



Defining Art: Philosophical Perspectives on Children's Drawings

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ABSTRACT

This article explores whether a child's drawing can be considered art. It delves into the complexities of defining art by examining various philosophical theories, including the significant form theory, the idealist theory, and the institutional theory of art. The analysis emphasizes the crucial role of aesthetic emotion, the artist's intention, and the social context in determining the artistic merit of a child's drawing. The discussion also addresses the challenges of defining art and the potential impact of moral considerations, such as originality, on evaluating artistic works. Ultimately, the article argues for a nuanced understanding of art that acknowledges artistic appreciation's subjective and multifaceted nature.

Introduction

Art education occupies a complicated space within the structure of school curricula. Often relegated to the periphery of academic priorities, it is frequently classified under the umbrella of "co-scholastic" or "extra-curricular" activities, seemingly distinct from the core subjects deemed essential for a child's development. This marginalization is often reflected in the allocation of time and resources. A cursory glance at a typical school timetable reveals art's presence confined to a single period per week, commonly designated as the "art and craft" period. This designation itself is telling, as it often implies a limited scope of artistic exploration. The general perception of "art" within the school environment is frequently restricted to a narrow range of activities, primarily focusing on drawing, and at most, extending to painting, sketching, basic craftwork, and "best out of waste" projects. These activities, while



valuable in their own right, often represent a simplified and potentially constrained view of the vast landscape of artistic expression. This limited perspective naturally leads to a critical question: Can these activities, and more specifically, can a child's drawing produce within this context, be truly considered "art" in a broader, more meaningful sense? This inquiry necessitates a deeper exploration into the very definition of art, a concept that has been debated and contested by philosophers and art theorists for centuries. To adequately address the question of whether a child's drawing should be considered a work of art or not, this paper will examine various philosophical theories that attempt to define and categorize art, using these theoretical frameworks to build a more nuanced understanding of children's artistic creations.

Challenge of Defining Art

Many philosophers argue that art cannot be defined at all (Adajian, 2024). They claim that it is not feasible to look for a standard feature since there is too much variety among works of art. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) supports this idea with the idea of a family resemblance. There may be overlapping similarities amongst certain family members without a common observable feature that they may all share in the same way. Different sorts of art may resemble in the same manner. Despite the apparent similarities between some works of art, there may be no observable features they all share. It is impossible to look for any general definition of art if this is so. As a result, it will be wise only to look for definitions of an art form, like film, music, novel, painting, etc. However, there are many criticisms of the family resemblance view. Just like all family members are related to each other genetically, there is a possibility of developing at least one feature for all works of art. Considering the above opportunity, three theories come to our rescue, the significant form, the idealist, and the institutional theories of art.

Philosophical Theories of Art

The significant form idea was introduced by Clive Bell in his book *Art* in 1914. He starts with the conviction that every authentic piece of art evokes an aesthetic response in the viewer, listener, or reader. The feelings of daily living are not the same as this emotion. It is distinct in that it is unrelated to pragmatic issues. The term "significant form" was coined to describe the element that arouses these feelings. To put it another way, it is the important kind of art that makes people feel an aesthetic emotion. A work of art's significant form is an indefinable quality that perceptive critics can sense on an instinctive level. Many people, meanwhile, are unable to recognise the important form. Bell considered the concept



of art to be evaluative. For something to be considered a work of art, it must possess a certain value. Every authentic piece of art, regardless of age or country, has important forms. The circular character of this idea has drawn criticism. Simply said, a work's formal qualities that evoke an aesthetic feeling are its significant form. The emotion experienced when a significant form is present is the only way to understand the aesthetic emotion. A further objection to the theory is that it cannot be refuted (Hodges, 2016). Many philosophers believe that a theory is meaningless if logically impossible to deny because every possible observation would confirm it. The significant form theory assumes that there is just one emotion that all genuine experiencers of art feel when appreciating true works of art. However, this is extremely difficult to prove.

