

her husband had done. Eventually she has settled on very colorful and bold brushwork, much like an Expressionist painter of three-dimensional objects.⁶

In her work, Woodman engages in the endless debate about whether there is a meaningful difference between what is called “art” and what is called “craft.” She continues making pottery but does not isolate herself from the arenas of painters and sculptors. She often throws cylinders on a potter’s wheel, as would a traditional potter, but then cuts the cylinders in pieces and flattens them by dropping them on the floor. The flattened pieces retain the curvilinear spiral lines of her fingers on the clay as she shapes it on a turning potter’s wheel. She shapes the slabs of thrown pieces into sculptural forms. She combines colors made from fired glazes with enamel paints added after firing the clay. Artistic processes and strategies for making art and other objects are further explored in Chapter 12.



1.5 HORACIO SALINAS Dior bag, 2008.

Subject Matter and Meanings

In representational works of art, **subject matter** is the people, animals, plants, places, and things recognizably depicted. The subject matter of the photograph by Horacio Salinas (1.5) is a purse hung on a tree branch and bees on and about the bag.

Subject matter in nonrepresentational works of art may consist of a shape, a color, or a brushstroke. For example, the subject matter of Christopher Wool’s painting *Untitled* (1.6) is smears of paint and lines that do not form recognizable objects that might be found in the world.

The **meanings** of an image or object are its expressive content or inferred implications. This distinction between what the work of art depicts (its subject matter) and what the work means or is about or expresses is very important. Subject matter is usually quite easy to determine: a purse, a branch, and bees in Salinas’s photograph (see 1.5); smears and lines in Wool’s painting (see 1.6). Meanings are harder to decipher than subject matter, and they require interpretive arguments based on evidence and reasons.

For instance, Salinas’s photograph is made to evoke desire to purchase an object. Such a desire is prompted by the design of the purse, its brand name of Dior, which culturally implies sophisticated and expensive fashion. The photograph is made for an ad in a magazine published in spring. The



1.6 CHRISTOPHER WOOL *Untitled*, 2007. Enamel on linen, 126 × 96 in.



1.7 RICHARD SHAW *China Cove*, 2001. Glazed porcelain with overglaze decal transfers, 15 × 9 × 7 in.

yellow of the purse and the bees evoke warm feelings of the summer to come. The photograph is accompanied by the tag line: “Killer bees: Catch more eyes with honey.” The whole artwork, consisting of photograph, Dior bag, and text, is meant to appeal to women who may want to attract the admiring gazes of others.

Wool’s painting seems to be about painterly qualities and an exploration of what he can do with a mostly black-and-white and gray color palette, using only abstract lines sprayed on linen, and wiping wet paint to make diverse marks and strokes. It seems to be about the joy of painting itself. It is open to other interpretations, as are all objects. The fascinating topic of meanings and interpretations is fully explored in Chapter 2.

When you work for a client, the subject matter may be broadly defined for you—for example, a commissioned portrait of a specific person, or, as in the *Sesame Street* example (see 1.2), a female Muppet. What the portrait and puppet look like and express will emerge in how you handle specific details as the project develops and while you meet the needs of your client.

Other times, you may choose your own subject matter, from observation or pure invention. In either case, your decisions about subject matter are central to meanings that viewers will construct about your work. You offer interpretations about your subject matter by how and what you choose to show and omit.

REPRESENTATIONAL WORKS OF ART

Based on observation of the world, **representational art** attempts to reproduce figures, objects, or scenes as they appear in the real or visible world and as they might appear in the imagined world (fire-breathing dragons or unicorns, for example), with varying degrees of accuracy, distortion, and stylization. Sometimes the term “figurative” is used synonymously with representational art. In more common usage, figurative refers to art that uses the human figure. We can refer to Norman Rockwell’s painting (see 1.8) and Alberto Giacometti’s sculpture (see 1.9) as both figurative and representational.

There are varying degrees of realism in art. Realistic or naturalistic art can even come close to deceiving the viewer, as in *trompe l’oeil* art, which stays so close to the ocular aspects of what it depicts that it “fools the eye,” which is how the French term translates into English. Although *trompe l’oeil* was invented in the Baroque period (turn of the seventeenth century), artistic efforts to trick the eye reach far back in Western art history. An ancient Greek story tells of the artist Parrhasius, who is said to have painted a still life so realistic that birds flew to it to peck at its painted grapes.

