

# THE NATURE OF ART

Is it necessary for us to give physical form to things we feel, think, and imagine? Must we gesture, dance, draw, speak, sing, write, and build? To be fully human, it seems that we must. In fact, the ability to create is one of the special characteristics of being human. The urge to make and enjoy what we call art has been a driving force throughout human history. Art is not something apart from us. It grows from common—as well as uncommon—human insights, feelings, and experiences. When we are so deeply moved by an experience that we want to share it with others, we are where art begins.

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

For example, Wassily Kandinsky’s work *COMPOSITION IV*, while it may at first appear to be a strange jumble, comes from common feelings. Kandinsky, one of the great innovators of modern art, tried for years to create works that did not “copy” anything in the external world. Rather, he wanted the forms and colors on the canvas to communicate his inner state of mind without referring to anything seen. He would often improvise with paint, expressing himself spontaneously from moment to moment. This quest of his was an outgrowth of his spiritual yearnings: He thought that the world is too materialistic; and if art depends on reproducing the visual world, it also is too materialistic.

He later wrote about *COMPOSITION IV*, detailing how some of the elements of the painting correspond to inner states. The large blue patch at the center “gives the whole picture a cold tone.”<sup>1</sup> This blue area contrasts with the lighter and sweeter colors elsewhere in the work. He noticed elements from landscape in the painting that he called figures, horses, and a castle. He gave them those names because he found that such shapes often bubbled up in his mind as he was working. Just as anyone’s mood is usually a mixture of various feelings, this painting communicates a complex emotional moment that includes the sweetness and coldness of the colors with a sense of motion in the outlined forms. Through a work such as this, he wrote, “the artist purposely sets the soul vibrating.”<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT IS ART?

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

Media in use for many centuries include clay, fiber, stone, wood, and paint. By the mid-twentieth century, modern technology had added new media,



I Wassily Kandinsky.  
COMPOSITION IV. 1911.  
Oil on canvas. 62 $\frac{3}{16}$ "  $\times$  98 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".  
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf.  
Photographer: Walter Klein, © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
NY/ADAGP, Paris.

including video and computers, to the nineteenth-century contributions of photography and motion pictures. Art made with a combination of different materials is referred to as *mixed media*.

When people speak of *the arts*, they are usually referring to music, dance, theater, literature, and the visual arts. Each art form is perceived in different ways by our senses, yet each grows from a common need to give expressive substance to feelings, ideas, insights, and experiences. In this book, the focus is the visual arts, including drawing, painting, sculpture, film, and architecture.

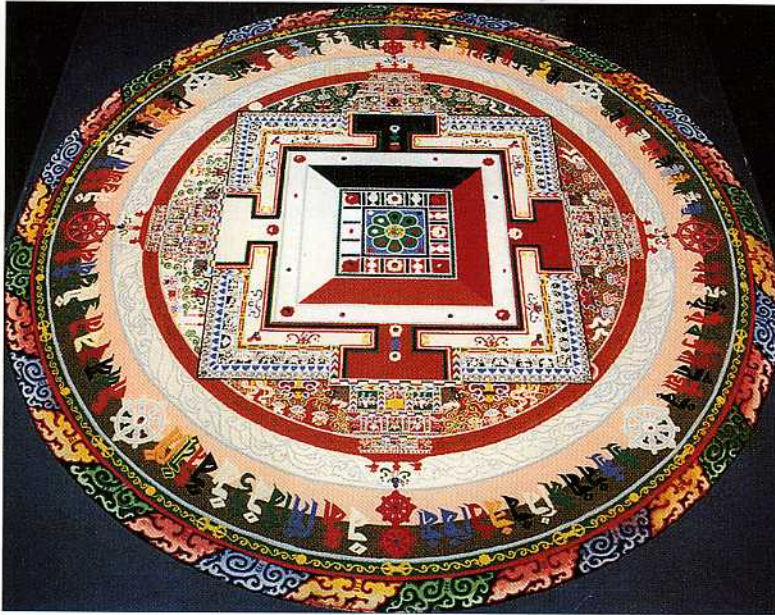
Much of our communication is verbal, yet any single medium of expression has its limitations. Some ideas and feelings can be communicated only through visual forms, while other insights can be expressed only through music. American painter

Georgia O'Keeffe said: "I found that I could say things with colors and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way—things I had no words for."<sup>3</sup> The arts communicate meanings that go far beyond ordinary verbal exchange, and artists use the entire range of thought, feeling, and observation as the subjects of their art.

### THE NEED TO BE CREATIVE

All societies produce objects that communicate beyond words and meet physical, spiritual, or aesthetic needs. Some objects—from simple tools to vast temple complexes—have been designed to meet many of these needs simultaneously.

In the context of Tibetan Buddhism, art making is a meditative collaborative process requiring concentration and focused attention. In 1997, three



2 WHEEL OF TIME.  
Tibetan sand mandala. 1997.  
Photograph: José R. Lopez, *New York Times Pictures*.

Tibetan monks from the American Nagyal Monastery spent three weeks at the Asia Society in New York City making a traditional *mandala* (a sacred circle). Working eighteen-hour days for three weeks, they produced the WHEEL OF TIME by carefully pouring colored sand. The monks followed ancient traditional practices as they created their contemporary symbol. After celebrating and sharing the work, they destroyed it to symbolize the impermanence of life.

