



The Invention of Art: A Cultural History

By Larry Shiner

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With *The Invention of Art*, Larry Shiner challenges our conventional understandings of art and asks us to reconsider its history entirely, arguing that the category of fine art is a modern invention--that the lines drawn between art and craft resulted from key social transformations in Europe during the long eighteenth century.

"Shiner spent over a decade honing what he calls 'a brief history of the idea of art.' This carefully prepared and--given the extent and complexity of what he's discussing--admirably concise, well-organized book is the result. . . . Shiner's text is scholarly but accessible, and should appeal to readers with even a dabbler's interest in art theory."--*Publishers Weekly*

"*The Invention of Art* is enjoyable to read and provides a welcome addition to the history and philosophy of art."--Terrie L. Wilson, *Art Documentation*

"A lucid book . . . it should be a must-read for anyone active in the arts."--Marc Spiegler, *Chicago Tribune Books*

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

University of Illinois philosophy professor Shiner (*The Secret Mirror*, etc.) spent over a decade honing what he calls a "brief history of the idea of art." This carefully prepared and given the extent and complexity of what he is discussing admirably concise, well-organized book is the result. Looking forward as much as backward, Shiner finds that "the category of fine art is a recent historical construction that could disappear in its turn." He plausibly traces the 18th-century division between "so-called polite and vulgar arts" from a time when music, for example, was played at home or for "religious and civic occasions" to when it started to be played in concerts with no other goal than artistic enjoyment in and of itself: "On this high cultural ground, noble and bourgeois could meet as a fine art public, rejecting both the frivolous diversions of the rich and highborn as well as the vulgar amusements of the populace." It was the beginning of art as we experience it today. Shiner cites examples from a wide range of forms, including Shakespeare's plays, Greek drama, Cellini's sculptures and Michelangelo's paintings. He also discusses Asian art, pointing out how "the Japanese language had no collective noun for 'art' in our sense until the nineteenth century" and establishes that the phrase "Chinese art" is also a relatively recent invention, since before the 19th century no one in China "grouped painting, sculpture, ceramics, and calligraphy together as objects" with something determinate in common. Essentially optimistic in tone, this book argues that people who complain about the "death of art" are really just failing to measure "the staying power of the established art system." A must for larger art collections, Shiner's text is scholarly but accessible, and should appeal to readers with even a dabbler's interest in art theory.

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From the Inside Flap

We take enormous comfort in the notion that art began in ancient Greece, or maybe even the Renaissance, and that its progress can be traced through a long series of masterpieces. We believe even more firmly in the idea that art is transcendent and universal. With *The Invention of Art*, Larry Shiner challenges these articles of faith and invites us to reconsider the history of art entirely. He argues that the category of fine art is a modern invention—that the lines drawn between art and craft resulted from key social transformations in Europe during the long eighteenth century.

The idea of fine art was inextricably linked to the development of new market economies and the rise of the middle classes, both constituting enormous changes in Western culture. During this period, the art museum, a place where art could be viewed, digested, and contemplated, first came into being. Meanwhile, critics became less interested in how art and literature functioned, and more fascinated with art's aesthetic worth. At the same time, the performance of classical music shifted from places of worship and political ceremonies to more secular and commercial venues where it could be listened to silently. And accompanying these institutional changes was the dissolution of the patronage system for producing art and the advent of a new market system supported by consumers.

The Invention of Art traces the rich tradition of opposition to these institutions. Shiner looks at works by thinkers as varied as Hogarth, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Emerson, Marx, Dewey, and Benjamin. Ultimately, he shows how the modern system maintains its dominance through the assimilation of artists and musicians who resist it, and the distinctions it draws between artists and artisans, and high art and the crafts.

About the Author

Larry Shiner is a professor of philosophy at the University of Illinois at Springfield. He is the author of *The Secularization of History* and *The Secret Mirror*.

Users Review

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