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The Invention of Art:

A Cultural History

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Introduction

TODAY YOU can call virtually anything "art" and get away with it. One reason for the explosion in what counts as art is that the art world itself has taken up the old theme of getting "art" and "life" back together. Gestures of this kind have lurched between the innocent and the outrageous, from taking quilts into fine art museums or pulp fiction into literature courses, to playing street noises in symphony halls or undergoing plastic surgery on satellite video. The entry of so many eccentric artifacts, writings, noises, and performances into fine art has led some to talk darkly of a "death" of art, or literature, or classical music. Others, wrapped in the banner of postmodernism, agree that the modern fine art system is dead but invite us to dance on its grave in celebration of yet another liberation.

I am less interested in whether we ought to dance or weep than in understanding how we have come to this place. If we want to make sense of the explosion in what counts as art and the yearning to reunite art and life, we need to understand where the modern ideas and institutions of fine art came from. The modern system of art is not an essence or a fate but something we have made. Art as we have generally understood it is a European invention barely two hundred years old. It was preceded by a broader, more utilitarian system of art that lasted over two thousand years, and it is likely to be followed by a third system of the arts. What some critics fear or applaud as the death of art or literature or serious music may only be the end of a particular social institution constructed in the course of the eighteenth century.

Yet, like so much else that emerged from the Enlightenment, the European idea of fine art was believed to be universal, and European and American armies, missionaries, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals have been doing their best to make it so ever since. Scholars and critics ascribed it to the ancient Chinese and Egyptians, and once the European colonial grip was firmly established, Western artists and critics discovered that the conquered peoples of Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific had all along possessed something called "primitive art." This assimilation of the activities and artifacts of all peoples and



Figure 1. Florentine cassone with panel showing the conquest of Trebizond (fifteenth century), made by Marco de Buono Giamberti and Appollonio di Giovanni de Tomaso. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, John Steward Kennedy Fund, 1913. (14.39.) All Rights Reserved.

all past epochs to our notions has now been around for so long that the universality of the European idea of art is taken for granted.

Unfortunately, popular histories, museum displays, symphony programs, and literary anthologies encourage our natural bent to focus on whatever in the past seems most like the present and to pass over differences. For example, Renaissance paintings are almost always presented framed on museum walls or isolated on lecture hall screens or art book pages with little to remind us that almost all were originally made for a specific purpose and place—parts of altars or wedding chests, built into bedroom walls or council hall ceilings (fig. 1). Similarly, Shakespeare's plays were written not as fixed and timeless "works" to be read as masterpieces of literature but as changeable scripts for popular performance. Viewing Renaissance paintings in isolation, like reading Shakespeare's plays out of literature anthologies or listening to Bach passions in a symphony hall, reinforces the false impression that the people of the past shared our notion of art as a realm of autonomous works meant for aesthetic contemplation. Only by a deliberate effort can we break the trance induced by our culture and

see that the category of fine art is a recent historical construction that could disappear in its turn.

The Great Division

The illusion that the modern ideals and practices of art are universal and eternal or at least go back to ancient Greece or the Renaissance has been easier to swallow thanks to an ambiguity in the word "art" itself. The English word "art" is derived from the Latin *ars* and Greek *technē*, which meant any human skill whether horse breaking, verse writing, shoemaking, vase painting, or governing. The opposite of human art in that older way of thinking was not craft but nature. Some of the older sense of "art" lingers on in our use of the phrase "an art" for things such as medicine or cooking. But in the eighteenth century a fateful division occurred in the traditional concept of art. After over two thousand years of signifying any human activity performed with skill and grace, the concept of art was split apart, generating the new category fine arts (poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, music) as opposed to crafts and popular arts (shoemaking, embroidery, storytelling, popular songs, etc.). The fine arts, it was now said, are a matter of inspiration and genius and meant to be enjoyed for themselves in moments of refined pleasure, whereas the crafts and popular arts require only skill and rules and are meant for mere use or entertainment. But this historic change of meaning became difficult to remember after nineteenth-century usage dropped the adjective "fine" and spoke only of art versus craft or art versus entertainment or art versus society. Today, when we ask, "Is it really art?" we no longer mean, "Is it a human rather than a natural product?" but "Does it belong in the prestigious category of (fine) art?"