Because the arts express, enhance, and embody creative energy, they often act as ritual, embellishment, and practical technology all at once. Arts such as singing, dancing, carving, or painting bring participants into unity with nature's forces and thereby give access to the creative energy of the universe.

Visual creativity can take almost any form. A film director places actors and cameras on a stage in order to emphasize a certain aspect of the script. A Hopi potter takes clay from the ground near her home and shapes it into a water jar. A graphic designer seated at a computer screen arranges a composition of typefaces, images, and colors in order to help get his message across. A carver in Japan fashions wood into a Buddha which will aid in meditation at a monastery.

Most of us have at some time selected and arranged posters or pictures on our walls. All of these actions involve artistic creativity, the use of visual imagery to communicate beyond what mere words can say.

Because our high-tech, multicultural society has few shared traditions, we have few traditional art forms. Most of us tend to think of "art" as something produced only by "artists"—uniquely gifted people. Because art is often separated from community life in contemporary society, many people believe they have no artistic talent. This belief makes them hesitate to create their own art or even to explore the art of others. Today, works we call art are often displayed in galleries and museums—far removed from the everyday life experiences of the people who created them or view them.

This situation is unfortunate; people living in highly technological societies need art as much as the members of culturally rich, traditional societies need art. Science and the arts serve humanity in complementary ways. Both involve creative thinking and problem solving. Science seeks answers to questions about the outer, physical world; these answers form the basis of our technology. The arts foster the development of our inner world—the intuitive, emotional, spiritual, and creative aspects of being human. Reality is explained through the sciences and revealed through the arts. People need both science and art if they are to balance function with meaning.

History provides the best evidence of our need for the arts. When a dictator or conquering group seeks domination over a people, and perhaps has already won a military victory, the next step is to find ways to destroy the culture—to eliminate the language, traditions, and the arts of the oppressed. Artists of all kinds are among the first to be controlled or silenced. Hitler's and Saddam Hussein's control of the arts, and the suppression of the languages and ritual arts of Native Americans, immediately come to mind.

As groups and individuals, we can survive incredible physical hardships more easily than the loss of our personal creativity and cultural foundations. Our languages, our arts, our traditions, and beliefs are at the core of who we are.

## PURPOSES AND FUNCTIONS OF ART

Art can inform our minds, embellish our surroundings, inspire our souls, arouse our feelings, awaken our consciences, and delight our senses. Art can challenge us to think and see in new ways, and help each of us to develop a personal sense of beauty and truth. It can also deceive, humiliate, and anger. A given work of art may serve several functions all at once.

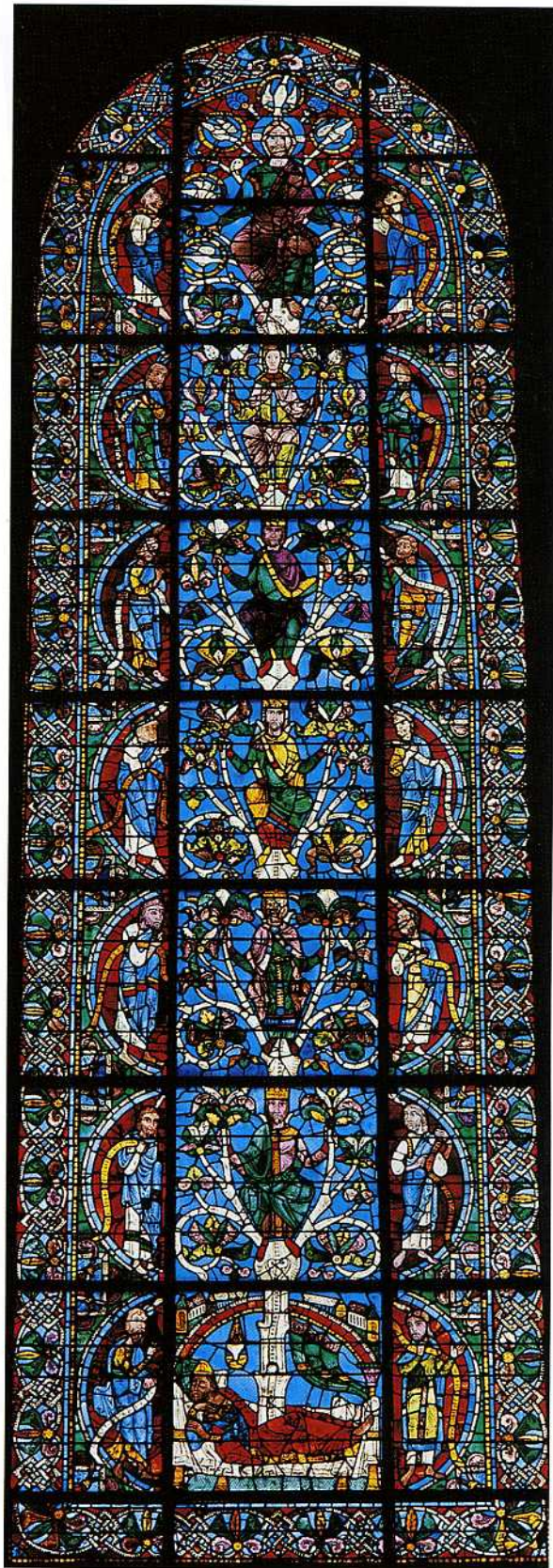
When we look at art we cannot always know exactly what its creators had in mind. To understand their purposes and functions, let us examine some works as examples.