According to the idealist view of art presented by R. G. Collingwood in his 1911 book *The Principles of Art*, the genuine work of art is an idea or feeling that exists only in the artist's mind and is not physical. Through the artist's use of a certain artistic media, this concept is given tangible, imaginative expression and altered, yet the artwork itself stays in the artist's head. Some iterations of the idealist theory place a great lot of emphasis on the sincerity of the emotion being communicated. The idealist theory distinguishes between craft and art. Art does not serve any particular function. They are the result of the artist's work with a particular media, like words or oil paint. Craft objects, on the other hand, are made with a specific purpose in mind, and the craftsman starts with a plan instead of designing the item as they go along. Collingwood (1911) makes it clear that the two types of art and craft are not exclusive of one another. Rather, no piece of art serves only as a tool. The idealist theory draws a distinction between entertainment art and true art. Genuine art is an end in and of itself; it serves no function. Since entertainment art is a craft, it is not as good as true art. The primary criticism of the idealism approach is that it is odd to view artworks as mental concepts rather than tangible things. A second criticism of this idea is that it is overly limited, classifying many well-known pieces of art as merely craft rather than true art.

According to George Dickie's institutional theory of art (1974), works that qualify as art share two characteristics. First of all, they can all be referred to as artefacts because humans have contributed to them in one way or another. Second, some people in the art world have deemed them to be works of art. They may be an artist, conductor, producer, publisher, or gallery owner. By merely publishing, displaying, or performing the work, some people and organisations in our culture can transform any item into a piece of art. This theory is critiqued because it does not differentiate good art from bad art. Using



this theory, anything can be termed art. This theory is also circular because ‘work of art’ and ‘member of the art world’ have been defined in terms of the other.

Denis Dutton’s (2009) evolutionary theory of art emphasises on ‘art instinct.’ He further elaborates how landscape paintings that portray desirable scenes in real life are widely appreciated. Evolutionary theory can also explain why artists and works of art are so highly prized despite being of no practical use. This theory is criticised because there can be numerous explanations for a particular instinct.

Analysing Children’s Drawings through Philosophical Lenses

Keeping the above theories in mind, I will attempt to reflect on the original question: Should a child’s drawing be considered a work of art? Why not? If yes, then under which conditions?

If the child’s drawing evokes aesthetic emotions, it can be considered art. Everyone may not be able to appreciate the ‘significant form’ in the drawing that produces aesthetic feelings, but this does not allow us to conclude that the drawing lacks the same. It all depends on the viewer. A sensitive critic may also be able to place value on the child’s drawing.

However, idealist theory may call the same drawing a work of craft if the child drew it with a purpose. The purpose can be anything, be it homework submission or simply a drawing competition. At the same time, the idea in the child’s mind in the non-physical form behind that drawing can be termed art. If the child’s drawing gets published or exhibited, the drawing will be christened as a work of art. It will also acquire a monetary value. The drawing can also be considered art if the child’s instinct behind that drawing gets recognised and is in line with the likes of the masses. Some people may consider copy work as art. However, ethically dubious copying cannot be considered art since the purpose is fraud, which is linked to deceit, which is the same as lying. But for other people, there can be legitimate reasons to keep some artistic and moral issues apart: a clever fake may still be impressive as a piece of art even if it entails deception (Warburton, 1992). Hence, it becomes tricky to clearly say if the child’s drawing is a work of art, especially if it has been copied. However, I would like to give the child the benefit of the doubt. A child may not have the intention to deceive or may not even realise that they have copied their drawing. One should call a child’s drawing a work of art even if it is copied if it displays the fine artistic skills of the child.



Expanding the Definition of Art

“All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.” – Pablo Picasso.

