THE SUBJECT OF ART

Meanings, Kinds and Functions of Subject

The Subject of Art

- What Subject Is?
- Ways of Representing Subject
- The Artist and His Choice of Subject
- Kinds of Subject
- The Ugly and the Tragic in the Art
- Subject and Content

What is a Subject?

- To a majority of people, the appeal of most works of art lies in the representation of familiar objects.
- Their enjoyment of painting, sculpture and literature comes not from their perception of the meaning but from the satisfaction they get out of recognizing the subject or understanding the narrative content.

What is a Subject?

- The subject of art refers to any person, object, scene or event described or represented in a work of art.
  - Representational or Objective
    - Arts that have subject (eg Painting, Sculpture, Graphic Arts, Literature and Theatre Arts)







What is a Subject?

- Non-Representational or Non-Objective
  - Arts that do not have subject.
  - Music, Architecture and many of the Functional Arts
    - Program Music – musical compositions which have subject
  - They do not present descriptions, stories, or references to identifiable objects or symbols. Rather they, appeal directly to the senses primarily because of the satisfying organization of their sensuous and expressive elements.

Makoto Fujimura's
Golden Summer



What is a Subject?

- Many contemporary painters have turned away from representational to non-objective painting. **They have shifted their attention to the work of art as an object in itself**, an exciting combination of shapes and colors that fulfills an aesthetic need without having to represent images or tell a story.
- Many modern paintings are like this making them more difficult to comprehend.

The Subject of Art

- What Subject Is?
- **Ways of Representing Subject**
- The Artist and His Choice of Subject
- Kinds of Subject
- The Ugly and the Tragic in the Art
- Subject and Content

Ways of Representing Subject

- The manner of representing subject varies according to the **intent** and **inventiveness** of each artist.
  - Realism – when things are depicted in the way they would normally appear.
  - Abstraction – it is the process of simplifying and/or reorganizing objects and elements according to the demands of the artistic expression.
  - Distortion – is when the figures have been so arranged that proportions differ noticeably from natural measurements.
  - Surrealism – it is realism plus distortion.

Ways of Representing Subject

- **Realism**
  - Strictly speaking, no work of art is realistic. Since no work of art is an accurate copy of what exists in the natural world.
  - Some paintings seem to be photographic renderings of facts or anchored on historical facts.



Fernando Amorsolo.

A Basket of Mangoes. 1949.

oil in canvas .

20x16 (frame 24x20)

Ways of Representing Subject

- **Abstraction** – the artist selects and renders the objects with their shapes, colors and positions altered. In some abstract works, enough of a likeness has been retained to represent real things.
- In others, the original objects have been reduced to simple geometric shapes and they can be rarely identified unless the artist named it in title.
- His concern is the rendering of the essence of the subject rather than the natural form itself.



George Braque

Ways of Representing Subject

- **Distortion** – it could also mean twisting, stretching or deforming the natural shape of the object.
- The relief sculptures and paintings of ancient Egypt were distorted. The head and lower part of the body were shown in profile, while the eye and upper part of the body were in the frontal position. Convention demanded the highly stylized representation of the figure.
- It is usually done to dramatize the shape of a figure or to create an emotional effect.
- Caricatures employ distortions so that their targets of ridicule would appear grotesque and hateful.



Ways of Representing Subject

- **Surrealism** – it is a method where the artist in giving expression to what it is in the subconscious composes **dreamlike scenes** that show an **irrational arrangement of objects**. The images are recognizable, sometimes drawn from the nature but they are so combined in utterly fantastic and unnatural relationships.



Joan Miro. Carnival of Harlequin. 1924



Salvador Dali. ***The Persistence of Memory.*** 1931





Kawayan de Guia. ***Incubator.***2008
Ateneo Art Gallery

The Subject of Art

- What Subject Is?
- Ways of Representing Subject
- **The Artist and His Choice of Subject**
- Kinds of Subject
- The Ugly and the Tragic in the Art
- Subject and Content

The Artist and His Choice of Subject

- Practically everything under the sun is raw material for the artist to draw his subjects from.
- Most, if not all, of **the visual arts are representations of what the artist thought and felt about the world they lived in**. Or they are representations of things the artists imagined or dream about.
- Whatever subject an artist chooses, his choice involves some personal statement.