What has been effaced in ordinary usage is not only the fracturing of the older idea of art/craft into art *versus* craft, but a parallel division that separated the artist from the craftsman and aesthetic concerns from utility and ordinary pleasures. Before the eighteenth century, the terms "artist" and "artisan" were used interchangeably, and the word "artist" could be applied not only to painters and composers but also to shoemakers and wheelwrights, to alchemists and liberal arts students. There were neither artists nor artisans, in the modern meaning of those terms, but only the artisan/artists who constructed their poems and paintings, watches and boots according to a *technē* or *ars*, an art/craft. But by the end of the eighteenth century, "artist" and "artisan" had become opposites; "artist" now meant the creator of works of fine art whereas "artisan" or "craftsman" meant the mere maker of something useful or entertaining.

A third and equally fateful division occurred in the eighteenth century: pleasure in the arts was divided into a special, refined pleasure appropriate to the fine arts and the ordinary pleasures that we take in the useful or entertaining. The refined or contemplative pleasure came to be called by the new name "aesthetic." The older and broader view of art as construction was compatible with enjoyment in a functional context; the new idea of art as creation called for a contemplative attitude and a separation from context. M. H. Abrams has called this change a "Copernican revolution" in the concept of art: "In the course of a single century . . . the construction model . . . was replaced by the contemplation model, which treated the products of all the fine arts as . . . objects of rapt attention" (1989, 140). By the early nineteenth century the older idea of function in the arts was also divided, with the fine arts given a transcendent spiritual role of revealing higher truth or healing the soul. Heretofore, the idea of disinterested contemplation had been applied primarily to God; now art, for many of the cultured elite, was about to become a new arena of spiritual investment.

Because this conceptual revolution along with its related institutions still governs our cultural practices, it takes some effort to appreciate the depth of the rupture that had occurred. It was not merely the substitution of one definition of art for another, as if the word "art" designated a neutral and unchanging substrate, but the substitution of one entire system of concepts, practices, and institutions for another. In the older art system, the idea of art as any kind of object or performance for use or diversion went hand in hand with institutions that joined together what we separate as arts, crafts, and sciences. Instead of the modern art museum, for example, the sixteenth and seventeenth century had the "cabinet of curiosities," which displayed seashells, clocks, sculptures, and precious stones as a visual table of knowledge. Instead of separate concert halls, most music accompanied religious worship, political ceremony, or social recreation. Most artisan/artists worked on commissions from patrons whose contracts often specified content, form, and materials and envisaged a specific place and purpose for the finished piece. Even Leonardo da Vinci signed a contract for *Virgin of the Rocks* that specified the contents, the color of the Virgin's robe, the date of delivery, and a guarantee of repairs. Similarly, professional writers spent much of their time copying, note taking, and letter writing for their employers or churning out birthday poems, encomiums, and satirical attacks as required. Moreover, making art was usually a cooperative affair, with many minds and hands involved, whether in painting frescoes (Raphael), in the multiple authorship of theater productions (Shakespeare), or in the free borrowing of melodies and harmonies among composers (Bach). How different the dominant norms of the modern system of (fine) art are, where the ideal is not in-

ventive collaboration but individual creation, where works are seldom meant for a specific place or purpose but exist for themselves, where the separation of art works from a functional context leads to the ideal of silent and reverential attention in concert halls, art museums, theaters, and reading rooms.

