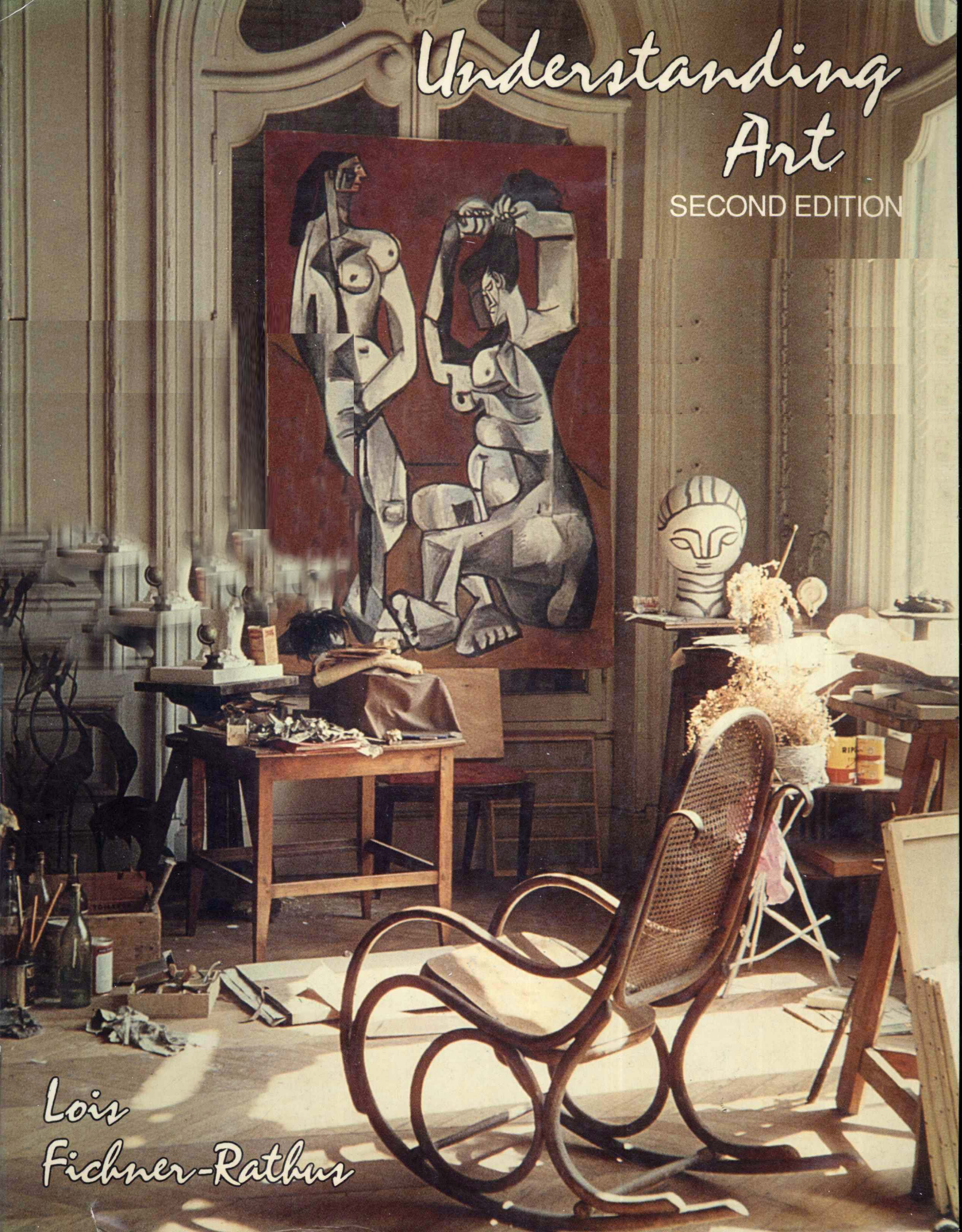


# Understanding Art

SECOND EDITION

Lois  
Fichner-Rathus





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# Understanding Art

SECOND EDITION

LOIS FICHNER-RATHUS

Trenton State College



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# Preface

I was gratified when Prentice-Hall asked me to revise *Understanding Art*. The acceptance of the first edition confirmed the value of our unique approach to the teaching of art appreciation and I was exhilarated to have the opportunity to “fine tune” the text for a second go-around.

The first edition had been an enormous task—the creation from scratch of a book that would work both for students and for professors. I needed to compose a tool that would help organize and enlighten this demanding, often whirlwind-like course. In a sense I wanted to write a book that would do it all—to edify and inform students and at the same time to keep them engaged, animated, inspired. It was not enough for me to satisfy my own needs through eloquent metaphor, or to meet the desire of instructors for comprehensive exposition—I wanted to make *Understanding Art* “user friendly” to its ultimate consumers—students.

