

## Notes to SLT Plato and Art Session

‘Art’ is a very broad term which can just mean paintings and sculptures, but can also include music, film, television, theatre, architecture and so on.

We began the session by thinking about what different kinds of art there are, and what effects they have on viewers and listeners. We also talked about what made these things ‘art’.

As a result of the discussion, a number of suggestions were made about what makes something ‘art’. This included:

1. Art objects are beautiful
2. Art objects don’t have a particular purpose; they are ends in themselves
3. Art objects are whatever the ‘experts’ tell us are art objects.
4. Art objects make us feel a certain way, or are expressions of certain feelings by the artist
5. Art objects tell us something about the world, or are a way of trying to understand and think about the world

Philosophers of art have tried to explore many of these ideas and, unsurprisingly, no general agreement has been reached. There are appealing features, but also drawbacks, of each attempt to understand art. I’ve listed some of the problems here:

1. (Beauty) Some art objects are not beautiful and don’t seem to be trying to be beautiful.
2. (Purposelessness) Some kinds of art are very useful, such as in music therapy, or church music, or architecture.
3. (Experts) Who are the experts and how do they know? Also, can’t we recognise a painting as art, even if there’s no expert around to tell us that it’s art?
4. (Feelings) Some artists don’t think that they are expressing feelings in their work. Some artworks don’t make us feel anything at all, but we might still think they count as art.
5. (Truth and understanding) Some artists say very clearly that they don’t think they’re art tells us anything about the world; some kinds of art don’t seem particularly thought-provoking.

In the second part, we looked at some of Plato’s objections or concerns about art, as found in his book, *The Republic*.

I gave three of Plato’s objections.

i) The Ignorance of the Artists

Artists depict certain kinds of people (doctors, soldiers, politicians). But they don't really need to know anything about them in order to do so. Someone could paint a picture about a tree, without knowing anything at all about trees. Someone could write a TV drama about the First World War, without knowing anything about the history of that event.

ii) Audiences are gullible

Following on from (i): audiences tend to believe what they see depicted in artworks. It's not just that artists don't know what they're talking about; it's that audiences don't realise that the artists are ignorant. So a TV drama about the First World War might be completely inaccurate; but TV audiences will think it's well-researched, accurate, and so on. Another example was the idea of a child who watches unrealistic medical dramas and then decides to become a doctor. We would think that the child had mistaken the art (the TV show) for the reality.

iii) Getting over-emotional

Plato thought that audiences at plays (he was thinking about theatre, but we can think about Film and TV too) tend to get over-emotional and tend to get upset about things they wouldn't get upset about in real life. A modern equivalent might be romantic comedies, which make audiences cry, even though they know that life isn't really like that.

If you find you disagree with Plato's arguments (and many people do!), then try to find exactly why. Your reasons will perhaps reveal how you feel about art, why you think it's valuable, and what it means to you.