The Artist and His Choice of Subject

- Things that affect an artist's choice of subject
  - Medium
  - Time in which he lives and or the patronage he gets
  - Developments in Science and Technology

The Artist and His Choice of Subject

- The value of a work of art does not depend on the artist's choice of subject. It does not mean that the more profound the subject, the greater the work of art. Rather**, the worth of any representational work of art depends upon the way the subject has been presented.**
- How a work of art is to be appreciated and assessed, it has been agreed has more to do with the way in which its subject or theme is presented than with what is presented.

The Subject of Art

- What Subject Is?
- Ways of Representing Subject
- The Artist and His Choice of Subject
- **Kinds of Subject**
- The Ugly and the Tragic in the Art
- Subject and Content

Kinds of Subject

- Landscapes, Seascapes, and Cityscapes
- Still Life
- Animals
- Portraits
- Figures
- Everyday Life
- History and Legend
- Religion and Mythology
- Dreams and Fantasies

Kinds of Subject

- Landscapes, Seascapes and Cityscapes
  - Artists have always been fascinated with their physical environment.
  - Favorite subject of Chinese and Japanese painters.
  - Fernando Amorsolo, is well known for having romanticized Philippine landscapes.
  - In Europe, the paintings of pure landscapes without human figures was almost unheard of until the Renaissance. They only served as backgrounds prior to this.
  - Modern painters seem to be attracted to scenes in cities. Vicente Manansala, Arturo Luz and Mauro Malang Santos are some who have done Cityscapes



Vicente Manansala. ***Barung-Barong***



Fernando Amorsolo***. Antipolo***

Kinds of Subject

- Still Lifes
  - These are groups of inanimate objects arranged in an indoor setting (flower and fruit arrangements, dishes food, pots and pans, musical instruments and music sheets). The arrangement is like that to show particular human interests and activities.
  - The still lifes of Chinese and Japanese painters usually show flowers, fruits and leaves still in their natural setting, unplucked from the branches.
  - Today, focus is on the exciting arrangement and combinations of the object's shapes and colors.





Juan Sanchez Cotan(1560–1627), ***Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*** (1602),San Diego Museum of Art

Kinds of Subject

- Animals
  - They have been represented by artists from almost every age and place. In fact, the earliest known paintings are representations of animals on the walls of caves.
  - The carabao has been a favorite subject of Filipino artists.
  - The Maranaws have an animal form of sarimanok as their proudest prestige symbol.
  - Animals have been used as symbols in conventional religious art.
    - The dove stands for the Holy Spirit in representations of the Trinity
    - The fish and lamb are symbols of Christ
    - The phoenix is the symbol of Resurrection
    - The peacock is the symbol of Immortality through Christ



Kinds of Subject

- Portraits
  - People have always been intrigued by the human face as an index of the owner's character. As an instrument of expression, it is capable of showing a variety of moods and feelings.
  - It is a realistic likeness of a person in sculpture, painting, drawing or print but it need to be a photographic likeness. A great portrait is a product of a selective process, the artist highlighting certain features and de-emphasizing others.

Leonardo da Vinci.
Monalisa



Kinds of Subject

- It does not have to be beautiful but it has to be truthful.
- Besides the face, other things are worth noticing in portraits are the subject's hands, which can be very expressive, his attire and accessories for it reveals much about the subject's time.
- Statues and busts of leaders and heroes were quite common among the Romans but it was not until the Renaissance that portrait painting became popular in Europe.
- Many artists did self portraits. Their own faces provided them unlimited opportunities for character study.



Bust of Aphrodite



Frida Kahlo. ***Self-portrait with flowers***

Kinds of Subject

- Figures
  - The sculptor's chief subject has traditionally been the **human body**, nude or clothed. The body's form, structure and flexibility offer the artist a big challenge to depict it in a variety of ways, ranging from the idealistic as in the classical Greek sculptures to the most abstract.
  - The grace and ideal proportions of the human form were captured in religious sculpture by the ancient Greeks. To them, physical beauty was the symbol of moral and spiritual perfection; thus they portrayed their gods and goddesses as possessing perfect human shapes.



Venus de Milo c. 150 B.C.

Kinds of Subject

- Early Christian and medieval artists seldom represented the nude figure. The figures they used to decorate the walls and entrances of their churches were distorted so as not to call undue attention and distract people from their spiritual thoughts.
- But Renaissance artists reawakened an interest in the nude human figure.
- A favorite subject among painters is the female figure in the nude.

Kinds of Subject

- Everyday Life
  - Artists have always shown a deep concern about life around them. Many of them have recorded in paintings their observation of people going about their usual ways and performing their usual tasks.
  - Genre Paintings – representations of rice threshers, cockfighters, candle vendors, street musicians and children at play.



Fernando Amorsolo. ***Lavandera.*** 1932. Oil on board.