But the new system of fine arts not only was tied to behaviors and institutions, it was also part of more general relations of power and gender. The key factor in splitting apart the old art system was the replacement of patronage by an art market and a middle-class art public. When Friedrich Schiller and other eighteenth-century German writers championed the new ideas of the self-contained work of art and the need for a special aesthetic response to it, they were specifically reacting to their own frustrations with the art market and the new public. Of course, a central belief of the modern system of art has always been that money and class are irrelevant to the creation and appreciation of art. But to elevate some genres to the spiritual status of fine art and their producers to heroic creators while relegating other genres to the status of mere utility and their producers to fabricators is more than a conceptual transformation. And when the genres and activities chosen for elevation and those chosen for demotion reinforce race, class, and gender lines, what once looked like a purely conceptual change begins to look like an underwriting of power relations as well. If women's needlework has been rescued from the dungeon of "domestic art" to enter the main floor of our art museums, it is partly because pressure from the women's movement finally overcame a long-standing gender bias of the fine art system. So long as the modern system of art remains the established norm, feminist insistence on getting women into art institutions is certainly the order of the day. Yet women should not be satisfied with just getting "into" art but should recognize that fine art assumptions themselves have been gendered from the beginning and need to be fundamentally reshaped. Similarly, the multiculturalist movement is right to want the genres and works of excluded minorities to enter the literary, art, and music curricula, yet the very success of this effort could end up reinforcing the imperial claims of the Euro-American system of the fine arts unless we critique its underlying divisions. Instead of simply assimilating the arts of traditional African or Native American cultures to European norms in the patronizing belief that we pay them a compliment, we need to learn from their very different understanding of the arts and their place in society.

Although the modern system of fine arts has dominated European and American culture since the early nineteenth century, some artists and critics have resisted its basic polarities of art versus craft, artist versus artisan, aesthetic versus purpose. In later chapters I will explore a few instances of this resistance

since one task of history is to give voice to those possibilities and ideals defeated, marginalized, or forgotten. For example, people like Hogarth, Rousseau, and Wollstonecraft rejected the splitting apart of artist and artisan and of the aesthetic and instrumental even as these divisions were taking place, and equally radical challenges came from Emerson, Ruskin, and Morris, who struck at the underlying art-versus-craft and art-versus-life dichotomies. Then there have been the twentieth-century mockers, doubters, and ironists of art, from the dadaists and Duchamp, to the leading figures of pop and conceptual art. Despite this long tradition of resistance, the works of most of the resisters and apostates from the norms of fine art have been quickly absorbed back into the Church of Art and are now ensconced in the very art museums and literary and musical canons they meant to mock. But even as the fine art world was recapturing acts of resistance, it was also expanding its own limits, first by assimilating new types of art, such as photography, film, or jazz, then by appropriating works of “primitive” and folk art, and finally by seemingly dissolving its own boundaries completely by embracing everything from self-mutilation to the noises of John Cage.

Despite all these assimilations, the modern system of art has retained its most general features even in the gestures and writings of those who challenge it. When critics like Rosalind Krauss expose the “myth of the avant-garde” or artists like Sherrie Levine exhibit photographic copies of Walker Evans’s works as a parody of “originality,” they pay tribute to the norms of the modern system of art even as they challenge them. One reason I emphasize that art is not just an “idea” but is, instead, a system of ideals, practices, and institutions is to show that much of the current rhetoric about the death of art or literature or serious music—whether alarmist or celebratory—underestimates the staying power of the established art system.

So far, I have not touched on what may be the most important dimension of art: feeling. To talk of art as a “system of concepts, practices, and institutions” hardly does justice to the powerful emotions people experience through literature, music, dance, theater, film, painting, sculpture, and architecture. Art is not just a set of concepts and institutions but also something people believe in, a source of comfort, an object of love. To those who love art, my claim that the idea of fine art is a recent and parochial construction, marked by class and gender interests, will seem part of a hostile conspiracy to undermine one of our highest values. In the acrimonious debates over literary theory during recent decades, traditionalists have often accused their opponents of “hostility to literature.” A few years ago, one prominent literary theorist beat his breast in public, declaring that he no longer taught his students literary theory but the love

of literature (Lentricchia 1996). The traditionalists’ and the repentents’ anger at skeptical theories and histories is understandable. If one loves literature, why try to expose its questionable paternity? As an artist friend of mine exclaimed after I described the thesis of this book one day, “Don’t do it! Don’t we artists have enough trouble already?” I confess that I too am a lover of the arts. But one need not belong to the party of “hostility” to literature, art, or music to explore the historical roots of one’s beliefs as a prelude to rethinking existing ideals and institutions.

