

Debate

“In art, form ought to be valued over content.”

First, let's define a few terms in the art world:

Form: the overall form or shape of art; the composition or arrangement of elements in art; the physical nature of art (this could mean the colors, shapes, textures, style of art, etc.)

Content: the subject matter or meaning of art; the story or message in art; what is being depicted

Art: this could refer to paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, architecture, graphic design, etc.

When I heard this topic for debate, it right away made me think of something I learned in art history when I was in college ~ “Form follows function.”

This phrase goes back to Louis Sullivan, an American architect of the late 1800s/early 1900s. Form follows function is a principle of design associated with late 19th & early 20th century architecture and industrial design, which states that the shape of a building or object should primarily relate to its intended function or purpose.

“A rationally designed structure may not necessarily be beautiful, but no building can be beautiful that does not have a rationally designed structure.”

Then, Frank Lloyd Wright, another American architect who worked under Sullivan said:

“Form follows function—that has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union.”

As a young architect Frank Lloyd Wright worked for Louis Sullivan (1856–1924) in his Chicago-based architecture firm. Sullivan is known for steel-frame constructions, considered some of the earliest skyscrapers. Sullivan's famous axiom, “form follows function,” became the touchstone for many architects. This means that the purpose of a building should be the starting point for its design. Wright extended the teachings of his mentor by changing the phrase to “form and function are one.”

To value form over content in art means that one thinks that the beauty or aesthetic qualities are more important than the message being given in the artwork. And this could easily be debated. Both form and content are important in art. But it is important to understand both. And as Frank Lloyd Wright said above, form and function are one. Both are important. Sullivan's buildings were early “skyscrapers,” but they weren't grand or beautiful works of architecture (such as the famous Opera house in Paris). Google his buildings. You'll see. They were truly about being functional. And that is very important when making a building. I'd rather have a functional house than one that looks cool but isn't functional or sturdy. Imagine having a house where the doors are too small... Or the walls are too thin and could break at any moment. Function is important! But you also want a house that is nice looking... pretty... cute... homey... etc. No one wants to just live in a plain rectangle or cube. Frank Lloyd Wright created buildings that were both functional and beautiful. He truly blended both of these concepts. (Look up his house called Falling Water or the Guggenheim art museum in New York).

Hopefully the above is helpful for thinking about form and function, but it was referring to architecture. Art isn't so much about function like architecture. But, we can easily apply the idea of form and content in art (painting, sculpture, drawing, etc.).

We will look at a few examples on both sides:

Valuing the content over form:

Ever since the Modern and Post-Modern art movement began, I would say that content has been valued over form. Just walk through the Modern and Post-Modern section in an art gallery. You'll see what I mean....

Here is one example that came right to my mind:



“Fountain” by Marcel Duchamp, 1917

This was a *readymade* – which means it was an object that already existed. The artist took this object and decided to make it their artwork. And yes, this is a urinal.

By putting a urinal on a pedestal in an art gallery, Marcel Duchamp was questioning many things about art. What is art? Why is it art? Who decides what is art?

This “sculpture” or readymade is all about the content. It is about the ideas behind the art. It is not at all about the form or beauty. The artist’s intellect has been raised over any type of skill or technical abilities.

This is an extreme example, but you can see how valuing content over form in art can be rather negative. In order to get a visceral response from the viewer, he used an object that one would never imagine to be in an art gallery. It isn't pretty. It doesn't have a pleasing form or color. You wouldn't want it in your home. It isn't pleasing to look at.

For a few other ideas to see examples in this extreme of content over form, Google: “feminist art” or “political art” or “Piss Christ by Andres Serrano.” It is truly hard to see how some of this can be considered art. And this is coming from the perspective of an artist with a master’s degree in fine art. Some of this might be offensive or unsettling. Sadly, that is art these days.... But these examples show how the art is about the message. It is about shock value. It isn't about beauty or aesthetics. And with God being our ultimate example of a Creator or artist, shouldn't beauty matter? And what does one gain from simply throwing an agenda in our face? Should art be enjoyable? What makes it enjoyable and how do we define that?

Valuing form over content:

After considering how content can be taken to an extreme, let's look at form. The form of art could be the medium and technique it was created in. It could be the colors used, sense of space, the textures created, etc. Can form be more important than the content and what the art communicates to us?

To see an example of how form can be taken to an extreme in art, it is best to look at abstract art; specifically nonobjective or nonrepresentational art. This is art that is purely abstract. It doesn't refer to the natural world at all. (Keep in mind that this is for an extreme example. You could find a beautiful painting of a landscape or still life, where the artwork is simply made to create a pleasing image.)

Wassily Kandinsky or Jackson Pollock come to mind for me right away. These are both artists who created purely abstract or nonrepresentational art. There was no deep meaning or message. It was art purely about the formal qualities. And by that, we mean the formal art elements (shape, line, color, texture, space, etc.).

Here is a painting by Kandinsky. He tried to create paintings that created a visual image to a musical composition.



Here is a painting by Jackson Pollock. His paintings were spontaneous.



Both artists would name their pieces “untitled” or “composition” followed by a number. They did this intentionally so that the viewer wouldn’t read a title and then try to give meaning to the art. The art was simply art to look at and enjoy.

Now, being purely abstract, many people have trouble enjoying this art or finding beauty.

So, here are a few examples of art that are easier for some to relate to because they are representational. But, these paintings don’t have a deep meaning or story. They are simply about form... Something aesthetically pleasing...



But is this art too simple...? Boring? Does it lack meaning and a message? Does art require something deeper?

So, which is more important in art? Form or content?

I hope this helped you brainstorm for debate.

Here is one last thing to research and get your brain going:
“art for art’s sake”

Art for art's sake— which comes from a French slogan: l'art pour l'art, from the early 19th century— is a phrase that expresses the philosophy that the intrinsic value of art, and the only 'true' art, is divorced or separated from any didactic (teaching), moral, political, or utilitarian function.

Google this. It has been quite debated in the art world.