13 1/2x 10 ½ inches

Kinds of Subject

- History and Legend
  - History consists of verifiable facts, legends of unverifiable ones, although many of them are often accepted as true because tradition has held them so far. Insofar as ancient past is concerned, it is difficult to tell how much of what we know now is history and how much is legend.
  - History and Legend are popular subjects of art.
  - While many works may not be consciously done historical records, certain information about history can be pieced from them. The costumes and accessories, the status symbols, the kinds of dwellings or the means of transportation.
  - Malakas and Maganda and Mariang Makiling are among the legendary subjects which have been rendered in painting and sculpture by not a few Filipino artists.



Eugene Delacroix. ***Liberty Leading the People***. 1830. Oil on canvas. Louvre, Paris

Kinds of Subject

- Religion and Mythology
  - Art has always been a handmaiden of Religion. Most of the world's religions have used the arts to aid in worship, to instruct, to inspire feelings of devotion and to impress and convert non-believers.
  - The Christian Church commissioned craftsmen to tell the stories about Christ and the saints in pictures, usually in mosaics, murals and stained glass windows in churches. It also resorted to the presentation of tableaux and plays to preach and teach.

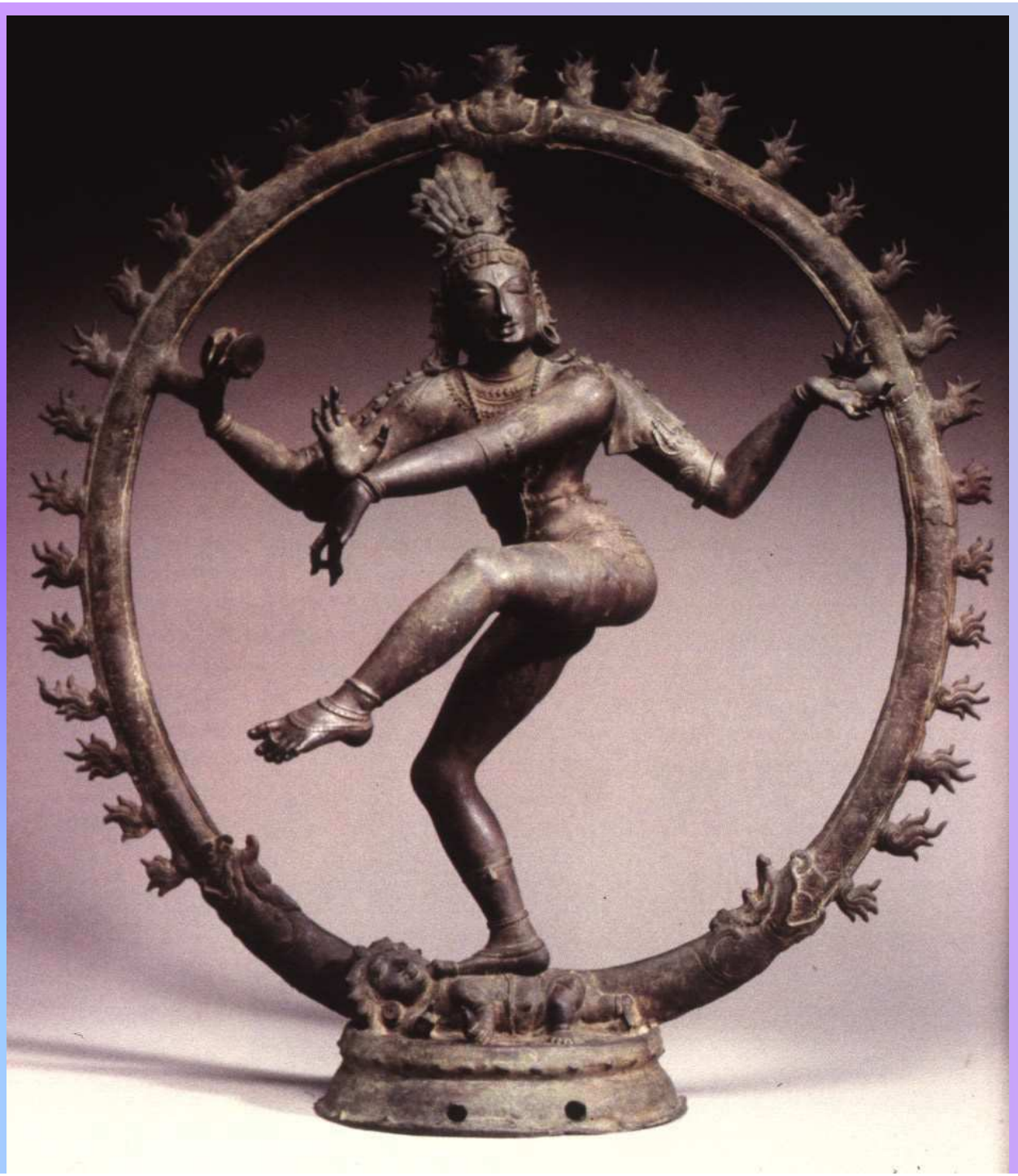


Kinds of Subject

- Some religions however, forbid the representation of divinity as human beings or animal forms, although they allow the use of some signs or symbols in their place.
  - Pictures of God, human beings, or animals are forbidden in Judaism and Islam because people might worship the images themselves
  - Other religions have taught that a god may sometimes assume human or other visible forms.
    - Thus he is distinguished from human beings by a halo, wing, or a darker complexion, or by the use of some attributes
      - » The ancient Egyptians portrayed their gods as part human and part animal
      - » The ancient African tribes distorted their god's features
      - » Among the Hindus, Shiva is shown as a four-armed god
      - » Buddha, is symbolized by his footprints, a wheel or a true

Kinds of Subject

- In the early Christian world, representation of divinity were also symbolic. There were precise conventions in rendering them.
  - The serpent has been used to mean evil
  - The Four Evangelists were represented by animal forms:
    - St Luke by an Ox
    - St John by an Eagle
    - St Mark by a Lion
    - St Matthew by a Winged Man



Kinds of Subject

- Dreams and Fantasies
  - Dreams are usually vague and illogical. Artists especially the surrealists have tried to depict dreams as well as the grotesque terrors and apprehensions that lurk in the depths of the subsconscious.
  - A dream may be lifelike situation.
  - Therefore, we would not know if an artwork is based on a dream unless the artist explicitly mentions it.
