

# What Is an Artist?

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## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers how to define an artist by exploring the difference between an ordinary artist and an artistic genius, and comparing and contrasting the Western and non-Western conceptions of the artist:

## 1. Identifying an Artist

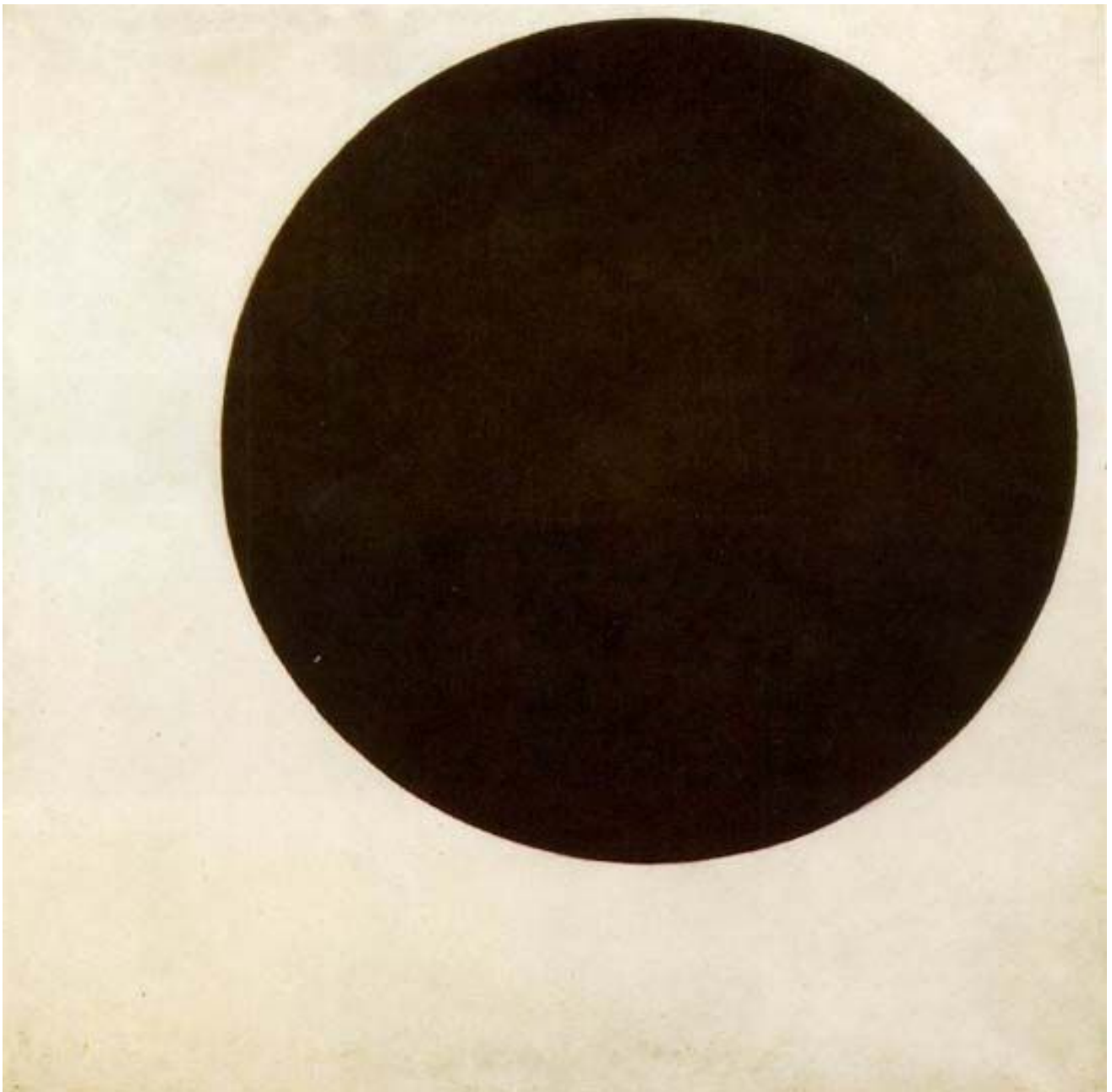
By definition, an **artist** is a person who creates work of aesthetic value. **Aesthetic** is concerned with beauty, or the appreciation of beauty. Keep in mind that sometimes the word aesthetic is also used as a synonym for the word "style."

This introduces some subjectivity because the idea of beauty itself is subjective; you may argue that whether or not someone is considered an artist is determined by the preferences of the viewer. However, this tutorial focuses more on the artist as a professional, or an individual who looks at the production of art as a discipline, rather than just a casual activity.

This distinction is important because it helps differentiate between the artist and the non-artist, or sometimes the craftsman or artisan. Again, these concepts are subjective, or open to interpretation.