Contemporary artist Richard Shaw continues working in the tradition of *trompe l’oeil*, but in ceramics (1.7). His gallery director attributes metaphorical meaning to the artist’s work: “Houses of porcelain cards are built over porcelain containers that rest on porcelain books. Beyond his humor, Shaw intimates about the potential for imbalance in our loosely constructed real new world.”⁷

Most representational art is somewhat less faithful to physical reality than *trompe l’oeil* paintings. Norman Rockwell is a master of realistically rendered subject matter, but we would not mistake it for the real. Look at *After the Prom* (1.8), for example, which he created in 1957 for a cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Dave Hickey, a contemporary art critic, describes Rockwell’s choices of subject matter in careful detail, telling us that the artist chose the setting of a 1930s-era soda fountain, bathed it in golden light, and painted the models in 1950s-era clothing. Rockwell created a narrative with four characters: a young man and his date, the soda jerk, whom Hickey describes as the boy’s older brother because of their facial similarities, and a male customer at the counter wearing a tattered bomber jacket and Air Force cap, whom Hickey describes as a veteran of



1.8 NORMAN ROCKWELL *After the Prom*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 31 × 29 in.

World War II, which ended twelve years before the date of the painting. Rockwell has the boy looking proudly at his older brother as the latter leans over to sniff the girl's gardenia. The veteran looks at the young couple and smiles.⁸

Because of the subject matter that Rockwell chose and how he portrayed it, the critic infers the meaning of the painting as a celebration of the freedom and safety of American youths after World War II. Hickey

explains that in the 1950s, parents tended to resent their children for having lives that were too easy and comfortable. The parents had endured the Great Depression and fought in World War II. Hickey believes that, in the painting, Rockwell uses the war veteran's response to the young couple to counter the attitude of their disapproving parents. In Hickey's view, Rockwell uses the veteran's smile to say, "This is what I was fighting for—this is the true consequence of that great historical



1.9 ALBERTO GIACOMETTI *Three Men Walking (II)*, 1949. Bronze, 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 13 × 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

cataclysm—this moment with the kids and the gardenia corsage.”⁹

Alberto Giacometti also depicts people in his bronze sculpture *Three Men Walking (II)* (1.9). The figures are representational men but look much less like men than if an artist like Rockwell had painted them. The degree of abstraction Giacometti achieves by elongation and gauntness affects our responses to the subject matter, although the figures are still representational. Giacometti’s works are often interpreted as comments on life as empty and devoid of meaning.

NONREPRESENTATIONAL WORKS OF ART

Rather than depict objects in the real world, **non-representational art** (also called **nonobjective art**) takes as its subject matter colors, textures, shapes, and brushwork, for example, that compose the formal pattern or structure of a work, and uses these to express



1.10 SEAN SCULLY *Dark Light*, 1998. Oil on linen, 96 × 84 in.

thoughts and feelings. Nonrepresentational paintings were the predominant style of modern art in European and American art by the mid-twentieth century. Sean Scully’s painting *Dark Light* (1.10) has no people or places, and does not tell a story, but it does have subject matter of stripes and rectangles and colors and textures. Scully says he finds inspiration for his non-representational paintings while walking the streets of New York when he sees painted stripes in a parking lot or new tar on top of old asphalt. A group of art students who discussed *Dark Light* saw references in it to a flag, a quilt, a patch, a rug, a mat, a piano, a beach blanket, a layer cake, a playing field, a game board, a textile, a window, doors, and a jail. They also listed several oppositional ideas that they thought the painting suggested: carnival/church, heaven/hell, tomorrow/today, day/night, war/peace, outside/inside, and good/evil.

Scully would likely be pleased with these observations and conjectures. He wants viewers to be involved in interpreting the subject matter in his paintings and what meanings it implies: “When you have something that, in a way, is incomplete, unfocused or unclear, the person looking at the

painting is empowered to complete the painting."¹⁰ *Dark Light* illustrates that non-representational art is not devoid of meaning or expression.

