

Is It Art? Part 1

Help students explore what art is, following these steps.

1. Read and discuss some dictionary definitions of “art.”
2. Briefly booktalk *Sammy Keyes and the Art of Deception*, setting up and including her dissatisfaction with Merriam-Webster’s definition of art on page 268. Ask for ideas about what Sammy might mean by comparing the definition to saying that a “human being is bones, blood, and muscle.”
3. Present the “Beauty or Truth” theory, claiming that art should either add beauty to the world or express an important truth, even if that truth makes us uncomfortable because it is frightening, discouraging, or ugly.
4. Share examples of “art” that stretch the boundaries of standard definitions, from print and online sources. Here are some suggestions:
 - The murals/graffiti in *Art Dog*
 - Items from *Startling Art* (Ripley’s Believe It or Not! Disbelief and Shock!)
 - Art made by animals, as in *Elephants Can Paint Too!* or these websites:
www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/stories/10-videos-of-animals-that-paint
www.coolystone.com/media/6392/Fish-Create-Sand-Art-On-Ocean-Floor/#Vb-9FflmpQo
 - Examples of controversial art, like some of Jackson Pollock’s abstract paintings (Google “Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings”); some of Andy Warhol’s pop art (Google “Andy Warhol’s pop art images”); game-graphics-style digital art (Google the subject and click on “images...”); “food art,” as in the Saxton Freymann and Joost Elffers books (or Google “food art” and click on “images”); or some photography (look at a variety of photos of landscapes, nature, people, close-ups of specific items, etc., or find samples of photography projects online, like the ones at <http://clickitupanotch.com/2014/10/photography-projects-for-kids>).
5. Consider these questions:
 - Can animals really create art? Do they intend to create art, or is it just random play?
 - Do the examples mentioned in the fourth bullet point in #4 above show skill and creativity?
 - Do they add beauty to the world?
 - Do they tell an important truth, even if it is ugly or frightening?
 - Do they convey identifiable emotions?
 - Do they make you think or see things in new ways?
6. Work together to compose a working definition of what characteristics a visual image must show in order to be “art.” Expect lively discussion and disagreement! Emphasize that the point is to explore the idea of art, not to authoritatively define it—something that no one has ever been able to do!

Is It Art? Part 2

After class discussion of “Is It Art? Part 1,” have each student choose a topic that interests them from the list below. Tell them to think about whether the topic does or does not qualify as “art.” Then, have each student write a one-two page persuasive essay stating and supporting their opinion.

- Graffiti
- Photography
- Tattoos
- A puffer fish’s design in sand
- “Refrigerator art,” created by children and displayed in their homes
- A painting done by an elephant or other animal
- A Jackson Pollock abstract painting
- An Andy Warhol painting
- War or other propaganda posters
- Food art, as in the Saxton Freymann and Joost Elffers books