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The Difference Between Art and Design

Art, Design, Web Design



The subject of **what separates art and design** is convoluted and has been debated for a long time. Artists and designers both create visual compositions using a shared knowledge base, but their reasons for doing so are entirely different.

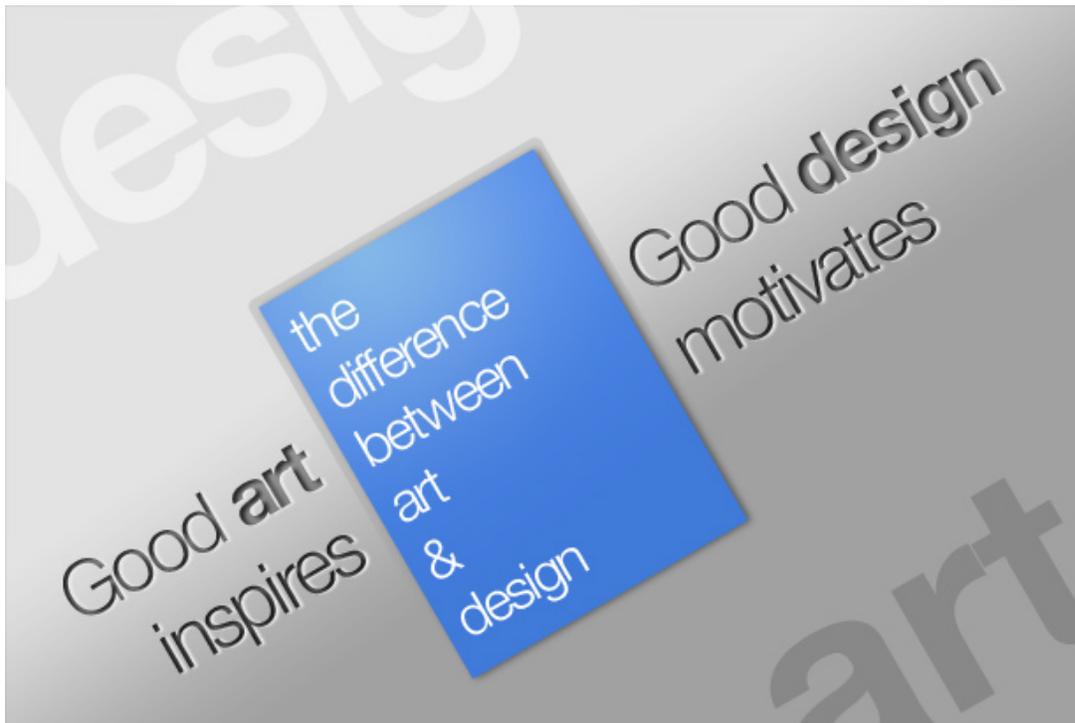
Some designers consider themselves artists, but few artists consider themselves designers.

So what exactly is the difference between art and design? In this post, we'll examine and compare some of **the core principles of each craft**.

This is a subject that people have strong opinions about, and I'm looking forward to reading the various points of view in the comments.

This post isn't a definitive guide, but rather the starting point for a conversation, so let's be open-minded!

Good Art Inspires. Good Design Motivates.



Perhaps the most fundamental difference between art and design that we can all agree on is their purposes.

Typically, the process of creating a work of art starts with nothing, a blank canvas. A work of art stems from a view or opinion or feeling that the artist holds within him or herself.

They create the art to share that feeling with others, to allow the viewers to relate to it, learn from it or be inspired by it.

The most renowned (and successful) works of art today are those that **establish the strongest emotional bond between the artist and their audience.**

By contrast, when a designer sets out to create a new piece, they almost always have a fixed starting point, whether a message, an image, an idea or an action.

The designer's job isn't to invent something new, but to communicate something that already exists, for a purpose.

That purpose is almost always to motivate the audience to do something: buy a product, use a service, visit a location, learn certain information. The most successful designs are those that most effectively communicate their message and motivate their consumers to carry out a task.