My history of art’s fateful division asks: What would the story of the ideas and institutions of the fine arts look like if we no longer wrote it as the inevitable triumph of Art over craft, Artist over artisan, Aesthetic over function and ordinary pleasure? What if we wrote our history from a perspective more sympathetic to a system of art that tried to hold together imagination and skill, pleasure and use, freedom and service? From that vantage point, the construction of the modern system of art would look less like a great liberation than a fracture we have been trying to heal ever since.

Part I, “Before Fine Art and Craft,” explores some striking cases from the more than two-thousand-year period when “art” still meant human making or performance of any kind dedicated to a purpose and when the distinction between artist and artisan was not yet normative. I argue against the widely held belief that the Renaissance established the modern ideals of art, artist, and aesthetic and show, that despite important steps in that direction, the older system that united art and craft, artisan and artist was still the norm in both Michelangelo’s Italy and Shakespeare’s England. Part II, “Art Divided,” describes the great fracture in the older system of art that occurred in the course of the eighteenth century, finally severing fine art from craft, artist from artisan, the aesthetic from the instrumental and establishing such institutions as the art museum, the secular concert, and copyright. These central chapters also explore the social, economic, and gender aspects of that rupture. Part III, “Counter Currents,” looks at three cases of resistance to a disinterested aesthetic (Hogarth, Rousseau, and Wollstonecraft) and then examines the audacious attempts of the French Revolution to revitalize the old system of art for a purpose only to end up accelerating the arrival of the new system of art for itself. Part IV, “The Apotheosis of Art,” completes the story of the construction of the fine art system by showing how the nineteenth century raised Art to the level of the highest values, made the artist’s vocation a unique spiritual calling, and spread the institutions of fine art over Europe and the Americas, inculcating the proper aesthetic behavior along the way. Yet there have also been many new arts added to the category of fine art over the past 150 years, even as there have been many

new forms of resistance to it. Part V, “Beyond Fine Art and Craft,” examines a few examples of these expansions and challenges, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to show how the modern system of art has been able to assimilate both new arts (photography) and new forms of resistance (arts and crafts, Russian constructivism) without altering its basic polarities. The final chapter of part V looks at some twentieth-century examples of the continuing force of the fine art—versus-craft division and its use to assimilate new areas of the arts by division (primitive art), as well as some of the vigorous signs of resistance (community-based art). Together the processes of assimilation and resistance have seriously undermined the polarities of the fine art system, raising the question of whether we are moving toward a third system of art.

For the sake of clarity in exposition, most chapters are organized around three central concepts and their allied institutions: the category of art, the ideal of the artist, and the experience of the aesthetic. Although it is possible to understand the later chapters of the book by beginning with part II, the chapters of part I provide insights into the world that was lost in the great division and can help us understand why some people have been trying to overcome the separation of art and craft, art and life ever since. Those interested in the difficulties created by the multiple meanings of words like “art,” “craft,” “artist,” “artisan,” and “aesthetic,” or wonder why I use “system” of art rather than the more familiar “art world,” or how there could be a “revolution” rather than merely an evolution in the concept of art may wish to read the next section before proceeding.

Words and Institutions

This book was inspired by Paul Oskar Kristeller’s essays of fifty years ago showing that the category of fine art did not exist before the eighteenth century (1950 [1990]). Although some recent surveys in the history of the arts now give a passing nod to Kristeller’s thesis, I have long felt that students and general readers could benefit from a brief account that integrated the history of the idea of fine art and the aesthetic with social and institutional changes, expanded it to include the concept of the artist, and brought the whole down to the present, showing its relevance to current debates.¹ Since I began this project over a decade ago, several others have also begun to flesh out Kristeller’s description by connecting the concept of art to practices, institutions, and social changes (Beccq 1994a; Woodmansee 1994; Mortensen 1997). In writing a cultural rather than a purely intellectual history, I have tried to capture this wider social and institutional component by combining the idea that certain concepts and ideals

