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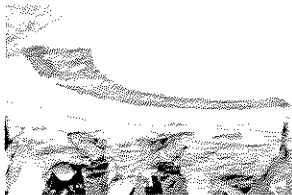
# "What is Art?" - Modern Art Theories for Introducing Aesthetics to Students

Essentialism, Modern Art Theory & Aesthetics, A Guide for Art Teachers on Getting Kids to Think Critically



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It is best to display artwork beside each of the theories to give students a visual reference.

Takeaways Did You Know

Art teachers know how important it is to explain Art theory and discuss aesthetics with students. We know that basic Art theory is part of the entire discipline of Art - something that deserves critical thought by students, and not just glazed over in a rush to "check off" a state standard. But getting students to think critically about Art is hard to do, while keeping them motivated and interested in what can be considered a very abstract and hard-to-digest concept. Although there are many directions in which Art teachers could go in explaining aesthetics to their students, I've broken down the very basics of Essentialism and Modern Art Theory, in a way that kids can understand.

Essentialism - A Modern Theory of Art

Essentialism is the idea that any piece of artwork has a certain quality to it, or an essence that exists. It is by this very essence - or by having these certain qualities - that something can be called Art. On the other hand, if something does not have these qualities, then it is not Art.

### Popular Essentialist Theories of Art

Now that it is understood that an object needs to have specific, defined qualities to be considered Art, the question is... what are these qualities that the object needs to show to be called Art? The problem in this question is that a lot of people disagree on what the right answer is! Although there are many viewpoints, here are six of the most popular Essentialist theories of what "good" Arts and should be (and they are all valid viewpoints):

#### 1. Representation (a.k.a. Realism, Imitation, Mimesis):

The idea that good art should portray its subject as realistically as possible. An artwork is considered successful if it looks like and imitates nature and what is seen in the real world.

#### 2. Expressionism:

The idea that good art should express the inner feelings, attitudes, desires and mental state of the artist. An artwork is considered successful if it clearly shows the emotion of the artist.

#### 3. Formalism:

The idea that good art should utilize the formal principles and elements of Art in its composition. An artwork is considered successful if it effectively makes use of color, line, shape, texture, pattern, rhythm, etc. to be appealing to the eye.

#### 4. Communication of Moral & Religious Ideas:

The idea that good art should promote moral or religious messages, a sense of what is right and

wrong, what is ideal, or what ought to be." An artwork is successful if it communicates a clear message to the viewer and instills in them the intended underlying values.

**5. Instrumentalism:**

The idea that good art should be useful and should help shed light on our life experiences and social issues. An artwork is successful if it becomes a means to an end, making the viewer comprehend an issue, reflect on their life, take a stand or take action.

**6. Institutionalism:**

The idea that good art does not need to follow any prescribed rules or set of guidelines, but merely needs to be defined as 'Art' by a person or institution with authority, such as a scholar, critic, expert, artist or museum. If the artist says its art, or if a museum displays it... then it's Art. An artwork is successful if it is displayed, exhibited, talked about, written about or made mention of. This theory can encompass a lot of Conceptual or Installation Art.

**How to Apply Modern Art Theory in the Art Room**

Because Art Theory can be a difficult concept for students, I have traditionally waited until my Art students were in about sixth grade before we tackled this material. However, depending on the maturity of your students, you could begin explaining Theory earlier than this, or when the students are older. The Aesthetics and Theory information above can be broken down into informational, matching or fill-in-the-blank worksheets to pass out to students, used in quizzes or art games, written on educational posters, used in Power Points, made into crosswords, or any other way you want to teach your Art students!

It has traditionally worked very well in my classes that, after we discussed each of the Modern Art Theories above, I displayed selected artworks to the class and had the students discuss or debate into which category they belonged. I have also, for my older students, given Theory quizzes, in which artworks were shown, and the students needed to write which theory they thought it belonged to and defend their answer. It is also a good idea to have students decide which modern theory of Art that they most agree with - this can lead to multiple opportunities for discussion, learning, and understanding that everyone has a different - but valid - viewpoint.

I have found that it is best to display artwork alongside each of the theories to give students a valuable visual reference to each category. For instance, examples of each category could include the following (links are to the corresponding artworks):

**- Representation: "Carnations and Clematis in a Crystal Vase" by Edouard Manet -**  
[http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/Still\\_Life](http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/Still_Life)

**- Expressionism: "The Scream" by Edvard Munch -**  
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**- Formalism: "Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red" by Piet Mondrian -**  
[http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/PietMondrian\\_ComplexK.jpg](http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/PietMondrian_ComplexK.jpg)

**- Communication of Moral & Religious Ideas: "The Child's Bath" by Mary Cassatt -**  
[http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/MaryCassatt\\_The\\_Bath.jpg](http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/MaryCassatt_The_Bath.jpg)

**- Instrumentalism: "The Problem We All Live With" by Norman Rockwell -**  
[http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/The\\_Problem\\_We\\_All\\_Live\\_With\\_Norman\\_Rockwell.jpg](http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/The_Problem_We_All_Live_With_Norman_Rockwell.jpg)

**- Institutionalism: "Fountain" by Marcel Duchamp -**  
[http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/The\\_Fountain\\_Fountain.jpg](http://en.wikispedia.org/wiki/The_Fountain_Fountain.jpg)

Both you and your students may find that many artworks can fit into multiple categories. For instance, "A Child's Bath" by Mary Cassatt (listed above) could possibly be considered 'Art' by both the Representation and the Communication of Moral & Religious Ideas theories. This is fine, because it will lead to more discussion among the students.