

PLATO Essay Contest Winners

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The 2017 PLATO High School Essay contest asked students to address these questions:

How do we define art or determine what things count as art objects?

Students were asked to consider the following scenario: Sarah and Mike, two friends who met in an art class, spend the afternoon in MassMoCA, a museum in North Adams, MA, that features installations of contemporary art that are sometimes very large and often unusual. In one gallery, they stop to look at a pile of sticks placed in a corner. In another, they watch an endlessly looping video of a person sitting in a chair. They aren't sure what to make of these exhibits. Finally, in one of the museum's wings, they find a variety of large, colorful abstract shapes drawn right on the walls. "Now this looks like art!" they say to each other. The artist's name is Sol LeWitt. But when they read more about him and his work, they learn that the shapes on the wall weren't actually painted by LeWitt. Instead, his assistants painted them according to his very detailed written instructions.

"This stuff isn't really art," Mike says. "It's all a scam!" Sarah isn't so sure. "Well," she says, "it's in the museum, which means someone decided it should be here. So it must be art."

Look at that pile of sticks in the corner," Mike says. "That's something anyone could do. I could do that!"

"But you didn't do it," Sarah says, "the artist did. Someone deliberately chose to position the sticks just that way."

Shouldn't art be beautiful?" Mike asks.

Does all art have to be?" Sarah asks. As they walk through the gallery continuing their discussion, they notice a fire extinguisher on the wall. "Is that art too?" Mike asks, pointing to the object. "Is it part of the exhibit? Or is it just something to put out fires? And how can we tell?"

Congratulations to the winners,

First Place: Keith Murray, 11th Grade, Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities

Second Place: Zach Walter, 11th Grade, Williamsville High School

Third Place: Tadhg Larabee, 11th Grade, Richard Montgomery High School

FIRST PLACE WINNER

Art Is More Than Beauty, It's a Whetstone

Keith Murray, 11th Grade, Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities

In almost every major city, one can find an art museum: the hub of culture, elegance, and, recently, confusion. Often times, one feels overwhelmed with awe when stumbling through the various exhibits that display the splendor of masterful painters and sculptors; however, there is always a section of a museum that seems to bring the viewer's awe to a halt: contemporary art—a section best described as eclectic, that is, containing many ideas displayed in odd and unique ways. The artworks displayed here are often the most creative, but most confusing pieces of art in the museum; they seemingly laugh at the previous exhibits of skill and disrespect the name of art which

they are assigned to be. Some, Mike for example, are angered with these artworks and insist that they are not art since they lack the beauty displayed by other more skillful paintings and sculptures. Others, Sarah for example, consider these artworks more deeply and do not dismiss them so quickly. By viewing these contemporary artworks like Sarah did, deeply and openly, we come to a common question: how do we define art? Through unconventional and unique ideas, these artworks challenge our preexisting notions about how we, society, define art. Even though society may be lured by the definitions of art made before the contemporary period, due to the beauty of those creations,

we must consider these recent, odd, and unique artworks as art, for they will be the guide in explaining how we define it.

To start to answer the question of how we define art, we must explain why ordinary objects are not considered art. This explanation can be related to a point which Mike brought up: the difference between the fire extinguisher, an ordinary object, and the art in the exhibit. In the middle of his frustration about how contemporary art is not art, he points toward the fire extinguisher and asks, sarcastically, if that is part of the exhibit or just meant to put out fires. The question may seem to have an obvious answer, but upon further inspection, it leads to an important distinction: a painting, an artwork, is made for art while the fire extinguisher, an artifact, is not made for art. The creator of the fire extinguisher did not intend for the fire extinguisher to be admired for its visual qualities and to be considered as a work of art, such are the qualities of an artwork; however, the fire extinguisher was designed to put out fires. When one views a fire extinguisher, one only thinks of the usefulness of it in the situation of a fire. But when one views an artwork, one only thinks of the visual qualities of the work or art. An object made by man, an artifact, does not bear any artistic significance if it was not made to be. The purpose of the object is a key part in how we define art. Art museums are not full of hair dryers, washing machines, or steering wheels, all of which have a functional purpose; art museums are full of paintings, sculptures, and other visually stimulating objects, all of which have a non-functional purpose. Our society uses objects that have functional purpose, while it admires those that have a non-functional purpose. That is not to say that all art has no functional purpose, but its main purpose is to be viewed as a work of art would be viewed. The distinction between an artwork and an artifact may seem to be obvious, but when viewing objects that are not aesthetically pleasing—beautiful—the distinction starts to blur.

