

# Margolis on Art and Culture

## Recognizing Art in Hindsight

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**ABSTRACT** | This essay develops Joseph Margolis's suggestion that Intentionality plays an essential role in distinguishing art from other artifacts and cultural practices. Following a review of the context and substance of Margolis's position, I suggest setting aside his emphasis on "central specimens" of art in favor of less central examples as well as non-Western art. Emphasizing Margolis's insight that interpretations of cultural entities are stabilized by appeal to contingent and incomplete interpretations of the past, I review cases where cultural entities are recognized to be art in hindsight, reversing previous denial of that status. Examples include some popular music, Japanese *ukiyo-e prints*, and everyday artifacts. Given that art status is conferred in hindsight only following reinterpretation of the cultural entity as one with cultural significance, I suggest that a particular mode of interpretation is the missing differentia that distinguishes art from other cultural entities.

**KEYWORDS** | Art; Definition of Art; Cultural Entities; Intentionality; Joseph Margolis

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## 1 Introductory Remarks on Margolis

This essay develops Joseph Margolis's suggestion that Intentionality plays an essential role in distinguishing art from other artifacts and cultural practices. I begin with a review of the context and substance of Margolis's position.

The philosophical project of defining art was reinvigorated and redirected by one of the most cited and downloaded essays in twentieth-century aesthetics, Morris Weitz's (1956) "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics." Weitz argued that the concept of art is inherently unstable. Therefore, art cannot be defined. Margolis (1957) responded almost immediately with a short essay that is republished and translated in the *East Asian Journal of Philosophy* (Margolis 2023). Although he could not have known it at the time, there is an interesting irony built into his critique of Weitz. Margolis (1957, 89) points out that Weitz's argument implies that the definitional problem is broader than the concept of art, extending to all empirical concepts (especially those with a normative element—those later known as "thick" concepts; Williams 1985). In turn, Hilde Hein promptly accused Margolis of the same overreach: Margolis, no less than Weitz, was "blurring the distinctions between ... works of art and non-works of art" (Hein 1959, 637). Margolis blurs this line because he concentrates on necessary conditions without identifying a set of conditions that would be sufficient for art.<sup>1</sup> The irony, then, is that much of Margolis's discussion of art is not, in fact, about art, but rather about the much broader field of cultural entities: objects and events with culturally emergent properties.

Margolis (1999a, 372) subsequently highlighted that he had always been casting his net far beyond art: "works of art ... —I would now say all 'cultural entities' ... possess 'meanings'."<sup>2</sup> He frequently characterized "meanings" as "Intentionality": "Intentional properties are intrinsically interpretable—apt for interpretation," inviting us to "articulate [their] meanings and significant structures" (Margolis 2000, 116–117). Although Margolis (1980, 47–48; 1999b, 68 n3) consistently stressed that a theory of cultural entities is the *core* of his theory, his early publications pursued a definition for central cases of "artworks," supplementing the necessary conditions of embodiment and Intentionality with the additional point that they are entities that arise within an appreciative tradition that includes aesthetic appreciation (Margolis 1980, 89–91).<sup>3</sup>

1 Danto (2013) faces the same problem. On this point, see Davies (1991, 160–163).

2 Margolis was explicit, later in his career, that we are pursuing a definition of "the fine arts" (Margolis 2010b, 215).

3 Margolis (1980, 41) sometimes suggests that his necessary conditions become sufficient whenever a cultural entity belongs to a recognized art form: e.g., "to locate or specify something as an artwork requires reference ... to the artistic and appreciative traditions of a given culture." See also Margolis (1999b). Thus, *Lucia di Lammermoor* is an opera created in a cultural context where opera was an established artistic and appreciative tradition, and so it is an artwork. In contrast, the printed warranty for my new thermostat is not an artwork because written warranties have no appreciative tradition. There is a whiff of this idea in Weitz (1956, 32), and it is developed by Levinson (1979) and Lopes (2014). However,