Jessica Stockholder is known for making temporary nonrepresentational sculptures for particular architectural environments. Her subject matter is things themselves, not representations of things, and materials she finds in discount stores. They were manufactured for a culture geared toward planned obsolescence, but before they outlive their life span she gathers them together and assembles them. In *Two Frames* (1.11), for example, her subject matter consists of plywood, plastic floor liner, glass, two pieces of a stucco-finished table base, a bookshelf, four metal table legs, a frame with Plexiglas, yarn, plasticine, zip ties, thread, shells, a rubber car mat, tape, and canvas from someone's oil painting. To these she has added oil paint and spray paint. Her subject matter is her materials and what she selects. They imply an acknowledgment and acceptance of our throwaway attitudes about items we purchase.

We can also infer meaning from the nonobjective logo designed for XM Radio (1.12). In this version, it is a simple design of lines in one color. From experience in our daily visual culture, we recognize lines in the middle as the letters *x* and *m*, and through our familiarity with advertisements, we likely know that the *x* and *m* stand in for the name of the company, XM Radio. We can also read the curved lines at either end of the logo as pulses, signifying that XM Radio broadcasts its sounds by satellite.



1.11 JESSICA STOCKHOLDER *Two Frames* (detail), 2007. Mixed media installation, 93 × 51 × 22 in.

SIMPLE AND COMPLEX SUBJECT MATTER

Subject matter can be exceedingly simple. In some of her paintings, for example, painter Georgia O'Keeffe limited her subject matter to a single flower; sculptor Claes Oldenburg has used hamburgers and French fries as the subject matter for some of his soft sculptures; and William Wegman relies primarily on dogs for his photographs.

The subject matter of Laurie Simmons's photograph *Black Bathroom* (April 16, 1997) (1.13) is a common one in Western



1.12 XM Radio logo, 2008.



1.14 HIERONYMUS BOSCH *Garden of Delights*; left wing: *Paradise (Garden of Eden)*; central panel: *Garden of Earthly Delights*; right wing: *Hell (Inferno)*, c. 1500. Triptych with shutters, wood, central panel: 220 × 195 cm.; wings: 220 × 97 cm.

Choice and Uses of the Medium

The material used to make an artifact is its **medium** (plural **media**). The media you choose and how you use them greatly affect how your artifacts will look, what they express, and how they may be used. Imagine the effect on meaning if Michelangelo's *Pietà* were made of Styrofoam instead of marble; if the Gateway Arch in Saint Louis, designed by Eero Saarinen, were made of translucent Plexiglas instead of opaque metal; if Maya Lin had designed the Vietnam War Memorial to be constructed of unfired red clay instead of polished black granite. As an artist, you will use materials to express yourself in form.

MEDIUM AS MATERIAL

As an artist, you need to be aware of the implications of the media you choose. No single medium is artistically superior to another; the point is how you use a medium to expressively meet the demands of an idea. The more media you explore and become comfortable with, the greater your options for media that best match your expressive ideas. You will also learn from experience that media are expressive in themselves and that artists both control the media they use and respect the peculiar characteristics of each medium they choose. As

the twentieth-century artist Pablo Picasso commented, "Painting is stronger than me—it makes me do what it wants."¹³

Designers are aware of the implications of the materials they choose for their products, seeking to manufacture environmentally friendly products, for example, through use of "greener" materials—those that have less negative impact on the health of the environment. Some clothing companies are reducing consumption of materials and waste by using recycled materials, printing clothing labels onto fabric rather than using sewn-on labels, and using fibers that can again be reclaimed.

MEDIUM AS ARTFORM

The term "medium" refers not only to a material but also to an **artform**, a kind of expression, such as sculpture, jewelry, ceramics, computer graphics, and so forth. Some artists choose to work within a single artform (medium) throughout their careers. Ansel Adams (1.15) worked exclusively within the medium of photography, mastering technical aspects of the still photograph as well as its potential for achieving beauty. Through his singular dedication to the medium, he produced a very large body of work that is collected and preserved by major museums throughout the world. In 1940 Adams helped establish the photography collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and in 1946



1.15 ANSEL ADAMS *Aspens, Northern New Mexico*, 1958. Photograph.



1.16 LOUISE BOURGEOIS *Spider*, 1997. Steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric, rubber, silver, gold, and bone, 175 × 262 × 204 in.