### Art for Communicating Information

Because art makes a statement that can be understood by a broad spectrum of people, it has often been used to impart information and ideas. During the Middle Ages in Europe, stained-glass windows and stone sculpture of the cathedrals taught Bible stories to an illiterate population.

At Chartres Cathedral, near Paris, a stained glass window called *THE TREE OF JESSE* depicts the genealogy of Jesus Christ, beginning with the Jewish patriarch Jesse (at the bottom below the tree). The vertical sequence presenting the four kings culminates in depictions of Mary the mother of Jesus, and at the top, Christ himself. Many later artists—especially portrait painters—following in the European tradition, have had as their primary goal the mere recording of information for posterity.

Art continues to inform nonliterate as well as literate people around the world. Photography, film, and television have proven to be particularly useful for recording and communicating. Through artistic presentation, information often becomes more accessible and memorable than it would be through words alone.



3 THE TREE OF JESSE.  
West facade, Chartres Cathedral. c. 1150–1170.  
Stained glass.  
Photograph: Laura Lushington, Sonia Halliday Photographs.



4 BLACKFEET PARFLECHE. 1885.  
Rawhide, pigment. 21" × 14".  
University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia.  
(Neg. #T4-826)

### Art for Day-to-Day Living

Objects of all kinds, from ancient, carefully crafted flint knives to sleek sports cars, have been conceived to delight the eye as well as to serve more obviously useful functions. Well-designed utilitarian objects and spaces—from chairs to communities—bring pleasure and efficiency into our daily lives. For example, the BLACKFEET PARFLECHE is a rawhide envelope that was useful for carrying personal goods in that nomadic Native American society. However, it is also decorated with colorful symbolic forms that refer to the tribe's communal life and to the forces of nature. Women made these parfleches by stretching out pieces of rawhide in the sun to dry, then applying paints pigmented with earthen powders.

Many societies value the artistic embellishment of everyday things. This DISH from ancient Persia is simply decorated in a few colors. The circular patterns in the central motif echo the shape of the plate itself. Dancing around its border is a line of stylized Arabic writing from Muslim scripture which underlines the plate's function in hospitality: "Generosity is one of the qualities of the people of Paradise."

In a general sense, the visual arts include all human creations in which visual form has been a major consideration during their design and production. Nearly all the objects and spaces we use in our private and public lives were designed by art and design professionals. The best of our buildings, towns, and cities have been designed with the quality



5 DISH.  
10th Century. East Iran.  
Lead-glazed earthenware with colored slips. Diameter 8¼".  
Courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
(F1965.27)

of their visual form—as well as their other functions—in mind. Each of us is involved with art/design whenever we make decisions about how to style our hair, what clothes to wear, or how to furnish and arrange our living spaces. As we make such choices, we are engaged in universal art-related processes—making visual statements about who we are and the kind of world we like to see around us.

### Art for the Spirit

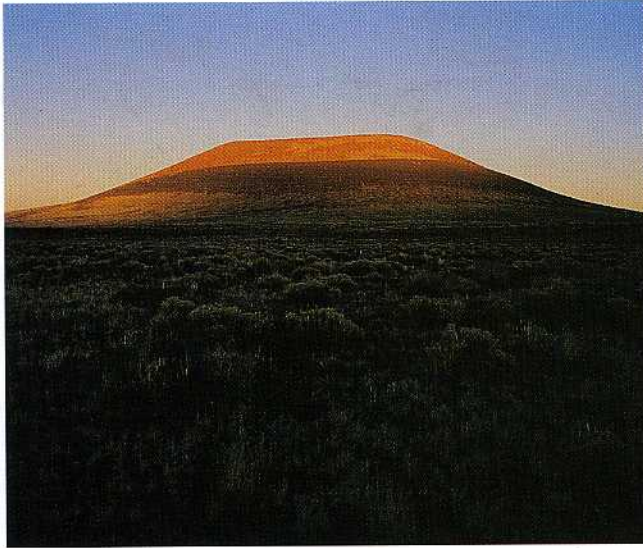
In many societies, all the arts have a spiritual component. Spiritual and/or magical purposes apparently motivated the making of the world's earliest carvings and cave paintings. Long before the developments of farming and writing, the arts helped sustain bands of hunter-gatherers. What motivated prehistoric peoples to carve, draw, and paint? Survival needs? The desire to record events? The need to

magically control the animals they hunted for food? Or simply the urge to create?

Among the best-known ritual structures built by stone-age human beings is the complex of huge boulders at **STONEHENGE**, England. It was constructed at a time when religion and science were one unified quest for understanding. Four series of giant stones, surrounding an altar stone, stand within a circular trench 300 feet in diameter. Most archaeologists agree that **STONEHENGE** was built in several phases, around 2000 B.C.E., to serve some sort of religious or scientific function. Since many of the stones in the structure align with celestial phenomena such as solar and lunar movements, many art historians think that this structure served a spiritual function, showing humans their place in the cosmic cycle. Most likely it was also a backdrop for various rituals.



6 **STONEHENGE.** Wiltshire, England. c. 2000 B.C.E.  
Photograph: Simmons Aerofilms Limited.