Good Art Is Interpreted. Good Design Is Understood.



Another difference between art and design is **how the messages of each are interpreted by their respective audiences.**

Although an artist sets out to convey a viewpoint or emotion, that is not to say that the viewpoint or emotion has a single meaning.

Art connects with people in different ways, because it's interpreted differently.

Da Vinci's Mona Lisa has been interpreted and discussed for many years. Just why is she smiling?

Scientists say it's an illusion created by your peripheral vision. Romantics say she is in love. Skeptics say there is no reason. None of them are wrong.

Design is the very opposite. Many will say that if a design can be "interpreted" at all, it has failed in its purpose.

The fundamental purpose of design is to communicate a message and motivate the viewer to do something.

If your design communicates a message other than the one you intended, and your viewer goes and does something based on that other message, then it has not met its requirement. With a good piece of design, the designer's exact message is understood by the viewer.

Good Art Is a Taste. Good Design Is an Opinion.



Art is judged by opinion, and opinion is governed by taste.

To a forward-thinking modern art enthusiast, Tracey Emin's piece "*My Bed*", which was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1999, may be the height of artistic expression.

To a follower of more traditional art, it may be an insult to the medium. This goes back to our point about interpretation, but taste is more about people's particular likes and dislikes rather than the message they take away from a piece.

Design has an element of taste, but the difference between good and bad design is largely a matter of opinion.

A good piece of design can still be successful without being to your taste. If it accomplishes its objective of being understood and motivates people to do something, then whether it's good or not is a matter of opinion.

We could go on discussing this particular point, but hopefully the underlying principle is clear.

Good Art Is a Talent. Good Design Is a Skill.



What about the creator's abilities?

More often than not, **an artist has natural ability**. Of course, from a young age, the artist grows up drawing, painting, sculpting and developing their abilities.

But the true value of an artist is in the talent (or natural ability) they are born with. There is some overlap here: good artists certainly have skill, but artistic skill without talent is, arguably, worthless.

Design, though, is really a skill that is taught and learned. You do not have to be a great artist to be a great designer; you just have to be able to achieve the objectives of design.

Some of the most respected designers in the world are best known for their minimalist styles. They don't use much color or texture, but they pay great attention to size, positioning, and spacing, all of which can be learned without innate talent.

Good Art Sends a Different Message to Everyone. Good Design Sends the Same Message to Everyone.



This really falls under the second point about interpretation and understanding. But if you take only one thing away from this article, take this point.

Many designers consider themselves artists because they create something visually attractive, something they would be proud for people to hang on a wall and admire.

But **a visual composition intended to accomplish a specific task or communicate a particular message, no matter how beautiful, is not art.** It is a form of communication, simply a window to the message it contains.

Few artists call themselves designers because they seem to better understand the difference. Artists do not create their work to sell a product or promote a service. They create it solely as a means of self-expression, so that it can be viewed and appreciated by others. The message, if we can even call it that, is not a fact but a feeling.

What Do You Think?

Depending on how you look at it, the difference between art and design can be clear-cut or hazy. The two certainly overlap, but **art is more personal, evoking strong reactions in those who connect with the subject.**

I'll leave you with this quote from Craig Elimeliah, who covered this subject in a fantastic article for AIGA, which I discovered during my research for this post.

"I do not claim to be an expert on defining what art is and what it is not, but I do know that if we look at the differences between art and design we will see a very clear line drawn between the two.

An engineer, if given the exact co-ordinates to place different colored pixels in specific places, could render a beautiful website or ad simply by following instructions; most design projects have a detailed set of instructions and most design is based on current trends and influences.

An artist, on the other hand, could never be given any specific instructions in creating a new chaotic and unique masterpiece because his emotions and soul is dictating the movement of his hands and the impulses for the usage of the medium.

No art director is going to yell at an artist for producing something completely unique because that is what makes an artist an artist and not a designer."

Further Reading and Sources

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