

The Aspects of an Art

This article was inspired by “What Makes an Art?” by Paul Leonard Turse, Jr., PhD. in the April, 1972 edition of Black Belt Magazine.

My first book from the 1970s (never published, but from which I extracted several articles that were published in various magazines) was *Holistic Martial Arts*. In this book and later in [*The Road to Mastery*](#), I discuss various aspects of the martial side of *budo* as it relates to the artistic side. Little did I know that in a book entitled *The Psychology of Art* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1938), R. M. Ogden not only made similar points (about art in general, not about *budo*), but also recognized other aspects of an art that we can easily apply to our martial studies.

All martial artists from street fighters to kata contestants, from cage fighters to dojo self-developers recognize the panorama of emphases within martial studies. We train in a set of unique disciplines that, at one extreme, can be ugly and deadly and, on the other extreme, can be beautiful but effete. Martial artists may never agree about where on that spectrum killing skills become an art, but I think Ogden's observations can help us delineate the art aspect when it diverges from the skills of combat.

As a behavioral psychologist, Ogden notes that all behavior seeks an end. A behavior veers toward art when the action of seeking or fulfilling becomes more important than the actual fulfillment, that is, when the means becomes more important than the end. (I would add that for a behavior to be seen as an art, it has to be a conscious attempt to provide an aesthetic experience to an audience even if that audience is only the artist herself.)

Ogden brings in the idea of an audience when he explains that the observer of any art identifies with the artist in that the observer automatically attempts to feel what the artist felt. The audience therefore responds not to an original end goal but to the art form itself. When we see an athletic *wu-shu* performance that we cannot physically emulate, we nevertheless find ourselves drawn into the movements as if we could emulate them. I would note that this is why we thrill at athletic performances and why we thrill more at those that are aesthetically pleasing than those that simply get “the job done”. It also explains why so many of us cannot relate to modern abstract art: often the form is so removed from our experience that we cannot see a form at all let alone the end goal that the art was initially aiming toward.

Another way of saying this is that if we cannot empathize with the artist's labors or her resulting form, we will not see it as art. In a related concept, Ogden suggests that art becomes beautiful when the spectator sees it as a completed form—a completed *form*, not an accomplished end goal. The assumption here is that a form is an attempt to seek perfection and although the form can be finished (e.g. displayed in a museum), it is still subject to being

perfected. Ask any artist how difficult it is to stop creating the work that always seeks to be just a little bit better.

An art suggests an end but can offer only an attempt at a form that may achieve that end.
The artistic form may be displayed but is always improvable, whereas the martial seeks an end and either fails or succeeds at achieving it.

As soon as the street fighter martial artist reflects on how he could have more efficiently dispatched his antagonist, he is veering toward art. As soon as the kata contestant investigates how her movements can be used for actual self-defense, she is veering toward the martial.