he established the first academic department of photography at California School of Fine Arts (later the San Francisco Art Institute). His disciplined study of the photography medium also resulted in his writing a series of authoritative technical books, *Basic Photo Series*, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, revised in the 1980s.¹⁴

Some artists work within a variety of artforms and with a wide range of materials. Louise Bourgeois, for example, has made very large metal sculptures for public sites, small hand-knit cloth sculptures, prints, drawings, and even jewelry. For the sculpture *Spider* (1.16), she used steel to construct the large spider that stands over a fenced cell containing mysterious objects made of silver, gold, bone, wood, glass, and tapestry. Her choice of media in the sculpture was not random. Bourgeois's work is partially autobiographical, and the individual materials have personal importance to her: tapestry, for example, is significant to her because as a young girl she helped her parents in their business of repairing and restoring old tapestries. She combines media in ways that are visually intriguing and emotionally evocative.

Today especially, categorizing artworks based on media (as artforms), such as drawing, sculpture, photograph, and so forth, can be arbitrary because artists sometimes purposely blur these divisions. Frank Stella's *La vecchia dell'orto* (*The Witch in the Garden*) (1.17) is labeled "mixed media." The term refers both to an artist's use of different materials in one piece of art—in this case, honeycombed aluminum, stretched canvas, and different kinds of paint material—and to the fact that it is sometimes hard to distinguish a work by labeling it one of the traditional artforms. Stella intentionally blurs distinctions between painting (a two-dimensional medium) and sculpture (a three-dimensional medium) by constructing aggressively dimensional painted works such as *The Witch in the Garden*, which is meant to hang on a wall.

MEDIUM AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

Consideration of media also entails how they are handled and made into expressive forms. When an artist has worked materials with considered skill and dexterity, the work is said to exhibit **craftsmanship**. There is not one particular way that any medium must be used; how a medium is used depends on the intent of the artist in making the piece and how the piece is meant to function. However, at a minimum, you would likely want to know or learn how to

Aspects of Form

The physical structure of your work—its **form**—is the result of the processes you use to compose your materials according to your work's intended function and expressive purpose. Form can be used as both a verb (you form materials) and a noun (what you make results in a form; what you make has form).

Form is constituted by design elements, such as line, texture, shape, mass, volume, color, time, and so forth. These are the building blocks of any form. Design principles are ways that artists organize elements into form, by balancing them, emphasizing some elements more than others, establishing patterns, finding ways of unifying the elements, and so forth.

If you wish to make a calm and peaceful nonrepresentational sculpture, how will you express calmness and peace in the medium you choose? If you want to move a viewer to action through a political painting, how will you visually convey your idea so this happens? If you do not understand form, you may end up with a jarring piece that you meant to be calming, or a calming piece that you wanted to provoke action. Design elements and principles are the topics of subsequent chapters, but for the present, consider two well-formed works, Rockwell's *After the Prom* (see 1.8) and a motorbike (see 1.21).

Hickey, the critic, explains how Rockwell composed (formed) his painting according to an expressive intent. Hickey observes that the form of the picture welcomes us. He writes that Rockwell's view of the scene places us inside the store but not up at the counter: we are part of the society but not part of the community. "The clustered burst of white in the center of Rockwell's painting, created by the young woman's dress, the boy's jacket, and the soda jerk's hat and shirt, constitutes our gardenia; we stand in the same relationship to that white blossom of tactile paint as the soda jerk does to the young woman's corsage."¹⁶ Hickey also tells us that the soda jerk that Rockwell posed leaning toward the girl is our surrogate: he inhales the fragrance of the flower that is the symbol of love. Rockwell shows him visibly responding. He shows the other figures responding to the soda jerk's response and to one another, and we respond to the totality of their responses. Rockwell has made a well-formed painting.

ENV (1.21), the world's first hydrogen fuel-cell motorcycle, relies in large part on its carefully designed form, and carefully chosen materials, for its high performance, which outstrips other electrically fueled bikes. The bike's structural form is lightweight, streamlined, and aerodynamic, designed to move quickly and efficiently as well as to look good. The bike produces minimal noise pollution, and its only emission is water vapor pure enough to drink. The bike can run for up to

four hours before refueling. The surface finish of iridescent white and high-gloss black paint expresses the bike's dual nature: clean power and the excitement of a good ride. It is a well-formed machine.

