

The concept of art does not readily translate to diverse cultures.

People express themselves in dance, music, song, painting, sculpture, pottery, cloth, storytelling, verse, prose, drama, and comedy.

A dictionary defines art as “the quality, production, expression, or realm of what is beautiful or of more than ordinary significance; the class of objects subject to aesthetic criteria” (Random House College Dictionary 1982, p. 76). According to the same dictionary, aesthetics involves “the qualities perceived in works of art . . . about the sense of beauty” (p. 22).

Even with this mosaic of purpose, artistic creation may be viewed more succinctly as beautiful and an expression of ideas that invoke emotions. But any creation with this in mind could leave the viewer with a spectrum of reactions, from being thoroughly astounded to wondering what all the fuss is about. After all, who will see this artistic creation and will others understand it from different tribes or societies? It could also be that an artistic creation does not have this as its objective as artistry but as a device for memory or location.

To this end, many societies don't view art as a separate, unique activity. And although tribal communities lack museums, they may have particular areas where artistic expression occurs. For example, the Tiwi of North Australia traditionally commissioned the manufacture of commemorative burial poles after death. The pole artists were sequestered in a work area near the grave. That area was taboo to everyone else. The artists were freed temporarily from the daily food quest.

The Kalabari of southern Nigeria carves wooden sculptures for religious, rather than aesthetic, reasons. They produce these sculptures, not as works of art but to serve as “houses” for spirits (Horton 1963). The sculptures will be placed in a cult house, where the spirits can dwell. Kalabari sculptures are created to manipulate and control spirits. The Kalabari have standards for the carvings, but those standards are not aesthetic; beauty is not a goal. The latter could even be grouped into a category that includes Upper Paleolithic cave paintings deep underground, not precisely the Louvre, which all are invited to see. No doubt, appreciation of the arts reflects one’s cultural background.

On another note (pun not intended), Ethnomusicology studies non-Western, traditional, folk, and contemporary popular music from a cultural perspective studying particular forms of music, their social functions and cultural meanings within particular societies (Kottak, 2019). Again, although music is considered a cultural universal, is the reaction to its display acceptable by all? It would be hard to imagine Beethoven’s 9th unacceptable to anyone, but contemporary Rap music may have a more restricted audience. This art form would also have appeal, but not necessarily to all.

Art, in all its creativity, may only be as appreciated by some cultures but have significant meaning for the cultures in which it was created. This does not deny understanding by others but could, in its study, provide a greater appreciation for those respective cultures.