7 James Turrell. **RODEN CRATER.**  
Work in progress. 1988 to the present.  
Photograph courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery.

8 **DANCE WAND IN HONOR OF ESHU.**  
Yoruba. Wood, leather, cowrie shells, brass, bone;  
Height 19¾".  
© Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington. Raymond  
and Laura Wielgus Collection.

Sculptor James Turrell is currently working to provide a direct, intense experience of nature through his **RODEN CRATER** project near Flagstaff, Arizona. The extinct volcano will be used to focus attention on celestial phenomena.

Turrell's concept is to keep the site—a beautiful, quiet, natural environment—as unchanged as possible from the outside. Inside, he designed underground rooms from which to view the changing light of the sky, using orientations involving the equinoxes, solstices, and moon cycles. As the space, light, and darkness are seen and experienced from different elevations, enclosures, and open spaces along the rim, the viewer, with no distractions from civilization, has the opportunity to respond to the majesty of nature and sense the rhythms of the cosmos.

A great deal of African art has a spiritual emphasis, as worshippers use objects in rituals to attract the attention of the gods. The **DANCE WAND IN**



**HONOR OF ESHU** is draped with strands of the shells that were used as currency, alluding to Eshu's lordship of the marketplace. A worshipper uses the statue by hanging it over a shoulder and literally dancing with it to the appropriate chants and songs. The bulbs protruding from Eshu's bladelike hairdo signify the medicines that Eshu uses.

Art continues to fulfill personal, spiritual needs for many people, and all of the world's major religions have used art to inspire and instruct the faithful.

## Art for Personal Expression

Certain artists reveal themselves and their heritage so clearly that we feel we know them. Seventeenth-century Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn expressed his attitude toward life through well over one thousand paintings, drawings, and prints.

From the age of twenty until his death at sixty-three, Rembrandt drew and painted dozens of self-portraits. He was fascinated by the expressive possibilities of the human body and found himself to be the most readily available model. Like a good actor, he used his own face as a resource for studying life.

In most of his self-portraits, Rembrandt viewed himself straightforwardly and with the same curiosity that he brought to his other human subjects. Rembrandt's *SELF-PORTRAIT* of 1658 is brought to life by the eyes, which suggest a man of penetrating insight. By examining himself objectively, he went beyond himself; he created a statement about how it feels to be alive, to be human.

Korean-American artist Yong Soon Min projects an altogether contemporary sense of the self in her mixed-media piece *DWELLING*. Born in a small village in Korea just before the end of the Korean war, she and her mother joined her father in California when she was seven. Thus while she was raised mainly in the United States, it is not her native land; yet on trips back to Korea she feels distant from her country of origin as well.

*DWELLING* expresses this alienation and absence. The artist inserted personal mementoes into a traditional Korean-style dress and hung it over a pile of books, maps, and photographs. Inside the dress, barely visible, is a script from a Korean poet which gives voice to the loss of identity. The hauntingly

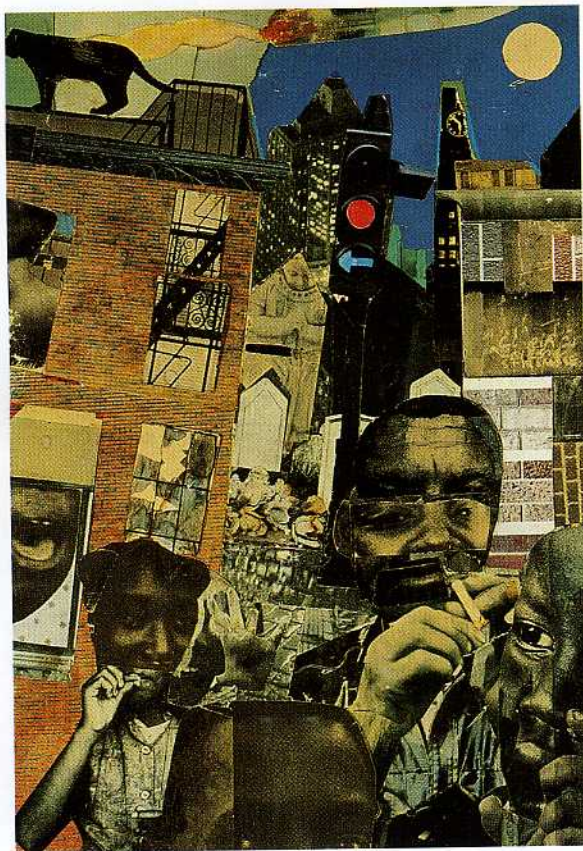


- 9 Rembrandt van Rijn.  
*SELF-PORTRAIT*. 1658.  
Oil on canvas. 52 $\frac{3}{8}$ "  $\times$  40 $\frac{7}{8}$ ".  
© The Frick Collection, New York.
- 10 Yong Soon Min.  
*DWELLING*. 1994.  
Mixed media. 72"  $\times$  42"  $\times$  28".  
Photo by Erik Landsberg. Courtesy of the artist.





11 Romare Bearden.  
 PREVALENCE OF RITUAL: TIDINGS. 1967.  
 Photomontage. 36" × 48".  
 © Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



12 Romare Bearden.  
 ROCKET TO THE MOON. 1971.  
 Collage on board. 13" × 9¼".  
 © Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

empty dress seems to await a Korean occupant who will never put it back on. This sense of divided nationality is increasingly common among Americans, many of whom were born elsewhere.