Margolis (1980, 40–41) suspects the relevant differentia is a byproduct of the distinction between the physical medium of an artwork and its artistic medium. For any work of art, there must be some physical medium in which the work reaches the audience.<sup>4</sup> However, something more is needed to determine its identity as the cultural entity that it is. For example, the *Mona Lisa's* physical medium is oil paint and a poplar wood panel. The particular physical object is an artwork by virtue of its purposeful construction in relation to “a purposeful system of brushstrokes” (a thoroughly *conventional* system, of course). Things get more complicated for the identity conditions for music and the other performing arts, but the basic idea remains the same. The various tokens are the physical medium for the work, and thus for any particular performance of Chopin’s piano sonata in B-flat minor (Op. 35), the physical medium will be the sound waves produced by the hammers striking the strings. Just as the painted panel is an artwork because representational painting has an artistic purpose, the sound waves produced by the vibrating strings convey an artistic purpose because they are sounds in a *musical* medium, that is, they are produced in relation to a conventional system of music making.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, this distinction between the physical and the artistic medium is an insufficient differentia for central or standard examples of art. Once we break the circle that arises from the stipulation that art requires an *artistic* medium by cashing this out as “a network of cultural traditions and institutions” that yields an “institutionalized craft” (Margolis 1980, 45–46), the upshot is that cultural conventions have informed the handling of the physical medium. Knowledgeable observers will recognize how the physical product reflects those conventions. However, this appeal to tradition-infused craft does not distinguish art from a host of other artifact designs, for these will also have their own stylized aesthetic features.<sup>6</sup> Culturally-informed aesthetic standards inform virtually all human designs, including all mass-produced objects and tools, from faucet handles to mobile phones to typefaces, and these designs are aesthetically evaluated and appreciated by their designers and consumers.<sup>7</sup> Nor would it help to restrict the differentia to cases of genuine aesthetic excellence: a great deal of art falls short of that standard. Coming at the same point from

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Levinson’s historical definition has been dismantled by Currie (2010), and Lopes is strongly challenged by Young (2016, 427–430) and Monseré (2016) as not systemically informative.

4 I set aside the issue of whether conceptual art refutes the physicality requirement. I align with Margolis in saying that there is no cultural entity without physical instantiation.

5 Saying “in relation” to a conventional system avoids the implication that the activity must *conform* to the prevailing conventions of the artistic medium. Artists and audiences share norms that are constantly violated, reformed, and revised. See (Margolis 1980, 48).

6 In this respect, recall that Gombrich (1960, 25) reaches back to Quintilian on the topic of style: an innovative vase design is only relatively novel, for it is inescapably tradition-infused as a precondition for making a vase; analogously, visual conventions permeate every picture. In short, there is no relevant difference here between functional craft and pictorial art.

7 Stecker (2000, 51): “Many artifacts fulfill aesthetic functions, not all of which are art by any means.” Davies (2015, 379) distinguishes art from tradition-infused craft by saying that “probably only the most superb examples [have] art status.”

the other direction, the twentieth century gave us an increasing array of non-aesthetic art (Binkley 1977), and therefore institutionalized craft cannot be a necessary condition for art.<sup>8</sup> Stepping away from the debate and his early emphasis on aesthetic appreciation, Margolis largely ignores art's aesthetic dimension in his later writings. Interpretation takes precedence over perception.

Concerning interpretation, Margolis argues that a cultural entity has a determinable meaning only as a function of contingent, relatively stable consensus about what is and is not contextually relevant to it in relation to its underdetermined cultural context. A singular, stable meaning would require a unified and stable cultural framework, but these are constructed "myths" (Margolis 1998a, 372). Thus, both the meaning and identity of any interpretable artifact arises against a backdrop of history, as a function of "*the historicized alterability of its interpretively assigned past*" (Margolis 2000, 126; see also Margolis 1999b, 35, 83). The upshot is that, for Margolis (1998a, 372), artworks are simply a prominent case of cultural entities that possess "a range of meanings [as] a function of the salient cultural 'myths' that may change for various reasons."<sup>9</sup>

For example, consider Edgar Degas' design technique of placing a subject off-center, partially cut off by the picture's edge. One critic calls it a "snapshot" technique with implications of the painter's relationship to the subject (Gombrich 1964, 205); another critic advises us to interpret Degas' work in relation to the development of photography (Classen 2014, 189). Elsewhere, one of these same critics shifts from a narrowly European frame of reference to a recognition of French *Japonisme*, advising us to interpret these same images in relation to Degas' appropriation of techniques from Japanese printmakers such as Utamaro and Hokusai (Gombrich 1951: 396–397; see also DeVonyar and Kendall 2007). Here, I agree with Margolis. We can adopt any valid frame of reference and each will yield a different interpretation of what Degas is showing us. The "myth" is our adherence to an established cultural frame as *the* correct frame. However, we can and do change frames (e.g., to take account of new facts), with significant consequences, a key point that I develop throughout this essay.

In summary, the cultural entity that is present for any audience member at any time is a function of the operative myth that stabilizes its interpretation. One can stand in front of the Venus of Willendorf in the natural history museum of Vienna, that is, one can stand in front of the limestone figurine, but the cultural entity that it was 25,000 years ago is up for debate. The physical object, *uninterpreted*, is not any specific artwork—not any specific cultural entity. Today, we can only *speculate* what the cultural entity was (and the very name, "Venus of Willendorf," aligns it with one myth rather than others), so that our very activity

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8 For an argument that non-perceptual artworks also have a distinctive aesthetic element, see Shelley (2003).

