Creativity can be a double-edged sword in that it’s one thing that artists are most criticized for, especially in the arena of buying and selling art. In general the buying public tends to want things.
they recognize, rather than artwork that challenges or requires thinking. This dichotomy is illustrated by a poem by English writer Robert Graves, “Epitaph on an Unfortunate Artist”:

He found a formula for drawing comic rabbits  
This formula for drawing comic rabbits paid,  
So in the end he could not change the tragic habits  
This formula for drawing comic rabbits made.

The ability to give visual expression is really what art is all about. It can range from creating pieces just for beauty’s sake (aesthetics) or for social, political or spiritual meaning. To fully appreciate the artist and their voice we need to consider that if we value expression we must value a multitude of voices, some of which contradict our own values and ideas. The artistic process culminates in a form of human expression that reaches all of us at some level.

**Art as Social Activity**

Some of the grandest works of art are made not by a single person but by many people. Pyramids in Egypt and Mexico are massive structures, built by hundreds of laborers under the direction of designers and engineers. Egyptian pyramids are tombs for individual royalty, while those in Mexico function as spiritual altars dedicated to gods or **celestial** objects. They are typically placed at a prominent site and give definition to the surrounding landscape. Their construction is the cumulative effort of many people, and they become spectacular works of art without the signature of a single artist.

A more contemporary example of art making as a community effort is the AIDS Memorial Quilt Project. Begun in 1987, the project memorializes the thousands of lives lost to the disease through the creation of quilts by families and friends. Blocks of individual quilts are sewn together to form larger sections, virtually joining people together to share their grief and celebrate the lives of those lost. The project is evidence of the beauty and visual spectacle of a huge community artwork. Today there are over 40,000 individual blocks. The quilt project is ongoing, growing in size, and exhibited throughout the world.

Many artists collaborate with non-artists in arrangements designed to produce work for a specific place. Public art is a good example of this. The process usually begins with a select panel of the public and private figures involved in the project who call for submissions of creative ideas surrounding a particular topic or theme, then a review of the ideas submitted and the artist’s selection. Funding sources for these projects vary from private donations to the use of public tax dollars or a combination of the two. Many states have “1% for Art” laws on the books which stipulate that one percent of the cost of any public construction project be used for artwork to be placed on the site. After the selection process the artist will commence on an intense collaboration with architects, engineers, public administrators and others connected with the project, ultimately resulting in the installation of a public artwork. Because of its complexity this
process needs to be expertly managed. Other countries have similar programs. All of them allow individual artists and collaborative teams the chance to put a definitive creative stamp on public spaces. You can view Flemish artist Arne Quinze’s public art work *The Sequence* below.

![Arne Quinze, The Sequence, 2008. Wood. Installed at the Flemish Parliament Building, Brussels. This image in the public domain.](image)

Public art projects can be subject to controversy. It’s not easy for everyone to agree on what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ art, or at least what is appropriate for a public space. The issue takes on a more complex perspective when public money is involved in its funding. One example involves Richard Serra’s sculpture *Tilted Arc* from 1981.

Time, resources, a space to work in, a supportive family and public, a culture that respects skill and values creativity and expression: all of these are useful for the artist to thrive. What does an artist give back to society? They give voice to speak of those things that language cannot describe, and an experience that pays attention to aesthetics and an interest in the world. They give expression to what it is to be human in all its positive and negative forms. A wonderful example of this is provided in the photography of Don Tremain. His ‘Salty Dogs’ series of black and white images featuring country musicians quietly speaks to the power of music and the aesthetic image in art and their connection to community, place and the singular creative act.