Twentieth-century American artist Romare Bearden was fascinated by the pageant of daily life he witnessed in the rural South and in Harlem, New York. Bearden created memorable images of humanity by observing, distilling, then reconstructing the life he saw around him. In *PREVALENCE OF RITUAL: TIDINGS* an angel seems to console or embrace an introspective young woman. Borrowed picture fragments with a few muted colors make up an otherwise gray world. There is a mood of melancholy and longing. Does the train suggest departure from this world or escape to the lure of a better life in the North?

In *ROCKET TO THE MOON*, collage fragments build a scene of quiet despair and stoic perseverance. A barely visible rocket heads for the moon, while urban life remains punctuated by a red stoplight. The artist makes an ironic visual statement: Bearden placed America's accomplishments in space next to our inner cities' stalled social and economic progress.

Rembrandt and Bearden were concerned with the effectiveness of their communication to others, but equally important was their own inner need for expression. Within the broad range of the visual arts, there is a considerable difference in the amount and type of personal expression. Not all art is meant to express the personality of the maker; the designs of a coin or a telephone offer much less information about the personal concerns of the artist than do the designs of a painting or a piece of sculpture.

Yet an element of self-expression exists in all art, even when the art is produced cooperatively by many individuals, as in filmmaking and architecture. In each case, the intended purpose for the art affects the nature and degree of the personal expression.

(1911–1988)

## JAZZ, MEMORY, AND METAPHOR

**ROMARE BEARDEN** paid tribute to the richness of his African-American experience through his art. He sought:

*to paint the life of my people as I know it . . . because much of that life is gone and it had beauty.*<sup>4</sup>

The child of educated, middle-class parents, Bearden spent his early childhood in rural North Carolina, then moved north with his family to Harlem, in New York City. He had a brief stint as a professional baseball player for the Boston club of the now-defunct Negro Leagues. He attended New York University, where he earned a degree in education and drew cartoons for the *NYU Medley*. He went on to draw humorous and political cartoons for magazines and a newspaper. During the Depression he attended the Art Students League in New York, where he was encouraged to say more in his drawings than he said in his cartoons. He held his first exhibition in a private studio in 1940—about the same time that he became a social worker in New York, a job he held on and off until 1966.

After serving in the army during World War II, Bearden used his G.I. Bill education grant to study at the Sorbonne in Paris. There

he came to know a number of intellectuals and writers of African descent, including poet Leopold Senghor and novelist James Baldwin. Bearden was inspired to make the philosophical perspective of his ethnic heritage a cornerstone of his art. He said of his experience at the Sorbonne, "The biggest thing I learned was reaching into your consciousness of black experience and relating it to universals."<sup>5</sup>

Bearden was critical of programs that supported African-American artists by encouraging them to work in European academic traditions rather than those of their own lives. He believed that, just as African Americans had created their own musical forms such as jazz and blues, they should invent their own visual art. He urged fellow African-American artists to create art out of their own life experiences, as had jazz greats Ellington, Basie, Waller, and

Hines, who were among Bearden's friends. Bearden himself was a musician and songwriter who said he painted in the tradition of the blues.

He combined his stylistic search with institutional activism. In 1963, he founded the Spiral Group, an informal group of African-American artists that met in his studio. A year later, he became art director of the Harlem Cultural Council, a group devoted to recognizing and promoting the arts of Harlem residents.

His study of art history led Bearden to admire Cubist and Surrealist paintings and African sculpture, as well as work by earlier European masters. These works of art were among the many important influences on his creative development. Also important was the rapid-cut style of contemporary documentary filmmakers. Bearden worked in a variety of styles prior to the 1960s, when he arrived at the combined collage and painting style for which he is best known.

Although he learned from direct association with the previous generation of international artists, Bearden's focus remained the African-American



13 ROMARE BEARDEN.  
Photograph: Bernard Brown  
and Associates.

experience. He kept a list of key events from his life on the wall of his studio. Often, Bearden drew upon memories of his childhood in rural North Carolina. The idea of homecoming fascinated him. He said, "You can come back to where you started from with added experience and you hope more understanding. You leave and then return to the homeland of your imagination."<sup>6</sup>

Despite his emphasis on his own experiences, Bearden cannot simply be labeled an African-American artist because his work has meaning both for and far beyond that community. He said, "What I try to do with art is amplify." If he had just painted a North Carolina farm woman, "it would have meaning to her and people there. But art amplifies itself to something universal."<sup>7</sup>