9 Ingarden (1973 [1931]) anticipates several of Margolis's points about cultural entities and artwork as purely intentional objects, but Margolis arrives at his thesis independently.

of speculating about it picks out a determinate cultural entity from a larger set of possibilities. Analogously, we do the same thing when we interpret artworks of our own time and place.

Margolis's initial response to Weitz did not stress these radical implications, but Hein detected their presence. Hein took issue with the possibility that a statue or painting might be physically present and yet cease to be the entity that it was. Hein (1959, 638) counters that once a work of art, always a work of art: "the 'Mona Lisa' used to cover a hole in the plaster would be no less a work of art than it is hanging in the Louvre at the height of the tourist season." Like many subsequent commentators on Margolis, Hein failed to take seriously the idea there are many days when the viewing area in the Louvre is crowded to capacity and yet da Vinci's painted panel is not at that time a work of art, for the tourists do not engage in *the relevant kind of interpretation* of it. Beyond a superficial understanding that they are viewing a portrait, few of them have any idea about how to apprehend the intended cultural entity. Responding to it in the light of a cultural stance that is inimical to Renaissance humanism, they admire a twenty-first century cultural entity (call it "small famous object across the room that validates me because it's behind me in a photo") rather than the Renaissance cultural entity *La Gioconda*.<sup>10</sup>

Might this doctrine about the identity conditions of cultural entities provide the differentia that Margolis sought for a definition of art? The remainder of this essay will examine examples of after-the-fact recognitions of art in order to motivate a potential differentia that exploits Margolis's point about identity conditions and Intentionality. Specifically, I pursue the idea that "This is not art" can be true when said of a specific cultural entity and "This is art" can also be true of the same entity. However, I want to show how this might work without going to Margolis's radical extreme of rejecting the principle of bivalence for truth values. Odd as it sounds, a case can be made that a cultural entity *becomes* art through the active agency of respondents' interpretive practices. I will suggest that art status depends on respondents' conscious attempts to specify the cultural entity they are encountering.

## 2 Procedural Considerations

Before I build on Margolis, I will situate my procedure by highlighting a point he makes about the project of defining art. Margolis (1999b, 68) says, "the would-be definition should be offered against the backdrop of a reasonably clear-cut range of central specimens and for the sake of answering a specific question about them—no more than that." Stephen Davies (2007, 29) basically agrees: if we

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10 Unfortunately, the few tourists who do interpret *La Gioconda* during the fleeting moments in its presence are generally content to apply the current dominant interpretations: see Margolis (1999b, 83–84, 91).

are going to ask whether tattooing, fireworks, and antique cars are art, we must first “make clear what the question is, why it is addressed, and what kind of result would count as an answer.”<sup>11</sup>

Davies’ formulation invites us to ask what question motivates Margolis. If his real target is the *sui generis* nature of cultural entities, why focus so tenaciously on the nature of art? There are two reasons, one that he articulates, and one that he does not. The former is this: “The arts ... constitute a very strong test of what to regard as an adequate system of conceptual distinctions fitted to the entire range of human reflection” (Margolis 2010a, 43). In short, it is more pragmatic to focus on the arts than on the whole scope of the intentional, conceptual realm. The second reason is unstated but also quite pragmatic: Anglo-American philosophers pay little or no attention to the broader field of philosophy of culture—a topic they have largely abandoned to other disciplines—and philosophy of art is, by default, the best way to approach it within Anglo-American philosophy: artworks are cultural entities.<sup>12</sup>

These two motivations also explain Margolis’s emphasis on substituting “the Intentional” for the “intentional.” That is, where philosophers of art have long debated the role of intentions in art, Margolis proposes that most of this debate minimizes the indispensable role of cultural frameworks. Because our whole mental life is “culturally transformed” (Margolis 2010a, 52), so are intentions.<sup>13</sup> Therefore “intention” must give way to the richer notion of “the Intentional,” where “the Intentional = the culturally significant and/or significative” (49), an utterly “novel order of reality that has gradually evolved from the inanimate and subhuman world in a *sui generis* but perfectly natural way” (51). Because “we cannot make sense of the arts” without an adequate theory of the Intentional (51), philosophy of art is our litmus test for understanding culture and, so, our very mode of being. But analytic philosophy of art largely ignores these connections. Granted, it is easy to lose sight of them. As enculturated entities ourselves, our operative cultural framework is like the air we breathe: it envelops and penetrates us to such an extent that we hardly notice it. Ironically, this may explain Margolis’s own emphasis on Cézanne and *Hamlet* and other “central specimens” of fine art.