“regulate” artistic practice with the notion that artistic practices and institutions form a social “subsystem” (Kernan 1989; Goehr 1992). Regulatory concepts and ideals of art and social systems of art are reciprocal: concepts and ideals cannot exist without a system of practices and institutions (composing and symphony orchestras, collecting and art museums, canons and copyright) any more than the institutions can function without a network of normative concepts and ideals (artist and work, creation and masterpiece).² I thought of calling this book a “social history of ideas” but that might have suggested its theme was the social determination of ideas rather than the mutual dependence of ideals and social changes. I have chosen the more general term “cultural history” since it suggests a meeting of the social and intellectual, the point of intersection for which I take to be the art institutions established in the eighteenth century. The important role of institutions in mediating between ideas and general social and economic forces is further examined in the overview to part II, “Art Divided.”

I have chosen “system of art” over the more familiar “art world” because an art system has a larger scope that includes the various art worlds and subworlds of literature, music, dance, theater, film, and visual arts. Art worlds are networks of artists, critics, audiences, and others who share a common field of interest along with a commitment to certain values, practices, and institutions. An art system embraces the underlying concepts and ideals shared by various art worlds and by the culture at large, including those who only participate marginally in one of the art worlds. For example, the ideal of the “artist” in the modern system of fine art has many common features (freedom, imagination, originality), which underlie the specific ideals of the author and the composer in literature and music, respectively. Obviously, there has been much historical variation in the interpretation of such norms, but some assumptions and practices are sufficiently general to permit a contrast between an older system of art and the modern system of fine arts.³ I use the term “modern” in “modern system of art” simply as a marker to contrast the “old” system of art with the “new” system of (fine) art and do not intend thereby any claim about when the “modern era” as a whole began or whether we are now living in a “postmodern” era. The “eighteenth century” designates the center of a period stretching from around 1680 to 1830, during which time the various elements that make up the modern system of art came together and were consolidated.

Of course, the linguistic, intellectual, and institutional evidence for a decisive turn in the course of the long eighteenth century does not form itself into a neat array of facts marching in lockstep to a magical date when the modern system of art became regulative. The transformation in each of the component

concepts of fine art and the emergence of new art institutions varied in timing, as well as by geography and by genre. The prestige and role of the poet, for example, had a very different development from that of the painter, and the separation of imaginative literature from literature in general did not coincide perfectly with the split of the visual arts into fine art versus craft. It is also clear that painting, sculpture, and architecture and their makers achieved “liberal arts” status in Italy well before they did in the rest of Europe, and in Florence before the rest of Italy, and that the term “aesthetic” was regulative in German discourse on art decades before it was the norm in France or England.

In ordinary usage, the term “art” can designate either the visual arts alone or the fine arts as a group; I include all genres of fine art, although I will focus on painting, literature, music, architecture, theater, and photography. But how should we mark the difference between the older, broader understanding of “art” and the narrower modern sense of (fine) “art”? Given the ambiguity of the simple word “art” in the lower case, the two senses are often held apart by capitalization: art in general versus Art. But capitalization creates its own problems. Consider the opening paragraph of one of the most widely read popular histories of the visual arts, E. H. Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*:

There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists. Once these were men who took colored earth and roughed out the forms of a bison on the wall of a cave. . . . There is no harm in calling all these activities art as long as we keep in mind that such a word may mean very different things in different times and places, and as long as we realize that Art with a capital A has no existence. For Art with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish. (1984, 4)

Yet Gombrich, no more than the rest of us, can escape the fact that the capital “A” of fine art nearly always lurks within the small “a” of art in our twentieth-century usage. Nor can we escape the modern idea of fine art by saying “there is no such thing as Art. . . . only artists” since the modern concept of the artist as independent creator was itself part of the establishment of the fine art–versus-craft polarity in the eighteenth century.

The drawback of a strategy like Gombrich’s is that the resulting histories often conceal the sharp differences that separate the old system of art from the modern system of (fine) art. Since I want to write the history of those differences and foreground the very break that most histories of literature, music, and art pass over as quickly as possible, I have adopted three terminological expedients: I will usually contrast an “older” system of art to the “modern” system of art, or for shorthand, “art” and “fine art,” and sometimes even “art” and “Art.” Obviously, none of these pairs is completely satisfactory since the word

“art” today, although it usually conveys the meanings associated with “fine art,” still bears the sedimented weight of older meanings.