Contexts

Meanings of artworks depend on context, the circumstances that form their setting. These circumstances in turn vary, from where and how an object is placed, to the way the parts of the object relate, to the history and experience of the artist and conditions in the outside world. We consider five types of context: viewing, internal, artist's, social, and art historical.

VIEWING CONTEXT

Where and how an object is placed—its **viewing context**—is crucial to how it is understood and received. Placing an American flag in the window of your dwelling signifies a positive view of America and its policies. Placing the same flag on the floor of an art gallery so that viewers must walk on it in order to see what else you have placed on the wall above it signifies criticism of the country and may be taken as an anti-American statement that will likely enrage some people, regardless of your artistic intent.

Similarly, if you take a piece of old discarded metal that you find visually interesting because of its shape, color, and texture and place it on a pristine gallery wall, it will be viewed as a work of "found art." That same piece of metal seen in an alley will be viewed as litter.

Viewing context includes an object's functionality, that is, how it performs in use. When the P'kolino Play Table (1.22) is featured in a design magazine, it appears as an interesting set of objects with an appealing palette of colors and shapes that are made inviting by their rounded edges. The two creators of the table (master's students at Rhode Island School of Design at the time)



1.21 Intelligent Energy ENV Bike, Great Britain, 2006.



1.22 J. B. SCHNEIDER AND ANTONIO TURCO-RIVAS P'kolino Play Table, 2004.



1.23 SARAH SZE *Still Life with Flowers*, 1999, Mixed media, dimensions variable.

intend their product to be functional, as well as attractive, in homes where children learn and play: "We wanted to create play furniture that was designed for children (not miniature adults) and how they play and grow mentally, physically and socially . . . all while making the products beautiful (after all adults have to live at home too)."¹⁷ The designers' play table avoids garish colors often used by designers who mistakenly believe that children need to be assaulted by bright colors to attract their attention. The colors of the P'kolino Play Table are pleasant and calming and avoid overstimulation of a household environment.

Other works your artifact is shown with will influence how viewers attribute meanings to your work. Curators thoughtfully place works beside one another, or distance works from one another, for interpretive reasons. For example, although most art museums show art in historical chronological order, some curators are hanging works from different times and cultures in the same gallery according to a theme, such as mother and child or social protest. They may also mix different media in the same gallery rather than in media-specific galleries: paintings, product designs, photographs, and other objects from the 1950s may be in one room, rather than spread throughout the museum into media-specific spaces such as a sculpture garden, a gallery for furniture, another for painting, and so forth. You too can influence how viewers will think about any one of your works depending on the context in which you show it, whether it is situated next to another of yours or next to someone else's.

INTERNAL CONTEXT

The juxtaposition of parts within the whole and the meanings they evoke through proximity to one another give an artifact its **internal context**. Sarah Sze makes sculptures, some ephemeral, some permanent, out of everyday small-scale household objects that she assembles for specific spaces. Museum educators for the Carnegie International Exhibition say that the items she chooses "respond to and infiltrate the surrounding architecture in which they are situated." She successively links small bits of discrete objects into a complex three-dimensional network (1.23). Each object

affects the other objects near it, and “the interplay between individual components and overall structure allows Sze to explore the boundaries between art and everyday life.”¹⁸

Everything in a work of art is altered by anything else in it. This will be apparent when we later consider how artists use design principles to change how design elements are understood according to how those elements are placed as part of an artifact. Some especially compelling examples in the chapter on color (Chapter 4) show how the same color against different backgrounds looks like different colors (see p. 84).