Notice, again, Margolis’s gloss on Intentionality as “the culturally significant and/or significative.” Procedurally, it might be useful to turn to less “central” cases without prejudging which cultural entities are “significant.” Approaching every cultural entity as a candidate artwork, Ellen Dissanayake exemplifies a liberal attitude to what counts as art. Dissanayake (1988, 167–168) observes, “art

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11 Each disjunct of a subsequent tripartite definition of art in Davies (2015) can then be understood as answering a different question: what is art in early human societies and in cultures that lack a concept of art, what is art in a culture with a tradition of multiple art forms, and what is the remainder?

12 Margolis (2009: 45, 73) comes close to saying this, but in the end the proposal is only there by implication.

13 An individual’s intentions are intrinsically social facts, inherently dependent on interpretive contexts: see Margolis (2020, 116–17).

as it is thought of today is not considered to encompass the often banal and inept activities that [ ... my ethological view] includes as instances of a behavior of art (e.g., home décor, personal adornment, window displays).” Clearly, by “art as it is thought of today,” she means fine art. When Margolis (2009, 29) moves beyond “central” cases, he also becomes more generous, extending the visual arts to “landscaping, city planning, decor, couture, decoration, and other forms of design.” Yet, he concedes, “there is no entirely reliable principle of selection” (29) for determining whether the annual Spring-Summer Haute Couture Collection by Dior is art in the requisite sense. Still, it is a candidate, and so the right contextualizing myth may confirm its status as art.

In that spirit, I adopt three procedural constraints. First, my development of Margolis proceeds by setting aside his “central examples” in favor of more peripheral cases. Second, I recognize that a general definition of art must embrace both Western and non-Western art. Third, I will pursue Margolis’s stress on the Intentional rather than the aesthetic. As noted earlier, developments in twentieth-century art—e.g., Andy Warhol’s Brillo boxes (cf. Danto 1992, 6–7) and the anti-aesthetic art of modernism (cf. Binkley 1977)—demonstrate that the *aesthetic* function of art cannot be the differentia we seek. Tellingly, we arrive at this same result by noting that every cultural entity, Western and non-Western, has rule-governed design features. They vary according to local, contingent aesthetic norms, but it seems a human universal that aesthetic considerations inform all purposive design, and thus every artifact seems to be a cultural entity (in Margolis’s sense), significative if not especially significant. However, I do not mean that “form follows function” in the simplistic sense that function determines form/design. Function underdetermines form. Stylistically, a vast gulf of culture distinguishes a nineteenth-century Shaker chair from Le Corbusier’s chrome-framed easy chairs. Aesthetic norms inform—often unconsciously—design and communicative processes.<sup>14</sup> And where aesthetic norms invite interpretation by signaling that an object or practice has a special status (Dissanayake 1988), we frequently have art. Therefore, every culture has *many* candidates for being art that are not recognized as such. The question, then, is whether an aspect of the Intentional makes the difference.

In summary, I will concentrate on how Intentionality moves something beyond mere candidacy to art status. I will do this by introducing cases where there has been a reversal of judgment, i.e., where cultural entities that were explicitly classified as *not* art are reconsidered and reclassified as art. This phenomenon is found both within Western societies (frequently in relation to a subculture) and in interaction between cultures. I will consider each in turn before proposing a novel case.

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14 On design, see Parsons (2016, 106–112).

### 3 Popular Music

It is now widely understood that no person could have looked at da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* when it was new and said "That is a great artwork" or anything synonymous. A wonderfully crafted likeness, yes, or a great painting, but not a great artwork, for there was no term in use that matches our term "artwork." Obviously, then, recognition of its status as an artwork was hindsight. The same is true of other paintings and sculptures of the Italian Renaissance (Shiner 2001, chap. 3). But after the concept of "fine art" developed in subsequent centuries, something new became possible, namely our capacity to reconsider and reclassify cultural entities so that some that were explicitly denied the status of art are subsequently reclassified as art. On what basis does this happen?

Jazz is a prominent example. It is such a cliché to say that jazz is an art form that one can hardly say it without remarking on its status as a cliché: "Another cliché about jazz, that it is a quintessential American art form, is true" (Grella 2015, 16). However, to say, without qualification, that jazz is art is to reclassify it retroactively. During much of the twentieth century, it was taken for granted that jazz did *not* count as art. This was not a localized prejudice. Within the modern (Western) system of the arts, music was consistently divided into three types: "the popular music, the church-music, and the scientific music of the theatre or opera" (anonymous 1809, 343), where the last of these three categories came to be known as fine art.<sup>15</sup> As such, there was an established tradition according to which jazz might furnish content for art, in much the way that folk music could furnish source material for serious composers, but this source material was not art.<sup>16</sup>