Similar problems attach to the term “craft.” It is sometimes said that the older, broader idea of art was closer to our concept of craft than to the modern idea of fine art. Yet we must not forget that the old system of art/craft also included many ideals that were split off in the eighteenth century and ascribed exclusively to fine art and the artist. For example, after the eighteenth-century break, all the nobler aspects of the older image of the artisan/artist, such as grace, invention, and imagination, were ascribed solely to the artist, whereas the artisan or craftsperson was said to possess only skill, to work by rule, and to care primarily for money. Thus, while it is true that the traditional idea of art was closer to craft than to our idea of fine art, that is partly because the older idea of art contained characteristics of both fine art and craft. Moreover, “craft,” like “art,” has both wider and more specific meanings. In its more specific sense, “craft” refers not only to skill and technique (the craft of the novel) but also to categories of objects and practices of varied status, for example, studio crafts (ceramics), building crafts (carpentry), home crafts (sewing), and hobby crafts (papier-mâché). Yet in its widest sense, which I will use, “craft” also serves as a general marker for the opposite of fine art, embracing such overlapping categories as applied art, minor art, folk art, popular art, commercial art, and entertainment arts. Once the modern system of fine arts was firmly in place in the nineteenth century and “art” had come to designate an autonomous realm within society, the art-versus-craft polarity was absorbed into the more general polarities of art versus society or art versus life. The latter polarities emphasize art’s autonomy and, like the art-versus-craft pair that they incorporate, suggest fine art’s independence from the purposes and pleasures of everyday life.

The terms “craftsman,” “artisan,” and “artist” also have a complex history. In order to respect the rules for gender neutrality, I often use “craftsperson” rather than “craftsman,” but not rigidly. William Morris spoke eloquently of the term “handicraftsman” as conveying a dignity and honor absent from “artisan.” Rather than pairing the cumbersome “craftsperson” with “artist,” I have generally preferred “artisan” despite its modern associations with ordinary labor, especially in British usage. Under the old system of art, of course, there were neither artisans nor artists in the current meaning of those terms but artisan/artists who united qualities that were only definitively pulled apart in the eighteenth century.

By foregrounding the break that split art into fine art versus craft and artisan/artist into artist versus artisan, I believe I can offer a clearer view of what

was gained and lost in the “Copernican revolution” of the eighteenth century. But such cultural revolutions seldom occur out of the blue, and a favorite employment of historians is to search out signs, portents, and origins. But emphasizing anticipations of modern ideals and practices leaves the nonspecialist reader with the impression that modern ideas of literature, art, or serious music are the outcome of a destined development. My survey is designed to avoid such comforting implications by refusing to treat the modern system of art as the outcome of an inevitable evolution and to see it instead as the result of an eighteenth-century invention.

By invention, I do not mean that the modern system of art appeared all at once as if cooked up by a handful of philosophes one afternoon in the salon of Madame du Deffand. To insist that there was a break between the premodern system of art and the modern system of fine art is not to deny the existence of continuities, especially since the elements of both fine art and craft were united under the old system. One can indeed find singular aspects of the modern ideals of fine art, the artist, and the aesthetic scattered among ancient Greek writers, Renaissance painters, and seventeenth-century philosophers, but those ideas only coalesced into a regulative discourse and institutional system at the end of the eighteenth century. As Roger Chartier has remarked, gradual development does not preclude radical disjunctures: “The passage from one system . . . to another can be understood at the same time as a profound break . . . and as a process made of hesitations, steps backward and obstacles” (1988, 36; see also Burke 1997).⁴

The modern system of art resulted from the conjunction of many factors, some of general scope and gradual development, others more restricted and immediate, some primarily intellectual and cultural, others social, political, and economic. That conjunction was gradual, uneven, and contested, but this much is certain: prior to the eighteenth century neither the modern ideas of fine art, artist, and aesthetic nor the set of practices and institutions we associate with them were integrated into a normative system, whereas after the eighteenth century, the major conceptual polarities and institutions of the modern system of art were largely taken for granted and have been regulative ever since. Only after the modern system of art was established as an autonomous realm could one ask, “Is it really art?” or, “What is the relation of ‘art’ to ‘society?’” Obviously, the ideas and practices of the fine arts have continued to evolve, but the art system established in the course of the eighteenth century has remained the framework within which most of those changes have taken place.