ARTIST’S CONTEXT

An **artist’s context** is the life history, experiences, and time influencing the person whose work we are considering. We can enjoy *Untitled* by Wangechi Mutu (1.24) without knowing about her, but when we have access to facts about her life, there is more to think about when looking at her artwork. Like all artists, Mutu draws upon the personal facts of her life to express thoughts and feelings. She is Kenyan born, living in Brooklyn, and her work resonates with African imagery. She considers herself a multimedia figurative artist. When she was younger, a main source of her inspiration was discarded magazines she found on the street, her “poor man’s paint.” She chooses the female body as her subject matter and notions of beauty as a major idea for her work. Her works combine such diverse materials as cloth, ink, pearls, glitter, magazine fashion pictures, and medical imagery gathered from scientific texts. Mutu’s life experiences are within multicultural settings, and she uses multiple representational conventions in her works. In *Untitled*, the head of the woman is in severe profile, as in ancient Egyptian representations of the human figure, although the torso of the figure is presented in the representational manner of Renaissance artists. Mutu’s works reveal her ideas about contemporary society: “We live in a moment of collage, of splicing, entering another’s space, of coexistence, or of forced coexistence.”¹⁹ In *Untitled*, Mutu has spliced ancient Egyptian and Renaissance perspectives with different media both old (ink) and new (Mylar), and she has given the woman a protective knife for a left hand, perhaps to indicate the need of women to defend themselves, and a prosthetic device for a right hand, perhaps to indicate the ravages of sexism.

Your own work will necessarily be grounded in the context of your life history. It can be a rich resource for your personal expression. Although we share commonalities of experience, no one has lived the same life. Your challenge as an artist is to transform your personal life experiences and insights into works that are understandable to others as well as meaningful to yourself.



1.24 WANGECHI MUTU *Untitled*, 2004. Ink, acrylic, photocollage, contact paper on Mylar, 36 × 24 in.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

The **social context** of a work of art is the time and place in which the work is made. To understand with some degree of confidence Leon Golub’s painting *Try Burning This One . . .* (1.25), we need information about the social context of the United States in the first part of the twentieth century to accurately consider what the painting shows and implies. Golub (who died in 2004) based his paintings on political events. He pondered news media for themes and clipped out printed news photographs for his subject matter. His paintings are about his time in the world as he experienced it from his American perspective. He directly and consciously borrowed from the culture he lived in, and his art is often critical of it. To understand his paintings the way he meant them, we too must be aware of the paintings’ social contexts.

In *Try Burning This One . . .* Golub portrays two standing male figures. One wears a T-shirt with an American flag and the words “Try burning this one . . . asshole.” The other male next to him crudely and defiantly grasps his own crotch. The men, in their clothing, postures, and gestures, are threatening and



1.25 LEON GOLUB *Try Burning This One . . .*, 1991. Acrylic on linen, 122 × 113 in.

confrontational. They look directly at you, the viewer. Their ideology seems to be one of an unenlightened patriotism that would protect the flag, with violence if needed, against any who would use it to protest policies of the U.S. government. Citizens of the United States have been divided about war and what it means to be patriotic in times of war, especially when wars are controversial. America's involvement in the Vietnam War from 1959 to 1975 was particularly divisive for Americans. Many demonstrations for and protests against the Vietnam War turned ugly. One way of protesting by those opposed to America's involvement in the war was to burn American flags, acts that oppositional elements considered highly offensive and unpatriotic. The Vietnam War and other American military engagements after it are frequent subjects of Golub's paintings. He was opposed to that war, and the wars in the Middle East that followed it, and took offense at those who considered calls for peace to be unpatriotic. *Try Burning This One . . .* is critical of those who think peaceful patriotism is cowardly and unmanly. Golub's political views, however, may not be easily inferred

by looking at this one painting.

Functional objects you design will likewise be seen within a social context of the time and place they are made, namely, within a segment of the consumer culture or the marketplace for your type of object. The designers of the ENV bike (see 1.21) are more aware of the precariousness of the natural environment than designers of earlier motorized vehicles when we were less conscious of the effects of products and their uses on the sustainability of the natural world.

Your work is in a competitive environment of products and services, whether or not you place it there, because consumers will. You will need to consider what social cues your own work is drawing upon, and whether you have presented them in ways that communicate your position on any

given topic to an audience. If your references are too oblique or too ambiguous, misunderstandings of your work are likely.

ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When you make a work, it becomes part of an **art historical context** within the realm of all other artifacts throughout history. The history of art is often cast as a history of one artist referencing the work of another artist, sometimes to further a tradition, sometimes in a spirit of homage, and sometimes in a spirit of wanting to challenge a predominant style.