  - But if the picture suggests the strange, the irrational and the absurd, we can classify it right away as a fantasy or dream although the artist may not have gotten from the idea of a dream at all but the workings of his imagination
  - No limits can be imposed on an artist's imagination.





The Subject of Art

- What Subject Is?
- Ways of Representing Subject
- The Artist and His Choice of Subject
- Kinds of Subject
- **The Ugly and the Tragic in the Art**
- Subject and Content

The Ugly and Tragic in Art

- There is nothing that may be considered as an improper subject when it comes to art.
- The grotesque, the ugly and the tragic are all legitimate subjects as the pleasurable and the beautiful are.
- Many, in fact, have often deviated away from the stereotyped and beautiful subjects.
- The greatest plays are invariably tragedies.
- And many of our songs speak about love denied or lost.
- Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts according to Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The Ugly and Tragic in Art

- There are reasons for the wide appeal of works of art that show human suffering. Each of us has suffered grief, frustration or loss one way or another. In these works of art we find an affinity with the rest of the humanity who have likewise experienced these painful emotions and tensions.
- It is as if by vicariously experiencing the suffering evoked by these works, we are purged of the pain and we achieve a release of tension.

The Subject of Art

- What Subject Is?
- Ways of Representing Subject
- The Artist and His Choice of Subject
- Kinds of Subject
- The Ugly and the Tragic in the Art
- **Subject and Content**

Subject and Content

- Subject refers to the objects depicted by the artist
- Content refers to what the artist expresses or communicates on the whole of his work

- Content is the meaning
- In literature, it is the theme
- Content reveals the artist's attitude toward his subject

Subject Matter's Different Levels of Meaning

1. Factual Meaning
2. Conventional Meaning
3. Subjective Meaning

Subject Matter's Different Levels of Meaning

1. **Factual Meaning** – the literal statement or the narrative content in the work which can be directly apprehended because the objects presented are easily recognized

Subject Matter's Different Levels of Meaning

2. **Conventional Meaning** – refers to the special meaning that a certain object or color has a particular culture or group of people.

Examples: Flag- symbol of a nation, cross for Christianity, crescent moon - Islam

Subject Matter's Different Levels of Meaning

3. **Subjective Meaning** – any personal meaning consciously or unconsciously conveyed by the artist using a private symbolism which stems from his own association of certain objects, actions or colors with past experiences.

Functions of art

- Aesthetic function- appreciating art for its own sake.
- Utilitarian function-it does not only enriches man’s life but it improves nature.
- Cultural function-it enables to transmit culture from one generation to another.
- Social function-through art, man learns to love and help each other.