I had envisioned writing the revision as a simpler task than the original, but I was mistaken. Once I commenced it became very clear to me that I was going about the risky business of tampering with the successful. Broadly speaking, my task was to

develop the text but also to retain the features, topics, and coverage that worked well the first time around. More specifically, it was decided that I would expand the discussions of media and methods but retain the comprehensive coverage of art history that set the first edition apart from other art appreciation textbooks. It was resolved that I would introduce more examples of contemporary art and women’s art but maintain the celebrated monuments from the history of art. And it was determined that we would triple the number of color illustrations and enlarge their dimensions—yet somehow keep the text to a manageable size.

To my delight, and somewhat to my surprise, we have managed to meet our goals.

---

## COVERAGE

*Understanding Art* is comprehensive and balanced in coverage. It communicates the excitement, relevance, and beauty of art by combining stimulating discussions of the language and elements of art with a comprehensive treatment of the history of art. The elements of art—media, methods, con-

tent, composition, style—and its purposes constitute the first part of the book. Chapters 1–9 focus on what we respond to in a work of art and how artists go about their work. It was my intention to show that our lives are enriched not only by drawing, painting, sculpture and architecture, but also by photography, cinematography, video art, crafts, even advertising design.

We are affected not only by the art we view in the world's famous museums. The carpeting we tread upon, the furniture on which we sit, even the logos on our business stationery can all have an aesthetic influence on our daily lives. I felt that I must open students' eyes to all this; I must help them to understand and appreciate the beauty all about them.

But to understand where we are, we must also understand where we have been. To provide such insight, the history of art is covered chronologically in the second part of the book. It was my goal to demonstrate that artists from all periods and all cultures have used the same elements and language of art in order to commemorate their experiences, express religious values, protest the social order, decorate their communities, or persuade their audiences. Their works, of course, have taken very different forms. Yet each, when understood, may be seen to have a certain integrity—indeed, a certain necessity—that expresses the artist's time, place, and personality.

---

## PEDAGOGY AND STYLE

It is not sufficient, however, for textbooks to be comprehensive in coverage. They must also meet the students' needs by presenting the subject in an accessible form.

Most students who take art appreciation or introduction to art history courses are nonmajors. Some are fulfilling a distributional requirement in the humanities. As such, many of them begin their studies with little or no idea of what art is about. This textbook uses a number of pedagogical and stylistic features to stimulate and enlighten the contemporary broad-based college population:

- **INTRODUCTION:** An introductory chapter called "What Is Art?" discusses the meanings, purposes, and styles of art.
- **"A CLOSER LOOK" AND "THE ARTIST SPEAKS" BOXES:** Boxed highlights in each chapter contain discussions of the methodology of art history, insights into artists' personalities, art-related news items, and meaningful quotations from artists and other sources.
- **LINE DRAWINGS:** Pertinent and clearly labeled diagrams, maps, architectural plans, and explanatory drawings for complex artistic processes are interspersed throughout the chapters on media and methods.
- **GLOSSARY:** Key terms are boldfaced in the text and defined in an end-of-book glossary.
- **STYLE:** The style of writing and the explanations of concepts are tailored to communicate to the students without compromising the complexity of the subject matter. As I wrote *Understanding Art*, I tried to remain keenly aware of what had come before and what would come ahead, so that I could build concepts logically and gradually. I avoided using difficult technical terms arbitrarily; and, when I did use them, I attempted to explain them clearly.

Whatever else good writing does, it must also communicate, and I did not subordinate communication to the subject matter; instead, I made every effort to integrate style and subject.

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I consider myself fortunate to have studied with a fine group of artists and art historians who helped shape my thinking throughout my career. Without the broad knowledge, skills, and dedication of these individuals, *Understanding Art* would never have come into being. They include: James S. Ackerman, Wayne V. Andersen, Stanford Anderson, Whitney Chadwick, Charles C. Cunningham, Mojmir Frinta, Michael Graves, George Heard Hamilton, Ann Sutherland Harris, Diane U. Headley, Julius S. Held, Henry A. Millon, Sam Hunter, Konrad Oberhuber, John C. Overbeck, Michael Rine-

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I acknowledge with pleasure the fine

group of publishing professionals at Prentice Hall. Bud Therien, Executive Editor, is to be credited with bringing the manuscript to Prentice Hall. His enthusiasm and support inspired me throughout the developmental process of both editions. Hilda Tauber ably guided the project through the multiple demanding stages of production. Lori Morris and Joelle Burrows obtained the hundreds of new photographs. Meryl Poweski is responsible for the superb page layouts, and Christine Wolf for the handsome appearance of the text.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Spence, for his patience and help in certain aspects of preparing the manuscript. Writing a textbook can be an engulfing experience, and during the past several years he learned what it means to be an author's "widower."