Even the earliest contemporaneous admirers of blues music and Tin Pan Alley music understood that they did not qualify as art music. For example, one such critic remarked in 1917 that Irving Berlin was, at best, "the grandfather ... of the Great American Composer of the year 2001"—a twenty-first century composer motivated by "(what they consider) more serious aims," who will appropriate source material from "the rhythms and tunes that dominate the hearts of the people," from which "a new form would evolve" (Van Vechten 1917, 270, 280). This new form, but not the source material, would be art music. This separation of popular music from art persisted well into the twentieth century, as illustrated by this late-century comment on George Gershwin's jazz-based piano concertos:

*Rhapsody in Blue* ... [forges] a link between the characteristic sounds and playing styles of a dance band and the characteristic gestures

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15 See also Novitz (1992, 29–33). This grouping becomes increasingly complicated by the way that the first of the trio, popular music, was gradually divided into two kinds, folk music and commercial, composed entertainment music. Romantic ideas about folk art frequently regarded the anonymous songs of oral traditions as a second species of genuine art; see Gelbart (2007, 80–110).

16 As late as 1945, Duke Ellington's music was singled out for the "great virtuosity and imagination" that made jazz a "highly developed folk music" (Hoffman 1945, 118, 116).



and scope of a Romantic art music rhapsody. By the time of *An American in Paris*, Gershwin is creating links among a wide variety of popular music and art music styles ... in a work that is both significantly longer and structurally tighter than the *Rhapsody*. (Starr 1998, 475)

The twentieth century was well advanced before jazz changed sufficiently to resemble art. The key development was the appearance of bebop: “[t]he historical transformation of jazz from entertainment music to art music” (Gendron 1995, 31). Consistent with “the development of the arts in the western world,” its evolution “divorced jazz from its earlier associations with the popular song and with the function of social dancing” and “like the other arts in western society, [jazz became] isolated from other social functions” (Lewis 1987, 47).<sup>17</sup> But how does the art status of *later* jazz bestow art status on early jazz? If one wants to extend art status retroactively to the early jazz sides of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith, or to the blues music of Memphis Minnie and Blind Lemon Jefferson, or even to an obscure Tin Pan Alley song such as “On the Level You’re a Little Devil” (1918), there are three principled ways to proceed. One can suppose, with Dominic Lopes (2007, 14), that virtually everyone who valued this music during its heyday misunderstood what art is, which explains why they denied it the status of art.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, one can say (in the spirit of Margolis’s rejection of the principle of bivalence for truth-values) that there are multiple differentiae that identify a subset of cultural entities as artworks. These competing differentiae are in conflict, yet none generate a true or false definition. However, since Margolis has failed to persuade philosophers to give up the principle of bivalence, I will not pursue this option. The final approach, also in the spirit of Margolis, is to say that we are now dealing with a transformed set of entities. Popular music of the early twentieth century was not art when it was new. However, recordings of Louis Armstrong’s “Gut Bucket Blues” have come to occupy a different cultural space than previously—a space created, in part, by the art status of Gershwin’s jazz-derived *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924).<sup>19</sup> I favor this approach.

This option differs from Lopes’ because his approach says that “Gut Bucket Blues” was always art, but people misunderstood art and misclassified many cultural entities. In contrast, I concede that it was not art in 1925. My proposal is that music critics of the early twentieth century understood where to draw the line with cultural entities and they made no mistake when they excluded Irving Berlin songs and “Gut Bucket Blues.” Looking back from the vantage point of the

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17 See also Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk (2018, 9–38).

18 I discuss this idea in greater detail in the next section.

19 Institutional theories of art also endorse the idea that art status is frequently retroactive. As will become clear below, I do not agree that “Gut Bucket Blues” becomes art because an institutionally-sanctioned agent of the artworld deems it to be art. On my view, it is irrelevant whether anyone deems it to be art.

twenty-first century, we have socio-political reasons to recognize this music as significant (and not merely significative) cultural expression. But is that enough to justify treating it as art? Probably not. Art is not coextensive with significant cultural expression.<sup>20</sup> A principled reclassification demands something more: significance arises in conjunction with explicit reinterpretation of what had been slighted as beneath interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4 A Counter-argument, Elaborated

Lopes' position merits additional attention before I examine an interaction between Western and non-Western culture. Lopes observes that a society's prevailing *concept* of art may diverge widely from what art really is. Consequently, the question of whether the status of art holds for any specific object or for selected objects and activities of any given culture is completely unrelated to either (1) the absence of any term equivalent to "art" in a particular society or (2) employment of a concept similar to, but different from, any that became operative during and after the explicit delineation of that concept in the European Enlightenment. Therefore, we "cannot assume that the nature of art is determined by the Western concept of art," and, furthermore, "theorists must look beyond Western art to ascertain the nature of art" (Lopes 2007, 14). According to Lopes, the status and classification of "Gut Bucket Blues" and a trivial Tin Pan Alley song in 1925 are irrelevant. I am proposing that they *became* art under the Western concept of fine art through a reconsideration of Intentionality. In contrast, Lopes regards the Western concept as deeply problematic. Perhaps twentieth-century lowbrow entertainment and mundane printed documents *are* (and always were) art but, distracted by our unforgivingly narrow Western concept of art, we've misunderstood art and therefore these entities. Lopes thinks a wider net might snare an adequate definition of art that has, to date, eluded us.