Robert Colescott based a painting he made in 1975 (1.26) on a painting Emanuel Leutze made in 1851 (1.27). Colescott's painting does not make much sense without knowledge of Leutze's painting. Leutze's is a historical painting of George Washington leading revolutionary troops in a surprise attack in 1776 against the British, who had invaded the American colonies. It was a bold attack that changed the momentum of the war in the colonists' favor and ultimately led to victory.



1.26 ROBERT COLESCOTT *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook*, 1975. Oil on canvas, 84 × 108 in.



1.27 EMANUEL LEUTZE *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851. Oil on canvas, 149 × 255 in.

Colescott counts on viewers being familiar with Leutze's painting because it is frequently reproduced in textbooks about American history. Colescott implies this in the second part of the title of his painting: *Page from an American History Textbook*. Colescott's painting makes an ironic statement about history as presented in textbooks because, in Colescott's view, textbooks underrepresent and misrepresent the treatment of blacks in American history. Colescott has replaced George Washington with George Washington Carver and replaced the revolutionary soldiers with stereotypes of black people in minstrel-style blackface. His painting refers to tokenism—the inclusion of George Washington Carver as one of the few or the only important black person in many history textbooks for children—and to common stereotypes of black people in American culture.

Viewers will place your work into the context of past art and art currently being made and shown by other artists. They will want to know if your work is building on a past style, subverting one of them, or attempting to discard many. Your references to the art of others can be sophisticated or naive. If you are not well informed about the history of art, past and recent, you are at a disadvantage: those who know art will be consciously or subconsciously judging what you are doing by comparing it to what has already been done. Formal courses in art history are one way to acquire this knowledge, as is reading exhibition catalogs, period surveys, and monographs on particular artists. Instructors may ask you to make visual responses to the work of other artists in informed and creative ways.

Conclusion: The Components and Meanings

When you thoughtfully make a work of art or a designed object using subject matter, medium, form, and contexts, you will create meaningful objects. "Meaning" is an elusive term, but it generally refers to what the work is about or what it expresses. As we will examine in the next chapter, meanings of artifacts are multiple; thus we will use the word in its plural form, meanings. Works of art are not the kinds of objects that have single, correct, and immutable meanings.

Meanings are the results of interpretations. **Interpretation** is a process of deciphering what the work is about or expresses—not whether it is "good," but what it might mean to the maker, to the people for whom it was made if it is a historical artifact, and to its viewers in present time.

Work that you make will have personal meaning for you: it is based in your life experiences, and only you will know the significance of all the subjects or

symbols you use. Thus not everyone may be able to fully access all the meaningful aspects of any work that you make. By being aware of an audience, however, you can choose creative processes and make choices about process, subject matter, media, form, and contexts to better communicate to others. By being consciously aware of your artistic choices, you will likely gain self-knowledge while expressing what you think about what you have experienced.

Let's look at one work of art, Frida Kahlo's painting *What the Water Has Given Me* (1.28) and see how the components of subject matter, medium, form, and contexts interact to allow us to formulate meanings about the work. The components and their interactions may be put into this simple but powerful formula for thoughtfully making your own art and considering the artworks of others:

SUBJECT MATTER + MEDIUM + FORM
+ CONTEXTS = MEANINGS

This formula need not be followed in any particular order; you can start with any of the components, but you should consider all of them and how they interrelate and inflect meanings. Although we can analytically separate subject matter, medium, form, and context in works of art and design, these components are interdependent, and all are simultaneously active depending on the artist's process of working.

With Kahlo's painting, let's start with *subject matter* because it is complex and dominates the painting. We see a bathtub. We see two sets of toes against the end of the tub and reflected in the water. The nails are painted red, thus are likely the toes of a woman. The big toe of the right foot is cut and bleeding. Below the right foot, a woodpecker lies on its back on top of a tree that is part of an island landscape. To the right of the bird, a skyscraper emerges from the center of an erupting volcano. At the bottom left of the volcano lies a man in a loincloth, perhaps a Jesus figure. At the bottom right of the volcano, a skeleton sits atop a hill. Under the left foot we can see a sailboat, a rock formation, a seashell with water pouring from it. There are sea animals in the water. Between the seashell and the island, a nude pregnant woman floats belly up in the water. Her eyes are closed, and she may be dead. A rope originates in the loincloth figure's hand, wraps around the woman's neck, then around the rock formation, and ends tied to another rock formation on the island. Insects, a dancing woman, and a snake are moving on the rope. A fancy dress floats in the water near the body. To the right of the nude body, a man and woman in formal wear stand behind large leaves. In front of the leaves, two nude women are on a bed: one woman is of darker skin than the other. Lush plant life with exposed roots and blossoms grows in the water at the bottom of the canvas.