By identifying an artist, you can identify art. An artist produces art, and vice versa; you can identify an artist by looking at a piece of art and pulling out characteristics unique to an individual artist.

Additionally, by connecting the artist and the work, you gain insight into why and how something was created.



**Black Circle by Kazimir Malevich**



The River of Light by Frederic Edwin Church

Looking at each of the two paintings above, you can ask questions such as:

- Why was this created?
- What does it mean?
- How was this painting created?
- What techniques did the artist use?
- Are the techniques associated with a certain school of artists?

The answer to the last question is yes, in the case of the second painting. It is by the landscape artist Frederic Church, who was a member of the Hudson River School in New York.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

**Artist**

A person who creates works of aesthetic value

**Aesthetic**

Concerned with the beauty or the appreciation of beauty

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## 2. Notion of Genius

When talking about artists, it's important to keep in mind that there is a Western notion of **genius**, or an artist of extraordinary talent. Not every artist was a genius, though this is another subjective notion.

Essentially, the labeling of genius is a consensus among the learned scholars of art history, and this eventually seeped into the public consciousness, sort of by osmosis.

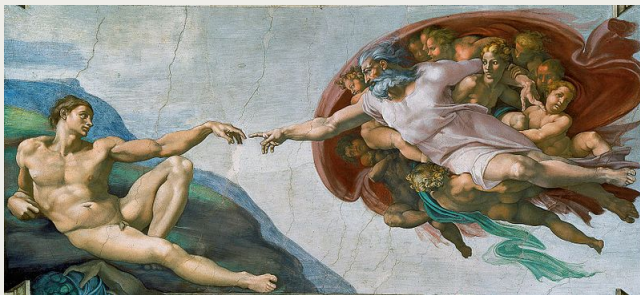
You can probably identify, without even trying too hard, one or two geniuses off the top of your head even if you don't have that much exposure to art history.

To understand how scholars arrive at the conclusion of which artists are geniuses, consider the famous artist Michelangelo. Michelangelo was extraordinarily talented and arguably one of the greatest—if not the greatest—sculptors of all time.

Scholars look upon his body of work, or his **oeuvre**. They also consider his originality, such as his ability to make the surface of marble appear flesh-like. They use all of these factors in determining that he is, in fact, an artist of tremendous ability.

### IN CONTEXT

Consider Michaelangelo's scene from the Sistine Chapel, his *David*, and the *Pietà*.



Sistine Chapel ceiling by Michaelangelo



**David by Michaelangelo**



**Pietà by Michaelangelo**

These are just some examples from his oeuvre, and they prove him to be exceptionally talented. Therefore, the unanimous consensus among scholars is that he was a genius. You would have a hard time convincing anybody in the field that Michelangelo was a hack.



#### **TERMS TO KNOW**

##### **Genius**

An exceptionally talented, knowledgeable, or creative person

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## 3. Conception of the Artist

Up to this point in your study, the conception of the artist has been a very Western one. In many non-Western cultures, artists don't necessarily exist in the same way as they do in Western cultures.

Many individuals in Western cultures that you might identify as artists would simply be known as craftsmen or artisans in non-Western cultures because they produce ceremonial or functional objects.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In Western conception, whether or not a blacksmith is an artist would depend on that person's oeuvre. The argument that a sword is a work of art could definitely be one worth making; however, the possibility might not even be considered in some non-Western cultures.

It's important to remember that all definitions are not universal, and the artist's role is not universal either. It can change as you move from culture to culture.

While the traditional Western approach to art history relies a great deal on knowledge of the artist, there are actually ways to critique or assess art if you don't know the artist.

You can look at other known attributes, such as:

- The regional style
- The religious and social values of the time
- The materials used

### IN CONTEXT

For instance, without knowing anything about the artist who produced the Egyptian sculpture in the photograph below, you can still tell a great deal about its meaning and function because so much is known about ancient Egyptian culture.





## SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that **identifying an artist** enables you to identify art by considering that artist's unique values and techniques. While the definition of an artist is subjective, there are some artists who are widely considered to be geniuses, or exceptionally talented artists. This **notion of genius** came from a consensus among the learned scholars of art history, and eventually seeped into the public consciousness.

Finally, you learned that while the Western, or European, **conception of the artist** is that of a person who produces work of an aesthetic value, this conception can be different in non-Western cultures. When critiquing or evaluating a piece of art, cultural context is important, especially if you don't know the artist.

Good luck!



## TERMS TO KNOW

**Aesthetic**

Concerned with the beauty or the appreciation of beauty.

**Artist**

A person who creates works of aesthetic value.

**Genius**

An exceptionally talented, knowledgeable, or creative person.

**Oeuvre**

An artist's body of work.