Granted, it is possible that we have the extension and intension of "art" wrong at any given time. However, as a practical matter we cannot be too far off. Here, I defer to Amie Thomasson's (2005, 223) proposal that natural kind terms differ from artifactual kind terms because the latter cannot function unless users "associate the term with some sort of kind (i.e., artifactual kind) with a broad concept of what sorts of features are relevant to membership in a kind of that sort."<sup>22</sup> We can identify water without knowing anything about H<sub>2</sub>O, but we cannot be *widely* wrong about how to classify our own cultural entities, for they

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20 Margolis (2009, 31) suggests that the classification of any specific kind of cultural entity as fine art is a function of "politics," a point I do not have room to explore.

21 E.g., the interpretation of Davis (1998).

22 For the full argument and the relationship between defining art and ontological status of artworks, see Thomasson (2004).

are cultural entities by virtue of being meaningful in relation to shared concepts. Contrary to Lopes, an examination of non-Western art practices is unlikely to reveal a noteworthy alternative. If art is a human universal, then communities that lack terminology equivalent to “fine art” will nonetheless have art practices that look much like Western art practices prior to artistic modernism.<sup>23</sup> A comparative survey will therefore be useful, but perhaps not for Lopes’ reason. As such, let us turn to a well-known example from nineteenth-century Japan.

## 5 Ukiyo-e Prints

Katsushika Hokusai’s “Great Wave” print is thought to be the most replicated, duplicated, recognized, and imitated image ever created in Japan (Davis 2021, 3).<sup>24</sup> It is, if you will, the Japanese *Mona Lisa*. And, like the *Mona Lisa*, it was created in a society that had no term for art. It was *ukiyo-e* (a “floating world” print), placing it in the broad category of an image or picture (the suffix of *ukiyo-e*), but one understood to be a low-status craft object (Davis 2021, 16). A few decades later, the Japanese encountered Western classification systems and coined a new, broadly inclusive Japanese word, *bijutsu*, to designate “fine art” as distinct from everyday crafted artifacts such as tools, housewares, and clothing (Foxwell 2015, 16–17). This new term aligned neatly with their traditional distinction between “craft” images and paintings by “masters” of the brush, and when Western countries asked the Japanese government to send examples of their art to international exhibitions, the Japanese never sent woodblock prints (Foxwell 2015, 114–115). They recognized that an ink painting on silk by Hokusai was *bijutsu*, but not “Great Wave” or other cheap commercial prints made for the lower classes. Consequently, when we (including, since about 1900, Japanese collectors) reverse tradition and reclassify *ukiyo-e* prints as art, we generate a vivid example of our definitional quandary: do we explain this in terms of Weitz, Lopes, or Margolis?

I have searched, but it is difficult to locate anyone who articulates reasons *why* “Great Wave” and other cheap, low-culture woodblock prints merit a retroactive reclassification. It is fairly clear that Japanese collectors reversed *themselves* in response to the mass exportation of these prints and the European appetite for collecting them.<sup>25</sup> But, as noted earlier, a social or cross-cultural explanation is not an explanation based on a definition, and the fact that Japanese art institutions grudgingly embraced *ukiyo-e* prints as an important art form is parallel to the belated celebration of early jazz and blues as important American performing arts. A hierarchical classification system of

23 Davies (2007, 62) and Dissanayake (1988) propose focusing on cultural entities made with distinctive investment in their aesthetic dimension.

24 Translated, the actual title is “Under the Wave off Kanagawa.”

25 See the long, translated quotation from *Matsukata ukiyo-e hangashū* in Meech (1988, 21).

cultural entities was in place prior to Japan's assimilation of Western concepts and categories: Edo-era Japan distinguished craft products from "master" images even when both types were created by the same brush. This hierarchical thinking about various media then translated readily into the overarching category of *bijutsu*,<sup>26</sup> a seamless adaptation that counts against both Lopes and Weitz. In short, the pre-existing parallels between the Japanese and Western conceptual schemes confirm that the Western concept of fine art is not an aberration.

