

Art, Design, Craft and Creativity

by Joseph Cali

THEME

Question: What is the difference between art and design and how does creativity play the key part in both?

SUB-THEME

How does this theme apply to the Japanese Garden?

Major premise:

Art can be either good or bad. Design can be either good or bad. Craft can be either good or bad. Being good or even "great" is not a criterion for whether something is art or not. The criteria is intention and, to some degree, method.

Art is not better or more important or of higher quality than Design or Craft. Art does not imply a value higher than the value of Design or Craft. Art is a neutral term describing an impulse to create without any purpose to that creation other than the artist's own desire to carry it out.

Art is comparable to Theoretical Physics in that it serves best to explore and theorize, potentially leading to new directions or forecasting trends in visualization, understanding and society in general. It often has more benefit to the creator than the observer and is often recognized only by the creator and a small circle of observers.

Definitions of Art, Design and Craft are a relatively new phenomena, stemming largely from the influence of technology and mechanically based production systems including printing, photography, film and computers.

Basic premise and definitions:

Art has no purpose, no direction, no clear criteria for success, and no limitations other than that of the individual who creates it.

Design has a purpose, it has direction, it has more or less clear criteria for success, and it has conditions usually set by someone other than the designer.

Craft has a purpose, it has a direction, it has more or less clear criteria for success, and it has conditions usually set by someone other than the designer. It may be employed entirely in the service of someone other than the craftsman and may be only part of the total outcome or product. Craftsmanship and craft are physical aspects of creating an object or a piece of music or a play or a story. Another word for craftsmanship is "skillful making." These are aspects of the quality and value of the manifested object. They do not directly relate to whether or not the object is art or design.

Creativity is the ability to reach within and use emotions, memories, knowledge, experience and every other human capacity, to manifest human mental, emotional and physical capacity into a form cognizable to others. Creativity is usually essential to both good art and good design and usually implies a certain degree of uniqueness, originality and invention. Creativity is less important to craft than perfection of method. This usually happens through the repetition of manipulating a certain group of materials such as paint or wood.

Good, bad, well made, skillful, expensive, famous are all value judgments unrelated to whether something is art or design.

Painting, sculpture, poetry, dance, etc., are forms of expression. Each uses a particular set of materials or processes, toward a concerted effort to manifest something—usually an idea or emotion.

One source of confusion about the difference between art, design and craft is in their changing roles in the society over time. Generally speaking, as with most other things, they have become separate and specialized vis a vis their original condition. Painting and drawing, for example, once played a very important role in representation and dissemination of knowledge. As these roles were taken over by printing, photography, film, TV, etc., painting veered toward self expression, abstraction, self-reference and experimentation (although it continues to play an important representative role in the form of illustration. Does this mean that painting is more or less "art" than it once was? No. It means that the advent of technology removed most of the functional aspects—or to put it another way, the design and craft aspects—from painting and freed it to be more theoretical and heretical.

Take, for example, Leonardo. Was he an artist? Unquestionably. Does that mean that everything he did was art? Certainly not. He was also a designer, an architect, an engineer, a scientist, a genius, and an individual of great creative power and highly developed skills. This last point is key to why the work of the ancients is more often considered art—no matter who or what it is—compared to the confusion over whether it is art or not exhibited in relation to contemporary art. It is simply because the ancients exhibited a high level of craft and in an age of machine-made objects, a high degree of hand-made skill is easily mistaken for art. But for the people of the age in which this work was created, it was not a question of art, but one of beauty and virtue. And, more importantly, it had a recognized purpose, without which it would be nothing. Once photography and printing came on the scene the ocean of creative effort began to divide until here we are today, dividing raindrops. In other words, since that time, the search for what to define and how to define it has often taken precedence over what is being made and the importance of making in all its myriad forms. Classifications are organizing tools at best, destroyers of talent and dreams at worst.

Another source of confusion is the review of historical works through the filter of modern sensibilities. This often causes the label "art" to be attached to objects simply because they have survived from ancient civilizations. Below is a grouping of phrases that serve to describe the different ages in which art, design and craft evolved, for the purpose of comparison:

Primitive to Ancient World- Dream world of semi-awareness, spirit invocations, fertility fetishes, primitive representation and level of craft with mostly group referential mythology, limited methodology and material resources, limited commercial organization except in utilitarian goods.

Ancient to Pre-modern World- More rational and organized efforts but highly spiritual in motivation, full-blown representation of gods and portraiture, full utilitarian developments including architecture and engineering, development of music, drama, poetry, etc., highly developed artisans organized into guilds for teaching secret techniques and passing on skill sets, commercial sponsorship and control by kings, royalty, warriors, religious leaders.

Pre-modern to Modern World- Fully rational and systematic, scientific and skeptical, non-spiritual goals and motivations, fragmentation and specializations, rise and dominance of science and technology, replacement of guilds and sponsorship of royalty with corporate and government commissions and control, division of commercial and non-commercial, replacement of guilds with unified learning in schools and individual efforts.

