The arts

How can the subjective viewpoint of an individual contribute to knowledge in the arts? On what basis can the merit of a work of art be judged? Is there any point in discussing the arts—should we not simply experience them?

“The arts” is a collective term that encompasses the creative productions of humans and encompasses the visual arts, the performing arts and the literary arts. The arts explore the experience and reality of being human and are an essential element of culture.

The arts could be thought of as creating a bridge between personal knowledge and shared knowledge. Many of them are collaborative. They use emotion as a currency to generate significance at a personal level but reason provides a restrictive framework necessary for the creation of meaning: artworks have their own inner logic. Some regard the arts as having an extra-artistic cognitive function, that they have a message about man’s place in the world which might have social or political implications. For example, there might be a case for supposing that the arts have an important function as a medium for social criticism and transformation. In any case, there is a widespread belief that the arts have a higher purpose to educate by encouraging introspection and sometimes making us think about how we should live our lives.
Knowledge questions

- Are the arts a system of knowledge?
- If artworks are products of the imagination of the artist, how is it that they constitute a system of knowledge?
- What is the relationship between the artist and the artwork?
- Is the aesthetic value of an artwork purely a subjective matter?
- What is the importance of form in artwork?
- Does art enlarge what it is possible to think?
- Is it possible that aesthetic value is at its base something universal—a fact about human beings?

Examples of possible topics of study

- Art as a vehicle for social critique
- Artwork used to affect the beliefs of individuals and groups (for example, advertising, film, literature, folksongs)
- Art forms that are strongly rooted in a particular culture or tradition
- Art and morality (for example, Riefenstahl, Kirkup)