In this context, consider historian Julie Nelson Davis. Although Davis (2021, 6) explicitly notes that there was no term or concept corresponding to "art" in the Tokugawa or Edo era (1603-1867), she retroactively identifies *ukiyo-e* as artworks. Unlike most scholars, she provides an argument, albeit minimal, to defend a retroactive reclassification of the whole range of *ukiyo-e* production as art. Specifically, the images were subject to aesthetic evaluation, and their production and reception occurred in the context of an organized "artworld" (7-8; see also Davis 2015, 8). Tellingly, her detailed account of *ukiyo-e* prints undercuts Lopes' promissory note that an examination of non-Western art will undermine our concept of art. Instead, we have a prominent *ukiyo-e* scholar self-consciously overturning the verdict of earlier Japanese society about its own cultural products and employing, as justification, two Western definitions of art, the aesthetic and the institutional.<sup>27</sup> Here, the art status of "Great Wave" neither disrupts our understanding of art nor supports the plasticity of an "open" concept. However, for reasons that are well known in philosophy of art, Davis's criteria are not sufficient conditions for art. Moreover, Intentionality plays no overt role in her explanation of why these non-Western images are art. Yet, as an art historian, she is largely concerned with detailed interpretations of particular examples. Those interpretations are, I suggest, her unstated justification for classifying *ukiyo-e* as art.

## 6 Everyday Designed Objects

In light of Intentionality, I will now offer a case where the vicissitudes of history lead me to identify a group of ordinary, everyday cultural entities as art.

Several years ago, I visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and one exhibit contained a small display case containing replicas of artifacts designed by a Bauhaus-trained graphic designer, Fritz Gadiel.<sup>28</sup> Fleeing Germany for Lithuania, Gadiel escaped the first stages of Nazi actions against German Jews. But when Lithuania fell to the German war machine, he was trapped

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<sup>26</sup> This point was articulated by one of Japan's Meiji-era ministers of culture and then echoed by numerous Japanese writers. See: Foxwell (2015, 114-115).

<sup>27</sup> The same two have been offered as reasons to group together certain "Zen arts" (Cox 2003, 1).

<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, Gadiel's designs are not currently exhibited to the public, and only one is shown in the museum's online image archive.

behind barbed wire in the ghetto at Kovno. From 1942 to 1944, Gadiel worked for the ghetto's makeshift local government. As in all the urban ghetto enclaves created by the Nazis, the Jewish population was expected to provide its own system of education, social services, self-policing, and other government services. Gadiel was assigned the task of satisfying the graphic design needs of the ghetto's government, and he designed letterheads, forms, ration cards, and other official symbols and utilitarian artifacts of local governance. What is unusual here is that the residents of the Kovno ghetto created a secret archive of the documents they produced during their confinement. They buried numerous documents, photographs, sketches, and small artifacts in secure, waterproof boxes and ceramic containers (Klein 1997). Although they were moved to work camps and concentration camps and the entire ghetto was eventually torched, a few survivors knew of the buried archive and returned and recovered it, and over 1,000 items have been acquired by the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Besides ration cards, work permits, arm bands, and desk calendars designed by Gadiel, there are identification badges and insignia pins for the Jewish ghetto police force.

None of these items was fine art in its original utilitarian employment. All the same, Gadiel's designs exhibit Bauhaus style and are as sophisticated as any that would be commissioned by a major city or corporation today. They are designs of Apollonian balance and beauty. However, as mundane, utilitarian objects created under horrific circumstances, there was no need to have lavished such care on their design and production. Viewing them today, reflecting on the circumstances of their creation, we can see that they were invested with more thought and attention than was necessary for their purposes. They were, to use Dissanayake's (1988, 92) phrase, "made special" to a degree that signifies that they are not merely utilitarian things. As such, they stand in contrast to the shoddy, cheap, and graphically boring vaccination cards given to Americans receiving their first COVID-19 vaccinations in early 2021. Perhaps Gadiel's striking designs are simply the unreflective result of his training, and they meant nothing special to him. Even so, they are the product of an individual mind shaped by a specific time and place in German culture, and when I looked at them, I could not escape the thought that they share a common embodied meaning: they express dignity. By generating designs that met the highest standards of contemporary graphic design, Gadiel refused to accept the oppressor's attempts to dehumanize his community. It is as if each design and object announce, "Despite your treatment of us, we remain the people we were." In lavishing such care in the design of the mundane markers of civic functions, they also communicate how seriously the community approached the task of self-governance in a world of crippling deprivation and looming annihilation. Gadiel *shows us* that they refused to be what the Nazis tried to make them to be,

and the community's investment in preserving these artifacts suggests that they also saw them as a kind of statement of their dignity as human beings.

Am I suggesting that Gadiel produced artworks, in the sense that they were artworks during his lifetime? Not at all. Am I saying that Gadiel wanted us to "read" his designs as proclamations of human dignity? No. I am not speculating about Gadiel's intentions. Instead, I am stressing that we frequently encounter cultural entities that are apt for interpretation, and we would be callous to deny that some of them have a significance—and sometimes a surprising depth—that is absent from ordinary desk calendars and police badges, however well designed.<sup>29</sup> Regarded in relation to their generative context and the story we tell about it, Gadiel's designs are much like burial goods recovered from ancient graves and now displayed as art.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, they are more interesting as cultural entities than are many works of fine art that I have subsequently encountered in art museums and art galleries. I propose that Gadiel's designs qualify as art, and I submit that what I have just said about them is sufficient for that status.