---

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# What Is Art?

## Meanings, Purposes, Styles

*Everyone wants to understand art. Why not try to understand the song of a bird? Why does one love the night, flowers, everything around one without trying to understand them? But in the case of a painting, people have to understand. —Pablo Picasso*

*Cold exactitude is not art; ingenious artifice, when it pleases or when it expresses, is art itself. —Eugène Delacroix*

*What is a work of art? A word made flesh. —Eric Gill*

*Art is nothing but humanized science. —Gino Severini*

**B**eauty, truth, immortality, order, harmony—these concepts and ideals have occupied us since the dawn of history. They enrich our lives and encourage us to extend ourselves beyond the limits of flesh and blood. Without them, life would be but a mean struggle for survival, and the value of survival itself would be unclear.

It is in the sciences and the arts that we strive to weave our experiences into coherent bodies of knowledge and to express them aesthetically. Many of us are more comfortable with the sciences than with the arts. Science teaches us that the universe is not ruled purely by chance. The sciences provide ways of observing the world and experimenting so that we can learn what forces determine the courses of atoms and the galaxies. Even those of us who do not consider ourselves scientific recognize that the scientific method permits us to predict and control many important events on a grand scale.



The arts are more elusive to define than the sciences, more difficult to gather into a conceptual net. We believe that the arts are essential to daily experience; we link them to the very quality of life. Artistic undertakings in the form of crayon drawings, paper cutouts, and block towers are parts of the daily lives of our children. Art has touched the lives of primitive peoples, and art is all around us today. We do not want to be without the arts, yet we are hard pressed to define them and sometimes even to understand them. In fact, the very word *art* encompasses many meanings, including ability, process, and product. As ability, art is the human capacity to make things of beauty, things that stir us; it is creativity. As process, art encompasses acts such as drawing, painting, sculpting, designing buildings, and composing photographs. As product, art is the completed work, such as the print, statue, structure, or tapestry. If as individuals we do not understand science, we are at least comforted by the thought that others do. With art, however, we suspect that there is something about its very nature that transcends understanding.

This book is about the **visual arts**. Despite the enigmatic nature of the visual arts, we shall try to share something of what is known about them so that understanding may begin. We shall attempt to heighten awareness of what we respond to in a work of art. In so doing, at times we shall explore some of the principles of human perception.

We shall explore the basic language of art and see how the elements of art, such as line, color, and shape, are composed into artworks. We shall explore several **media** of the visual arts: drawing, painting, and printmaking; sculpture and architecture; photography and cinematography; and the functional arts of design and craft. A traditional distinction has been made between **fine arts** such as painting and sculpture and **applied arts** such as advertising design, ceramics, and fiber arts. We shall see that applied work can also be fine, and that the creative urges that stir the painter can also stir the weaver.

When asked why we should study history, historians often answer that we must

know about the past in order to have a sense of where we are and where we may be going. This argument also holds true for the visual arts; therefore, we shall explore the journey of art from the wall paintings of the Stone Age through the steel-and-glass structures and the **wordworks** of the present day. The media, the forms, and the subject matter of art may evolve and change from day to day, but uniting threads lie in the persistent quest for beauty, truth, and other ideals.

In the remainder of this chapter we explore the purposes and styles of art to see how art meets many needs of the artist and of the viewing public.

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## PURPOSES OF ART

*L'art pour l'art.*

*Art for art's sake.*

—Victor Cousin

*Art never expresses anything but itself.*

—Oscar Wilde

*"L'art pour l'art"—art for art's sake. . . .* Many philosophers have argued that art serves no function, that it exists for its own sake. Some have believed that there is something about the essence of art that transcends the human occupation with usefulness. Others have felt that in trying to analyze art too closely, we lose sight of its beauty and wonderment.

These may be valid concerns. Nevertheless, our understanding of art often can be enhanced by asking the questions: "Why was this created?" "What is its purpose?" In this section we shall see that works of art come into existence for a host of reasons that are as varied as the human condition.

## To Create Beauty

*The beautiful is in nature, and it is encountered in the most diverse forms of reality. Once it is found, it belongs to art, or, rather, to the artist who discovers it.*

—Gustave Courbet