Another way to look at similarities and differences based on the content of method:

ART: Relies heavily on self-determination, individual pursuit of "meaning" as manifest in the work, experimentation, "mindless" activity. Conceptualization and production are usually an organic whole. Art is taught by example but there is no clear formula for making "good" or "successful" art.

DESIGN: Relies heavily upon both self- and group- determination, pursuit of solutions to posited problems, experimentation, some "mindless" but mostly "mindful" activity, ability to satisfy numerous conditions toward some useful (usually utilitarian) or applied outcome. Conceptualization and production phases are separate and production usually relies heavily on coordination with and the skill of others and, increasingly, technology. It can be studied and taught with a more or less clear formula for successful if not great design.

CRAFT: Relies heavily on precedent and attention to physical rather than conceptual aspects. Indeed, conceptual work may be partially or entirely carried out by others. The work of a single individual or organized group with a rigidly set process. Usually limited to a specific group of materials that are well understood and manipulated to a high degree of finish, and based on a well-understood set of rules. Craft is studied and learned over a long period of time and can be taught to others to assure a consistent and successful outcome.

Yet another way to view these definitions based on possible criteria of "good" or "bad" for each, by responding to the question "How is Art (Design, Craft) determined to be Good?":

"How is Art Determined to be Good?" (in order of importance)

1. By the determination of experts in the field.
2. By a high commercial value, especially over time.
3. By changes in philosophy or in the society which brings it recognition over time.
4. By the endurance of acclimation over time.
5. By popular demand (to view or own it)
6. By the acclaim of peers
7. By product durability

"How is Design Determined to be Good?" (in order of importance)

1. By popular demand (to view or own it)
2. By a high commercial value, especially immediately.
3. By the determination of experts in the field.
4. By product durability
5. By the endurance of acclimation over time.
6. By the acclaim of peers
7. By changes in philosophy or in the society which brings it recognition over time.

"How is Craft Determined to be Good?" (in order of importance)

1. By popular demand (to view or own it)
2. By a high commercial value, both immediately and over time.
3. By product durability
4. By the endurance of acclimation over time.
5. By changes in philosophy or in the society which brings it recognition over time.
6. By the determination of experts in the field.
7. By the acclaim of peers

Relationship of this theme to the Japanese Garden:

The relationship is in the question "Is the Japanese Garden Art?" Seen in this light, the answer is as follows: where the garden has been made to a predetermined area, at a predetermined cost and time schedule, with the demands and needs of the customer in mind—no. In that case it is design. On the other hand, where it has been made with no purpose, no restriction of area, budget, client desire, etc., and solely for the purpose of exploring the possibility of invention through the use of materials which may or may not be associated with Japanese gardens, is it art. Again, this does not answer the question of whether a particular garden is good or bad, but only if it is art.

It also does not imply that—as design—it is of lesser value, lesser skill or lesser importance than art.

Considering this definition, it is clear that the vast majority of Japanese gardens are not art but design. Furthermore, the realization of the design, as with creations such as music and architecture, is highly dependant on craft.

In other words, while both good art and good design almost always rely on creativity, the manifestation of good design relies more heavily on good craft than does good art—which may be totally or almost totally devoid of craft.

The Japanese garden is generally a combination of design principles and craftsmanship, using primarily living and non-living natural materials, applied to a specific site with a specific observer in mind.

The Japanese Garden generally lies squarely in the area between design and craft.

As Design, it seeks to find a solution to a posited problem. This problem is usually something like "how can a certain piece of land be developed, under certain circumstances and with certain conditions, to create what is considered by the owner of the property, the creator, and historical presidents to be a meaningful and pleasing environment.

As Craft, it relies heavily on a certain set of materials, manipulated according to certain rules and historical precedents, by people trained in a particular skill, under the supervision of the designer or his proxy. Its results must be durable, functional and conform to standards of beauty and quality.

Can the Japanese Garden ever be considered Art?

This is a difficult and open question. Historically, I believe that the first kare-sansui gardens come closest to the definition of Art proposed in this paper. Certainly, it appears that the lack of "pleasing effect" displayed by such gardens displays a disregard for the opinion of the general public—a necessary criteria of design and craft. Such gardens also display a leap of thinking more indicative of art than design or craft. The difficulty comes with not knowing the intentions of the creators. In other words, to the degree that such gardens were intended for some utilitarian use—such as religious instruction or the representation of ink paintings forms in a garden setting—they are design. However to the degree that they lacked any conditions or limitations on their making and to the degree that their only utilitarian aspect was to illicit an emotional or spiritual response—they are art. And, though much is made of the craft of gardens such as Ryoan-ji, I suspect that this was always secondary to the intentions of the creators, again, implying their affinity to art. Again, this is not a value judgment as to rather they are "good" or "bad".