1.28 FRIDA KAHLO *What the Water Has Given Me (Lo que el agua me dio)*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 69 × 88 cm.

Kahlo's choice of *medium* for this painting is oil paint on canvas. In *crafting* her painting, she does not draw attention to her technique of painting through noticeably thick paint and obvious brushstrokes as some painters do. Instead, she uses a simple representational style that does not distract the viewer from the painting's narrative content.

The *form* of the painting shows the feet and floating subject matter from the point of view of the woman taking the bath, although she is not shown. The figures and objects in the painting are not scaled realistically: the bathing feet are as large as the skyscraper, for example. Kahlo has rendered the scene and its objects with representational detail and realistic colors. The top of the canvas is calm in contrast to the bottom two-thirds, which contain most of the subject matter.

If we know of Kahlo's biography, which is well documented in recent history books, we know that all of her work is intensely personal because she investigates with honesty her life experiences. From *internal, artist's, and social contexts*, we can confidently infer that *What the Water Has Given Me* is a psychological self-portrait, a narrative of her life featuring selected memories and imaginings. Much of the subject matter is garnered from Kahlo's life: The floating nude woman, the darker woman on the bed, and the formally dressed woman look like photographs and other self-portraits of the artist. The floating woman's belly is swollen and may indicate pregnancy: Kahlo hoped for children but lost all her pregnancies due to a damaged pelvis—one of her injuries from a freak accident on a public bus. She suffered throughout her life after the accident and endured many surgeries. The man in formal wear looks like photographs and paintings of Diego Rivera, Kahlo's husband, a famous Mexican painter of large, politically motivated murals. The couple's relationship was emotionally tumultuous, with both having affairs, including Rivera seducing Kahlo's sister, and Kahlo engaging in lesbian relationships. The couple divorced and then remarried. Both artists were anticapitalist and pro-Marxist in their politics, which may account for Kahlo's rendering of the intrusive burning skyscraper in a natural agrarian environment. Kahlo is admired for being an early and influential feminist, an advocate of pride in one's ethnicity, and a promoter of social justice.

From artistic and social and *art historical contexts*, we know some of Kahlo's art-making processes. This painting is larger than most of her work. Her paintings are often small, partly because of the limitations of her body—she often painted while bedridden due to reparative operations following her bus accident. Kahlo was also attracted to small canvases by her knowledge of and preference for the fine detailing typical of the Mexican folk-art form known as the *retablos*. She strongly and proudly identified with Mexico's past and its indigenous people.

Although Kahlo distanced herself from the Surrealist painters of her time, her work is part of the Surrealist movement that explored the subconscious and revealed meanings beneath the surface appearance of things. We know that many of the things and situations represented in the painting are based on her actual life, but other things seem symbolic, floating above the water as if they were emanations of the bather's mind.

The intimacy of Kahlo's painting may inspire you to be more revealing when making your own works. Her bravery in self-disclosure may cause you to look more closely at your own life and at the stories you tell yourself to make sense of your life events: Are your narratives positive or negative, true or false, accurate or distorted? What would be the consequences of your changing your inner narratives into empowering stories? What if you shared these narratives publicly in paint or pixels?

As an artist or designer, you will express ideas, feelings, and attitudes in your work. Viewers of the objects you make will construct meanings and infer attitudes based on what they see when they consider your process and the choices you have made concerning subject matter, medium, form, and context. For perceptive viewers, everything counts in a work of art, even accidents and the unintended consequences of your choices. By deepening your understanding of the components of an artwork, you can knowingly exert greater or lesser control over your expressions and their effectiveness for viewers. The next chapter considers interpretation and meanings more fully and provides you with ideas about how viewers will construct meanings about the works you make. With this knowledge, you can better determine whether you are effectively showing your intent when making visual choices for your works.