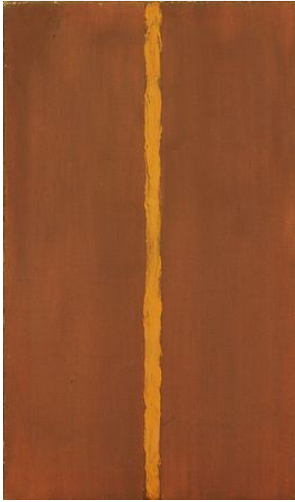


## Arts or Crafts?

What's the difference between an artist and a craft person? Why is one more respected than the other?



VS.



Barnett Newman, 1948, *Onement 1*

Felted bag, by Claudia on etsy.com

By Earl Hunsinger

Initially, the father vigorously opposed his firstborn son's chosen profession, feeling that because of their high station in life, it was beneath their dignity to have him pursue a career as a mere workman. He had his sights set higher for his son, wanting him to pursue something nobler, more respected, such as a career in the army or government service. His mother, who was more understanding, only said, "But if our child cannot be anything more than a painter—why, we must be content, and God willing, let us hope he will be a good one." Michelangelo Buonarroti was a good one, along with being a good sculptor, poet, architect, and engineer.

His father's attitude was not unusual for the time. Because they worked with their hands, for centuries, people who pursued professions that are considered artistic today were lumped in with the other manual labourers. This has had an influence on the perception of crafts today and on what might be regarded as an artificial and somewhat fuzzy distinction between arts and crafts. But we're jumping ahead. Let's start in the early days, in this case a couple of thousands of years ago.

To the Greek philosopher Aristotle, art was a pursuit where an individual acquired knowledge and then performed some task within a framework of rules. Painting was a trade, the same as making shoes or clothes. In fact, the Greek word used for a painter or sculptor was *banausos*. This word literally means "mechanic", which reflects how such "artists" were viewed at a time. The ancient world looked down on manual labourers, viewing them as socially inferior.

The attitude of the ancient world persisted into the Middle Ages, which is why for the most part painters and sculptors from earlier centuries remain anonymous. Just as with

any skilled laborer, their technique or workmanship might have been admired, but not enough to make them famous.

Just as the Ancients had devised a system of seven liberal arts (Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy), the Middle Ages saw the creation of a system of seven mechanical arts ( *vestiaria*: tailoring, weaving, *agricultura*: agriculture, *architectura*: architecture, masonry, *militia* and *venatoria*: warfare and hunting (martial arts), *mercatura*: trade, commerce, *coquinaria*: cooking, *metallaria*: blacksmithing, metallurgy. As the seven liberal arts were supposed to be arts of the mind, the seven mechanical arts were supposed to represent arts of the hand. Even with this system of classification, painting and sculpture occupy subordinate positions, being merely subcategories, along with other trades.

Leonardo da Vinci argued against the low esteem in which painting was held compared to the so called liberal arts of his time, which included poetry and music. After discussing the superiority of a painting of a beautiful woman over a written description of a beautiful woman, he said, "You have ranked painting among the mechanical arts but, in truth, if painters were as apt at praising their own works in writing as you are, it would not lie under the stigma of so base a name. If you call it mechanical because it is, in the first place, manual, and that it is the hand which produces what is to be found in the imagination, you too writers, who set down manually with the pen what is devised in your mind. And if you say it is mechanical because it is done for money, who falls into this error--if error it can be called—more than you? If you lecture in the schools do you not go to whoever pays you most? Do you do any work without pay?"

Of course, a change eventually came. This was probably due more to the skill of men like Leonardo and Michelangelo than to any logical argument. Their work began to be called divine and inspired, and so painting and sculpting as professions became more respected.

Which brings us down to our time, and our initial question, is it art or craft? While painting, sculpture, and architecture have gained greater respect since Michelangelo's day, a new bias has emerged. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the old bias has survived in a weaker form. Artists are now respected as gifted, as geniuses, as divinely inspired. Crafts people just make stuff. In an ironic twist, artists are considered professionals, while crafts people may be viewed as amateurs that sell stuff on the weekend at the local fair. Does it matter? It probably doesn't, if you're considered an artist. For someone, who has been labelled as a crafts person, maybe so. In addition to the matter of respect, it's been said, only half jokingly, that the difference between an art object and a craft object is several thousand dollars.



Leonardo DaVinci, *Mona Lisa*,  
1503-1506

Is there any other difference between arts and crafts? And, if you do crafts, how do you make the transition to being an artist? The word craft comes from the German word *Kraft*, which means “power or ability”. Certainly, whether something is considered an art or a craft, a measure of skill, or ability, is involved. It should be noted however, that there are differences between one craft object and another, and between one crafts person and another. One may use a purchased pattern to make the same object over and over again. Another creates their own design, making numerous decisions along the way, each involving a measure of creativity. Each might be called a crafts person, Bauhaus chair, 1920-1933 or an artist? You might compare this to the difference between a person filling in a “paint by number” painting and an artist painting in the more traditional way. While each has a measure of skill, do they each deserve to be called an artist?

As just discussed, crafts have also traditionally been associated with the creation of useful objects, such as shoes, clothes, etc. For many, the idea whether something is useful continues to be the defining difference between arts and crafts. A painting is art because it isn’t good for anything (except covering a blank wall). A porcelain vase is a craft object because it can be used to hold flowers (or I suppose any number of other useful things). Perhaps the Canadian government is right. After discussing the difference for several months, they reached a decision that might remind you of the poets who Leonardo criticized. They said that artists self-designate, that you are an artist if you claim to be one and a crafts person if that’s what you claim. In Canada at least, self promotion seems to be the key.

It’s been said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps the same applies to art. I’ve seen paintings hanging in modern art galleries that look like a child made them for his mother (and not a very talented child at that). My personal criterium has always been: if it looks like I could have painted it, it’s not art. The aesthetic value of a piece should be determined, not by the label given to it, but by the creativity seen in its design and execution. Ultimately, isn’t that what art is supposed to be: a product of the imagination brought to life for all to see?

By Buzzle Staff and Agencies  
Published: 10/31/2007