In a book that challenges the universalist claims of the European system of fine art, a comparison with the art practices and conceptions of China, Japan,

India, and Africa would have been useful. In the past, few popular surveys with titles like “Japanese Art” or “Chinese Art” have bothered to discuss the profound differences between those cultures’ basic assumptions about the arts and the mainstream assumptions of Europe and the Americas. Yet the Japanese language had no collective noun for “art” in our sense until the nineteenth century, and as Craig Clunas points out, the phrase “Chinese Art” is a “quite recent invention . . . no one in China before the nineteenth century” grouped painting, sculpture, ceramics, and calligraphy together as objects “constituting part of the same field of inquiry” (1997, 9). No doubt China and Japan, like most cultures, had a notion of “art” in the older and broader sense, and since our term “aesthetic” can also be used generically for any sort of theory or attitude about beauty one can legitimately speak of Japanese or Indian “aesthetics” (Saito 1998). But we should not be too quick to collapse those rich and complex traditions into European notions of fine art and the aesthetic. To sort out the actual similarities between the specifically European and the varied Asian concepts and practices would require another book. In a later chapter, I briefly discuss some of the distortions and paradoxes that have resulted from trying to assimilate the so-called primitive or tribal arts of traditional African or Native American cultures into the polarized European system. But before we can adequately understand the art ideals and institutions of other cultures, we need a better understanding of the particularity of Western concepts, practices, and institutions.

By focusing my essay on the discontinuities between the old European system of art and the more recent system of fine art, I believe I have told a story more faithful to the evidence and more illuminating for the present than traditional narratives of continuity and inevitability.⁵ It is up to those who believe in the universality or the ancient origins of the ideals and institutions of fine art to do the same and a few are now attempting it (Marino 1996). In a book intended for the general reader it would be out of place to debate scholars who defend an essentialist or continuity view, but it may be helpful to offer a brief comparison of my approach with Arthur Danto’s recent *After the End of Art* (1997), which makes a strong case for the story of an inevitable emergence.

Although Danto writes as a philosopher not a historian, he audaciously combines an essentialist’s conviction that “art is eternally the same” with a historicist’s conviction that the essence of art has gradually revealed itself through history (95). One of the surprises in Danto’s story is that he does not consider the aesthetic to be part of art’s essence but merely a contingent (and mistaken) view arising in the eighteenth century. Yet Danto as an essentialist is equally convinced that the art-versus-craft polarity is eternal and universal, although he

grants that Western culture did not become fully aware of the essential difference between fine art and craft until after the Renaissance (114).

Danto can even admit that there was an eighteenth-century “revolution” in the concept of art, but he is equally convinced that “there must be some extrahistorical concept of art for there to be historical revolutions in” (187). Reduced to its barest outline, Danto’s historical scenario is this: art and craft are eternally separate, yet were not originally distinguished but were united under the concept of imitation. When people first became conscious of their essential difference in the eighteenth century, they not only treated fine art as a higher form of imitation but also primarily (and erroneously) separated it from craft in terms of the aesthetic. Yet art continued to be viewed as imitation until the advent of modernism, after which artists themselves embarked on a quest for the essence of art that ended in 1965 when pop and conceptual art proved that there was no “right” way for art to look. Art had finally revealed its true nature: something that makes a statement and self-consciously embodies it. After the revelation that the essence of art is “embodied meaning,” the true form of the art-versus-craft polarity was also apparent: embodied meaning versus mere utility and genius versus mere skill.