Art first appeared about 50,000 years ago, far before civilisation and cities, but in forms that are still immediately relatable to us now (Philosophy Now, n.d.). The wall paintings in the Lascaux caves, which so surprised Picasso, have been carbon-dated at roughly 17,000 years old (Arn, 2019). What, therefore, is art if it applies to both cavemen and contemporary urban elites? We must ask, “What does art do?” in order to do this. And there is no question about it: it elicits an emotional reaction as opposed to a cognitive one. Saying that art is made up of ideas that can be shared and have an emotional impact that can be shared is one way to approach the challenge of defining art. Since a great work of art can legitimately provoke feelings other than those evoked by beauty, such as fear, anxiety, or laughter, art need not result in beautiful things or events. However, drawing a legitimate philosophical theory of art from this interpretation would require addressing the idea of “emotion” directly. Our thoughts, feelings, intuitions, and desires are all expressed through art (Lee, 2021). However, it goes even deeper than that: it’s about sharing our worldviews, which for many people is an extension of our personalities. Words alone cannot accurately convey the communication of intimate concepts (Jessica, 2020). The subjects and methods used to create art are limited only by the artist’s imagination. Art can evoke feelings of awe or cynicism, hope or despair, admiration or hatred; it can be straightforward or intricate, subtle or explicit, understandable or cryptic. Works of art express fearlessness and harmony with emotions that one is experiencing. In the light of the above definition, a child’s drawing can be considered a work of art.

Conclusion

The central inquiry of this paper, whether a child’s drawing can be legitimately considered a work of art, has led us into the complex and often contentious terrain of defining art itself. The exploration of this question reveals that a definitive, universally accepted answer remains elusive, mainly due to the multifaceted and evolving nature of art across different contexts and throughout history. While providing valuable frameworks for analysis, philosophical perspectives simultaneously underscore the subjective dimensions inherent in artistic evaluation. The theories examined in this study, Significant Form, Idealist, Institutional, and Evolutionary, offer unique lenses to view art’s creation and reception. As articulated by Clive Bell, the Significant Form theory posits that art’s essence lies in its capacity to evoke aesthetic emotions in the observer. This emphasis on emotional response highlights the subjective nature of art



appreciation, as what constitutes a “significant form” capable of eliciting aesthetic emotion can vary considerably from one individual to another.

In contrast, the Idealist theory, championed by R.G. Collingwood shifts the focus from the artwork as a physical object to the artist’s internal world, suggesting that the true work of art exists as an idea or emotion within the artist’s mind. This perspective raises intriguing questions about the role of intention and the creative process in determining the artistic merit of any creation, including a child’s drawing. The Institutional Theory, notably developed by George Dickie, introduces a sociological dimension to the definition of art, arguing that an artwork’s status is conferred upon it by members of the “art world”. This theory highlights the importance of context and social recognition in shaping our understanding of what constitutes art, suggesting that a child’s drawing might be elevated to the status of art through exhibition or validation by recognized authorities. Furthermore, the Evolutionary Theory, proposed by Denis Dutton, provides a broader perspective by exploring the deep-rooted human inclination towards art, suggesting that it serves certain evolutionary purposes. This perspective encourages us to consider the universality of artistic expression, potentially encompassing even the seemingly simple creations of children.

Applying these diverse theoretical frameworks to the specific case of children’s drawings reveals the inherent challenges in definitively categorizing them as either “art” or “not art.” A child’s drawing can sometimes evoke profound aesthetic emotions, originate from a place of genuine creative expression, and even be acknowledged and celebrated within specific contexts. However, factors such as the child’s intention, the level of skill demonstrated, and the degree of originality present can complicate the evaluation process. The issue of copywork, in particular, introduces moral considerations that further blur the lines of artistic merit. Ultimately, this exploration underscores the importance of adopting a nuanced and inclusive understanding of art. Art, in its essence, functions as a powerful medium for expressing and communicating personal experiences, provoking emotional responses, and reflecting the boundless capacity of human imagination. To limit the definition of art to only those works created by adults or those that adhere to conventional standards of skill and originality would be to overlook the inherent value and potential artistic merit found in children’s creative expressions. In conclusion, while whether a child’s drawing is “art” may not have a simple answer, it is imperative to acknowledge and appreciate children’s artistic endeavours within a framework that recognizes the diversity and richness of creative expression in all its forms.



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