## **7 Conclusion: A Potential Differentia**

My concluding speculations are, of necessity, brief and therefore suggestive rather than detailed. Even if he did not succeed in defining art, Margolis's interest in the topic of artworks as cultural entities accomplishes his primary goal, set out in 1957: Margolis refutes Weitz's (1956, 31) assertion that artworks share "no common properties." Their common property is their participation in Intentionality. Fundamentally, they invite interpretation as the purposeful products of culturally-embedded humans. However, the same can plausibly be said about all cultural entities.

At the same time, my selective case studies support Margolis's point that application of the concept of art must depend on some genuine question we are facing. A desk calendar, a popular tune from 1925, and other non-art does not move into the category of "art" because the concept changes. They became art when we started to tell a story about their significance—aligning them, in Margolis's terminology, with framing "myths." I propose that the common thread is that we examined a functional artifact or practice and became aware (perhaps with surprise) of its significance as a cultural entity. We see, with hindsight, that its value is not merely functional value, independent of its Intentional dimension. We come to recognize that a Stradivarius violin and the Euphronios Krater have a cultural significance that merits explication in the realm of meaning, apart from their utilitarian functions (to produce sound and as a

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<sup>29</sup> Notice how Intentionality supports the movement to rebrand traditional quilts as artworks, e.g., "as witnesses to our history" and "infused with a host of meanings" (Shaw 2009, 1).

<sup>30</sup> E.g., an undistinguished basin displayed in the Harvard Art Museum (<https://hvrd.art/o/304096>).

mixing bowl, respectively). Against Hein, it is plausible to say that the *Mona Lisa* would no longer be art if it actually had been used—portrait rendered unseen—to patch a hole in a plaster wall right after it was painted, and if the wood panel was never located and art historians only knew of it because Giorgio Vasari mentioned it alongside his descriptions of two lost Medusas by da Vinci.

Granted, there is a remote possibility that we have been wrong about the extension of “art” and our error explains why we have made a mess of defining it. Conversely, perhaps Margolis actually circumscribed the proper extension of the concept, and it involves the move from being something apt for interpretation to something interpreted: art is any cultural entity that receives explicit interpretation.<sup>31</sup> But not any and all interpretation: artworks differ from other cultural entities by virtue of being interrogated for meaning beyond what cultural insiders “spontaneously” understand them to mean (Margolis 2010a, 14). Thus, images are artwork by virtue of being interpreted beyond their “bare bones” semantic content (Kulvicki 2006, 180).<sup>32</sup> On this view, art requires interpretation not simply in the mundane sense that artworks are things in the Intentional realm (for that is true of every cultural entity), but rather in the active sense that, for any specific cultural entity, it is only an artwork if it has been so interrogated, resulting in an explicit critical or creative interpretation. Suppose two groundlings left the debut performance of *Hamlet* at the Globe Theater one afternoon in 1600 and one asked the other, “What was that about? Where is the moral purpose of a procrastinating hero?” According to my proposal, the resulting conversation, or some other like it, first made an artwork of the afternoon’s entertainment. So, analogously, for Louis Armstrong’s early recordings and “Great Wave” and Gadiel’s designs.

This approach to distinguishing artworks from other cultural entities has two advantages. First, it confirms that we are generally correct about which things are artworks: they are the artifacts and rule-governed activities and rituals of the past that art historians, art critics, archeologists, and cultural anthropologists have singled out as meriting interpretation. I predict that this class of objects will closely align with the cultural entities that are, at any given time, classified as art. Second, it explains why many cultural entities—especially the decorative and popular arts—are recognized to be full-fledged art only in hindsight. Most cultural entities pose no interpretive puzzle for their intended users. Others—most often those labeled “art” when created—receive immediate active interpretation. However, many are “low” cultural entities that are reconsidered and interpreted and so become art in hindsight.

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31 Not, however, “interpretation as art,” for “Gut Buck Blues” received interpretation long before anyone said it was art.

32 Cf. Stecker (2003, 1-2), the case of the badly written instruction sheet for assembling a ceiling fan, where the poorly-written instruction sheet is not an artwork despite demanding interpretation. Contrast Stecker’s interpretive puzzle, which is a matter of literal interpretation, with cultural anthropologists who investigate non-literal meanings of furniture in its symbolism to consumers (Garvey 2017), shifting some (but not all) furniture designs from the broader category of cultural entity to the narrower category of art.

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