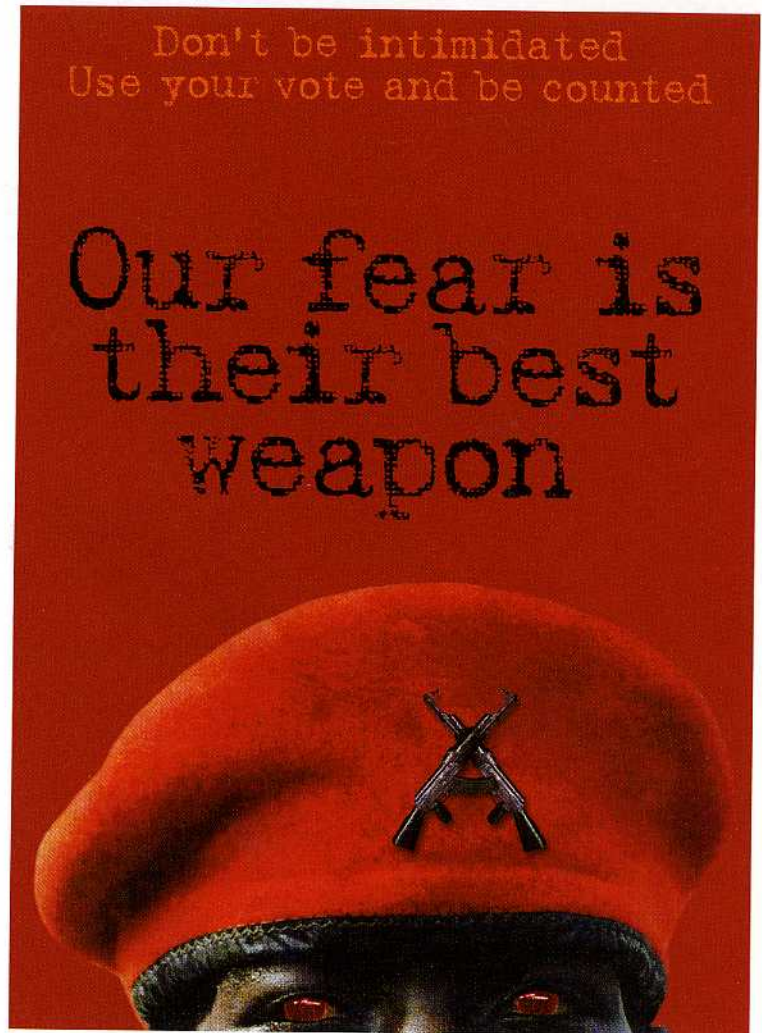
previous Chinese royal line to which the artist was still faithful. While not an outright protest, most educated persons understood the painter's intent.

Architecture, painting, and sculpture—and more recently film and television—have been used to project and glorify images of deities, political leaders, and now corporations. In seventeenth-century France, King Louis XIV built an enormous palace and formal garden at Versailles. His purpose was to symbolize the strength of his monarchy—to impress and intimidate the nobility with the Sun King's power (see Chapter 17).

Advertising designers often use the persuasive powers of art to present a version of the truth. We see their messages every day on television and in the print media. Not all persuasive art is commercial, however. Art can be an effective instrument for educating, directing popular values, molding public opinion, and gaining and holding political power.

For example, recent incidents of oppression caused one graphic designer to become politically active in a new way. When presidential elections were scheduled in Zimbabwe in 2002, the regime of Robert Mugabe took several steps to discourage voting, especially by persons who opposed the status quo. They failed to provide enough polling places in less friendly regions, forcing voters to travel long distances; they also harassed persons who attempted to register to vote. In the face of this threat, designer Chaz Maviyane-Davies began creating posters that denounced the situation, printing them on paper and distributing them free over the Internet. He established what he called a Portal of Truth web site and offered a new poster there each day in the month leading up to the elections.

One of these was *OUR FEAR IS THEIR BEST WEAPON*. Against a red background which symbolizes blood, we see a soldier staring back at us with the lower half of his face hidden, as if he were lurking in ambush. His eyes are the same red color as the background, so we might say that he has blood in his eyes. The upper portion shows slogans meant to encourage resistance, but the type is faded, giving it a tentative look. This and other posters did not lead to the downfall of the regime, but they did em-



16 Chaz Maviyane-Davies.  
*OUR FEAR IS THEIR BEST WEAPON*. 2002  
Offset poster, graphic commentary #23b.  
Courtesy of the artist.

bolden the opposition to continue protests of various kinds. They also forced the designer into exile later that year.

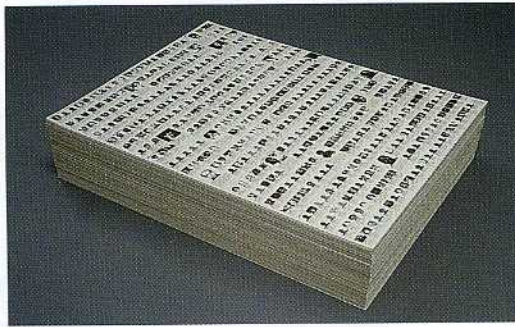
The art of our culture reflects who we are and what our relationships are to our surroundings and to one another. Art can be pleasing and beautiful, but it can also shout us awake and inspire us to action. Today, when cross-cultural understanding, open-mindedness, and creative problem solving are urgently needed, art can elevate our consciousness and thus deepen our humanity.



