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## Optical Lenses

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# When Is Art?

Scott Robinson



OPTICAL LENSES Ashley Coble

I WAS ONE OF MANY BEWILDERED FRESHMEN **WANDERING THROUGH THE STACKS OF TEXTBOOKS** at the community college bookstore. I found the required books for English, government, American history and art appreciation. The title of the latter made me pause. What is Art? "Yes!" I thought to myself. "That makes sense. I have to have a clear definition of what art is if I'm gonna be an art major." Standing in the crowded aisle, I flung open the book and read the first sentence:

The only way to begin this book is to make clear that we are not going to arrive at any single answer to the question, What is art?

"What a rip-off!" I said to myself. "I'm not paying for this!"

The book was written by the legendary John Canaday, though I had no idea at the time who the author was. Years later I was better able to appreciate what Canaday was trying to say. Many scholars have tried to define what art is. All failed. Canaday simply dispensed with the matter and got on with what art historians generally agreed upon as the basics of art appreciation.

Some cultures have no word for art, much less a concept of artists or art museums. This does not mean they live without art. Art to them may be that blanket, this bowl or a carved idol. Taking such an object out of context and placing it on a pedestal in an art museum makes no sense in many cultures. In some cases, this would virtually destroy the object because its use as a blanket, bowl or idol is exactly what makes it art—or whatever they call it. On the other hand, there are examples of art whose purpose is not realized until the object is destroyed rather than preserved in a museum. Navaho sand paintings will not dispose of the malevolent spirits captured in the design until the artwork is gathered up and cast to the wind.

So why has every book on art appreciation, save Canaday's, attempted to define art even though the task is impossible? All the conflicting definitions make the field of art appreciation so, well, downright exacerbating. Canaday's outright dismissal of the question forced me to question how could I dedicate my entire adult life studying something that could not be defined?

Then I stumbled onto a different approach to this old problem. I was taking a doctoral course on the philosophy of music when my professor introduced me to Nelson Goodman's book on the Languages of Art. Goodman was wrestling with a much deeper philosophical issue about the nature of music, but something he said seemed to make sense of the "what is art?" question. Part of Goodman's reasoning was that music exists only as it is performed, thus he emphasized the when of music. Maybe we were asking the wrong question about art. What if we asked **when** is art rather than **what**?