During Mark's frustration, he questions whether or not art should be beautiful, that is to say, can only beautiful objects can be art. Mark doesn't think that the pile of sticks should be considered art; however, it must be since it is in the art exhibit. As Sarah describes, the sticks in the exhibit were deliberately placed in their position, thus suggesting that they are art. It seems that they are hinting at a definition of art that is beyond external beauty and appearance but at a definition of art that is focused on inner beauty, of thought. For example, the endlessly looping video of a person sitting in a chair may not seem to be beautiful or aesthetically pleasing, but if we take a deeper look inside, we can find inner beauty. The person could be a symbol of society and how we are constantly moving, or the person could represent the artist and how the artist feels that his life is never ending and constantly repeating, or the chair could be symbolic of religion and man's constant departure and return to it. Whatever the video represents is not important; what is important is that the video is an artwork of more than appearances, but of something meaningful: like Sarah says, not all art has to be beautiful. Society's need to be stimulated is the driving force behind contemporary art. If all art was beautiful, then art museums would be no more than "walkthrough prisons:" places where one is disengaged from thought rather than invited to explore. However, since all art is not beautiful, society is drawn towards museums to think about art and question its existence. Through society's questions, beauty is redefined as the ability to make one question. Beauty is "in the eye of the beholder" since everyone draws different questions from an artwork.

Take Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, for example, and consider its "beauty." The *Fountain* is nothing more than a urinal placed upon a podium, but



Art is More Than Beauty (continued)

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when we view it through subjective lenses, we see the questions it invites: what is art? is art beautiful? is art profound? If one were to view art objectively, without considering a deeper meaning, then he would miss the whole purpose of art. Art's purpose is to engage us intellectually. That is why society can choose to accept the most outlandish art like the *Fountain* because it engages us intellectually. Mike is frustrated with contemporary art because he is not able to understand what art is doing for us. If Mike were to be more like Sarah and to ponder art's significance, he would realize the true beauty of art. Magritte's *Treachery of Images* is a prime example of this definition of art. In his painting, there is a pipe with the words (in French) that read, "This is not a pipe." Magritte's artwork is inviting to look past its physical qualities and search for a deeper meaning: to redefine what a painting is. A painting can't be solely an object, but an idea, thought, or emotion. Art has a way of transcending the eye and penetrating the mind.

However, for some people, art can't penetrate the mind. It is halted by a stubborn will afraid of new ideas. These people may say that since everyone interprets art differently, art can't have a rigid definition. Even though their point is valid, society's definition of art is general and broad intentionally so as to not stifle creativity. If art had a rigid definition, then artists would struggle finding ways to express their ideas and thoughts. Thousands of artworks would be lost forever in the mind if art had a rigid definition. Therefore, society's definition of art is broad to intentionally allow room for all artwork. The opponents of this idea would go on further to say that the broad definition of art would allow for ordinary objects to be constituted as art. They would see the line between artworks and artifacts as blurry; however, they have forgotten about importance of the artwork's intention. The first step in society's definition of art is to include the creator's intent so the line is clearly drawn. Finally, the opponents of the idea would ask how Sol LeWitt's art, the art that Mike and Sarah saw in the contemporary art exhibit, is included in society's definition of art. Surely it can't be art since the creator is not clearly established? After all, LeWitt didn't paint any of the artworks, his students did. These opponents must realize that all of the artworks were the LeWitt's idea. Since art evokes questioning and thought from the viewer, then it must come from the thought of the creator. The artwork acts as a medium to transfer these thoughts, even though the viewer can choose to reject the creator's thoughts and substitute their own. The idea came from LeWitt; therefore, he is the creator. The opponents of Society's definition of art may still try to refute it, but ultimately, there is an underlying quality the unites all art: the ability to provoke thought.

Mike's confusion is an ironic example of how thought provoking art can be. Since Mike is questioning what art is, he is clearly demonstrating art's purpose of invoking thought. Even though Mike may not be enjoying his confusion now, it will eventually make him a more thoughtful person. His observations about the nature of art will lead him to further question things around him. This is why society is drawn towards art. We enjoy the ideas that art exposes us to because they will transform us into a more reflective society. By including art that pushes the seemingly rigid boundaries of art, our intellect is sharpened as if it were a knife on a whetstone. We define art as objects created for the intent of provoking thought so that we will grow as a society.

About Keith Murray: I participate in a philosophy directed study program with a teacher at my school. I have been reading the works of Descartes, Hume, Kant, Sartre, and others for years now and continue to search for new and thought provoking ideas. Philosophy allows me to think deeper and more critically about current topics and past historical events. Without philosophy, I would have never been able to appreciate the seemingly meaningless things in life. By continuing to study philosophy, I hope to gain an experienced, wise perspective in which to help guide future generations to come. While others may try to degrade the occupation of a philosopher, my interest in philosophy will stay firm and guide my academic aspirations.



IS PLATO RIGHT THAT ALL ARTISTIC CREATION IS A FORM OF IMITATION OF NATURE?