14 Francisco Goya.  
 THE DISASTERS OF WAR, NO. 18:  
 BURY THEM AND SAY NOTHING. 1818.  
 Etching and aquatint.  
 5 $\frac{7}{8}$ "  $\times$  8 $\frac{3}{8}$ ".  
 S.P. Avery Collection, Miriam and Ira D.  
 Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs.  
 The New York Public Library,  
 Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

### Art for Social and Political Purposes

Artists in many societies have sought to criticize or influence values and public opinion through their work. Often the criticism is clear and direct, as with Francisco Goya's expression of outrage at the Napoleonic wars in his country. *THE DISASTERS OF WAR* vividly documents atrocities committed by Napoleon's troops as they invaded Spain in 1808. In a similar vein is the work of Cuban-American artist Félix González-Torres. In 1990, he printed large sheets with photographs and information on all of the victims of gunfire in the United States in a randomly selected week. *UNTITLED (DEATH BY GUN)* was reproduced in what the artist called "endless copies," which were then placed in a stack on the floor of the art gallery, free for the taking by viewers. González-Torres said of these pieces, "I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become a part of my work, to join in."<sup>8</sup>



Sometimes the artist's social comment is less obvious, but still sincere. The Chinese painter Bada Shanren of the seventeenth century, deeply dissatisfied with the foreign rulers of his country, frequently painted melons as a political statement. Melons are a symbol in China of new birth and new beginnings. The seeds inside the melons symbolized the

15 Félix González-Torres.  
 UNTITLED (DEATH BY GUN). 1990.  
 Offset print on paper. 44 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  32 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".  
 a. Installation view.  
 b. Single sheet.  
 The Museum of Modern Art, NY/Licensed by Scala-Art  
 Resource, NY. Purchased in part with funds from Arthur  
 Fleisher, Jr. and Linda Barth Goldstein.  
 Photographs: © 2002 The Museum of Modern Art, NY.

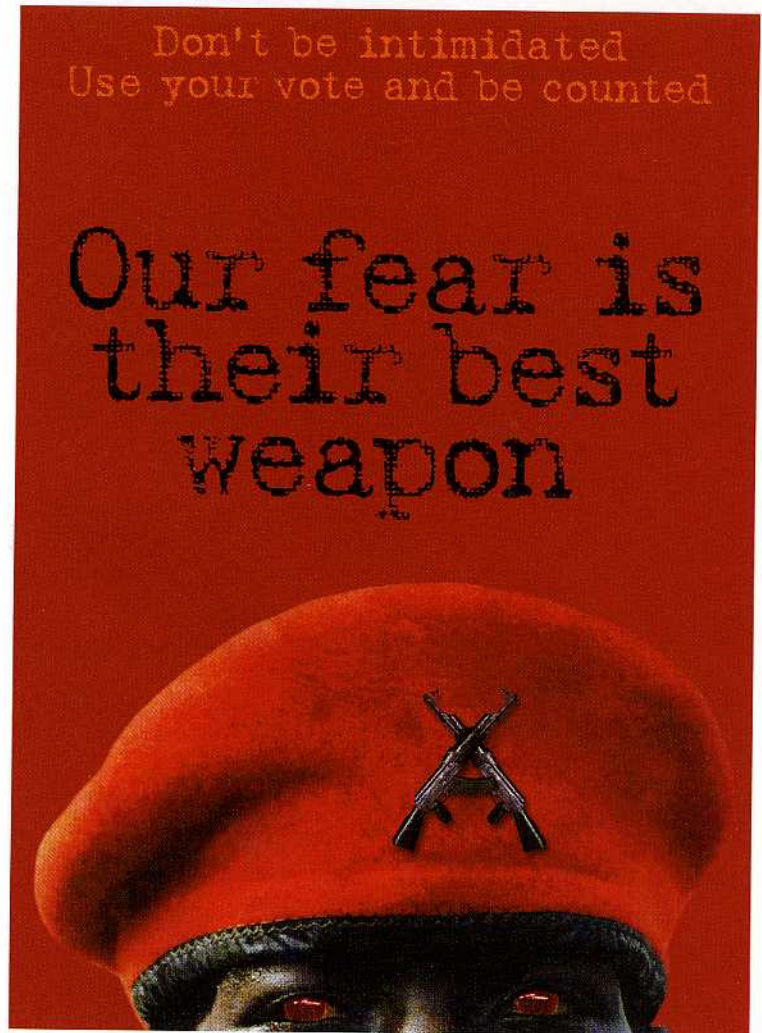
previous Chinese royal line to which the artist was still faithful. While not an outright protest, most educated persons understood the painter's intent.

Architecture, painting, and sculpture—and more recently film and television—have been used to project and glorify images of deities, political leaders, and now corporations. In seventeenth-century France, King Louis XIV built an enormous palace and formal garden at Versailles. His purpose was to symbolize the strength of his monarchy—to impress and intimidate the nobility with the Sun King's power (see Chapter 17).

Advertising designers often use the persuasive powers of art to present a version of the truth. We see their messages every day on television and in the print media. Not all persuasive art is commercial, however. Art can be an effective instrument for educating, directing popular values, molding public opinion, and gaining and holding political power.

For example, recent incidents of oppression caused one graphic designer to become politically active in a new way. When presidential elections were scheduled in Zimbabwe in 2002, the regime of Robert Mugabe took several steps to discourage voting, especially by persons who opposed the status quo. They failed to provide enough polling places in less friendly regions, forcing voters to travel long distances; they also harassed persons who attempted to register to vote. In the face of this threat, designer Chaz Maviyane-Davies began creating posters that denounced the situation, printing them on paper and distributing them free over the Internet. He established what he called a Portal of Truth web site and offered a new poster there each day in the month leading up to the elections.