I agree with Danto that there was a concept of art prior to the eighteenth century “for their to be revolutions in,” but it was art in the older sense that united meaning with use and genius with skill. Whereas my history tries to put together many contingent factors (intellectual, institutional, social), Danto looks beyond such contingencies to follow the destined emergence of the essence of art through the internal history of the visual arts. For Danto, the essence of art was always going to be what it has become and now that the essence is revealed, its historical phase is over: art no longer has a “narrative direction” (2000, 430). This is the meaning of Danto’s controversial phrase “the end of art,” which, provocative as it sounds, simply means the end of the art’s own quest for its essence. For me, the question of whether there might be a third system of art, beyond both the older system, to which we cannot return, and the modern system, which many are struggling to overcome, is a question that is both possible and urgent.⁶

BEFORE FINE ART AND CRAFT

Overview

IT IS COMFORTING to think that people in the past were “just like us” and to treat Homer’s *Iliad*, Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling, or Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* as if they were art in the modern sense. The next few chapters will show how misleading this practice can be—even though it is often reinforced by popular surveys and anthologies. Although I want to expose the bias of modernizing narratives and displays, I also want to do justice to the aspect of truth they contain. What is true in them is that one can indeed find scattered similarities in the past for the modern ideals and practices of fine art. What is false is to let these reassuring familiarities blind us to the enormous differences and create the illusion that the modern idea of art has always been with us. Obviously, the past leads to the present by many small steps, but there are points at which gradual changes finally coalesce to produce a rapid shift over a couple of generations. The issue is not whether we can find comments of Plato or gestures of Donatello that sound modern but, rather, how and when an older system of art/craft—an integrated complex of ideals, practices, and institutions—was replaced by a new system of fine art *versus* craft.

To show how decisive the break of the eighteenth century was, the following chapters will focus on the radical differences between our assumptions and the dominant conception and organization of the arts from ancient Greece to the mid-seventeenth century. Chapters 1 and 2 show that for over two thousand years Western culture had no word or concept of fine art, viewed the artisan/artist as a maker rather than creator, and generally treated statues, poems, and musical works as serving particular purposes rather than as existing primarily for themselves. There was neither fine art nor craft in the ancient world or the

Notes

Introduction

1. Although Kristeller was aware of the need to consider both institutional and socioeconomic factors, his phrase “modern system of the arts” refers to a system of classification, whereas I use it to emphasize the inseparability of concepts from practices, institutions, and social structures.
 2. I am using “regulative” to mean a concept that underlies thinking and practice in particular areas of life. For a more technical discussion of regulative concepts and their difference from constitutive ones, see Goehr (1992, 102–6). John Searle makes a similar distinction, viewing the regulative concepts as guiding a preexisting activity and constitutive ones as creating an activity (1995). In the case of art, we have a preexisting practice that undergoes a radical transformation in the eighteenth century. My distinction between “ideas” and “ideals” is also a more general one than Goehr’s (97–101). I usually refer to the idea of art but the ideal of the artist, that is, the normative image about what an artist ought to be like. But I make no attempt to develop either term into a technical concept.
 3. Such a working description is the best we can do for a historical account of something as expansive and malleable as the idea of art. See Berys Gaut’s paper “Art” as a Cluster Concept” (2000).
 4. For example, in a remarkable study tracing the Aristotelian and medieval roots of Renaissance naturalism, David Summers brilliantly demonstrates the continuity of the idea of the *senus communis* from Leonardo to Kant. But this continuity is perfectly compatible with the idea of a decisive break in the concept of art in the eighteenth century. The deeper continuity across the break is with the older idea of art and the gradual development of a higher estimation of sense experience (Summers 1987, 8–9, 17, 319).
 5. As Hayden White has argued, any narrative history tends toward a certain tone or tropism. In White’s terms, I am opposing an ironic story to synecdochic narratives that see the modern ideas of art and the artist as an inevitable emergence (1987).
 6. These brief remarks on Danto’s work hardly do justice to the philosophical and historical sophistication of his argument, which offers us an enormous gain in understanding all kinds of contemporary art. This becomes especially apparent in Danto’s incisive art criticism of the past fifteen years (1992, 1994, 2000).
1. The Greeks Had No Word for It
1. Hawlock and Pollitt mean not only that there was no “word” like “fine art” but also that there was no concept or practice either. Unfortunately, students are likely to be