

Classroom Activity

Aesthetics: What Is Art and What Should We Conserve for the Future?

- Objective** Students will begin to explore the nature of art and its value in society. They will learn that they have beliefs about the nature and significance of art and that others may have different views on these matters. In terms of philosophical thinking skills, students will practice articulating their views, listening carefully to others, defending and criticizing their own views, and will see for themselves that communal discussion of difficult issues can lead to greater understanding, a broadening of viewpoints, and changes of mind.
- Key Questions** What is art? (Notice that the question is different from *what is a good work of art?*) What is the value of art? Is art valuable for its own sake? Is art a valuable tool for understanding ourselves, our history, another culture, etc.? What value does art have in relation to other things in our lives? Are some works of art more valuable than others, and thus more worthy of conservation? How do we decide which works are more valuable than others? How do decisions about what to conserve relate to our views about what art is and what its value is?
- Background** The term *aesthetics* was coined by Alexander Baumgarten in the mid-eighteenth century. Baumgarten drew upon a Greek word *aisthesis*, which means sensation or perception. Some of the uses of the term *aesthetics* today include:
1. the rules or standards dictated by critics to artists;
 2. an adjective referring to certain kinds of experiences or mental attitudes, as well as to properties of paintings. The question of what constitutes an aesthetic property is very much debated. Some philosophers have thought that the aesthetic properties of a painting are limited to its formal properties, such as line, color, balance, etc.;
 3. term for the philosophical study of art. Philosophy is a reflective activity involving critical thinking and a close analysis of concepts. Philosophical thinking often leads us to ask very general questions about reality, our knowledge of reality, how to lead a good life, and what the nature and value of art is.
- Grades** The exercise can be modified according to grade level.
- Time** 30–50 minutes
- Materials** Assorted items, some of which are obviously works of art (represented by reproductions or postcards), some of which are obviously not works of art (pens and pencils), and some things that may fall on the borderline (children's art, a flag, an advertisement), boxes in which students will place items they select from the group above to create a "time capsule."
- Procedure** Divide the class into groups of 4–6 students and provide each group with an assortment of items to consider.
- Explain to students that they have been assigned the task of making a time capsule to be preserved until the year 3000 (or to be sent to another culture or planet). Tell them that there is only room in the capsule for works of art, since we want to help future generations understand what we think art is. They will have to choose items to send and those to leave behind. Older students might write out a definition of art and put that in the box.

Each group should discuss what should be put in the capsule and why. Compare the results of each group. Are there similarities in their views about what should be preserved and why? If time permits, break students into groups again and explain that they can help future generations understand more about what we think art is by helping them see why we think art is important or valuable. Ask the students to discuss the value of art. Older students might write a paragraph for the capsule explaining why art is valuable.

The teacher's role in this exercise is to help students articulate their views and to begin to criticize their reasoning. You might pursue a line of thought with students, asking further questions. You might sum up the session with a list of conclusions, or more likely, a list of questions the exercise raises.

Option 1 *What Should We Conserve for the Future?*

Expand the array of items that might be included in a time capsule, including things that might enhance future generations' understanding of who we are (a daily newspaper, a copy of the constitution, a photograph of a football game, a computer) and things that might seem more trivial (a gum wrapper, an advertisement, etc.). Tell them that the time capsules they construct with these items should help people in the future understand more about the students and their culture. They will have to choose their items carefully, as there is only room for half of them in the capsule. Again, ask students to discuss among themselves what they should include, and to provide reasons for including the items they've selected. Compare the results among the groups. Are there similarities in what should be preserved, and, if so, why? Did they select any art objects to send into the future? Why or why not? Help them to explore whether they believe art is valuable, whether it helps us understand something about ourselves, and whether it will help future generations understand us.

Option 2 *What Should We Conserve for the Future? Forgeries, Accidents, and Damaged Art.* (Grades 9–12)

Provide students with an assortment of reproductions of works of art to which they will affix stick-ums with various comments. It is best to have sets of two items. You can also do without reproductions and just describe the cases. The following are some examples:

1. A mediocre painting that is known to be an original vs. a brilliant painting within the same genre that is known to be a forgery.
2. A poem of moderate fame in its original language vs. the same poem in translation, but of great renown.
3. A fabulous, well-conserved forgery of the Mona Lisa vs. the original Mona Lisa cut into pieces by accident.
4. A black and white version of an old movie vs. the new colorized version.
5. The statue of Venus de Milo without arms vs. the statue equipped with arms developed from new computer technology that approximates how the arms should look, given the rotation of the shoulders in the original.
6. A painting by Van Gogh worth 20 million vs. another of his paintings worth 55 million.
7. The Mona Lisa by Leonardo de Vinci vs. the Duchamp version of the Mona Lisa with a mustache.
8. A painting by Jackson Pollock vs. a painting by an elephant.

Break the students into groups and assign each an assortment of items to consider. Instruct students that their time capsule should inform future generations about our concept of art and what we value in art. Inform students that there is room for only half the objects described above and for only one from each set. Instruct students to discuss what should be included in the capsule and their reasons for their selections. Assign a member in each group to compare notes. Again compare results among the groups and sum up the session with a list of conclusions and questions the exercise raises.