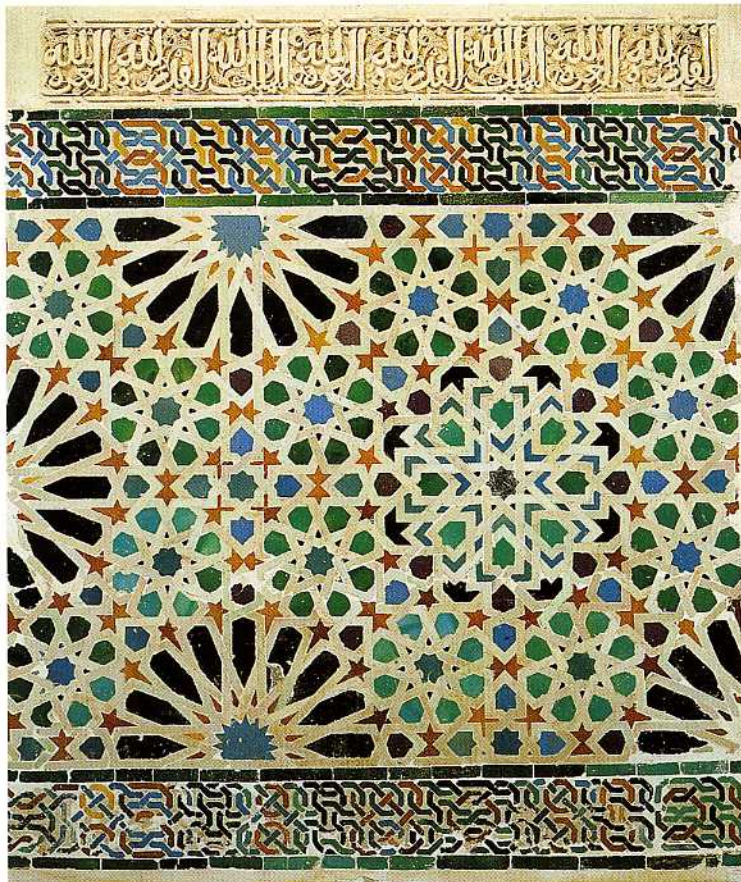
One of these was *OUR FEAR IS THEIR BEST WEAPON*. Against a red background which symbolizes blood, we see a soldier staring back at us with the lower half of his face hidden, as if he were lurking in ambush. His eyes are the same red color as the background, so we might say that he has blood in his eyes. The upper portion shows slogans meant to encourage resistance, but the type is faded, giving it a tentative look. This and other posters did not lead to the downfall of the regime, but they did em-



16 Chaz Maviyane-Davies.  
*OUR FEAR IS THEIR BEST WEAPON*. 2002  
Offset poster, graphic commentary #23b.  
Courtesy of the artist.

bolden the opposition to continue protests of various kinds. They also forced the designer into exile later that year.

The art of our culture reflects who we are and what our relationships are to our surroundings and to one another. Art can be pleasing and beautiful, but it can also shout us awake and inspire us to action. Today, when cross-cultural understanding, open-mindedness, and creative problem solving are urgently needed, art can elevate our consciousness and thus deepen our humanity.



17 DECORATIVE PANEL FROM THE ALHAMBRA.  
Granada. Nasrid Period, 14th Century.  
Glazed mosaic tile. 60" × 50¾".  
Museo de la Alhambra. Photograph: Sheldon Collins.



18 Miriam Schapiro.  
HEARTLAND. 1985.  
Acrylic, fabric, and glitter on canvas. 85" × 94".  
Collection of Orlando Museum of Art, Orlando, Florida.  
Gift of the Women for Special Acquisitions and the Council 101.87.1.

## Art for Visual Delight

Many of us probably think of visual delight as the first function of art. Indeed, art can provide pleasure, enjoyment, amusement, diversion, and embellishment in our world. Art that is visually attractive and well crafted can “lift us above the stream of life,” as a noted aesthete once put it.<sup>9</sup> Absorbed in contemplating such works, we forget where we are for a moment.

Islamic art is particularly abundant with lavish decorations of this sort. For example, the fourteenth-century DECORATIVE PANEL FROM THE ALHAMBRA is made of colored mosaic tile laid in dazzling patterns. Our eyes follow pathways that enclose geometric figures of many different shapes, sizes, and colors. These small polygons are elements in a larger rhythm of black starbursts between rows of geometric interlace. The piece shown here is only a small fragment of the lower portion of a wall enclosing a room in the Alhambra, a palace that reached its full glory under the Nasrid rulers of Granada in the fourteenth century.

Some contemporary artists have achieved decorative effects with very different materials. Miriam Schapiro’s HEARTLAND depends partly on sheer size for its impact, since it measures nearly seven by eight feet. Here, a rich texture of mixed media calls to mind traditional art forms of quilting and flower arranging which were once considered the province of women. The piece actually combines paint, fabric, and glitter in a collage format whose feminine elements led Schapiro to coin the term “femmages” to describe them. The lush colors, bold patterns, and symbolic meanings of the shape of the work combine to create a garden of visual delight.

Art—like beauty, truth, and life itself—is larger than any single definition. One widely used dictionary defines art in this way:

*art, n. 1. the expression or application of creative skill and imagination, especially through a visual medium such as painting or sculpture.*<sup>10</sup>

As we have seen from the works illustrated in just this chapter, it is difficult to arrive at a definition that includes all the possible forms of art. Hence, we will spend the rest of the book exploring them.