

WHAT IS FINE ART?

HONORS THESIS

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by

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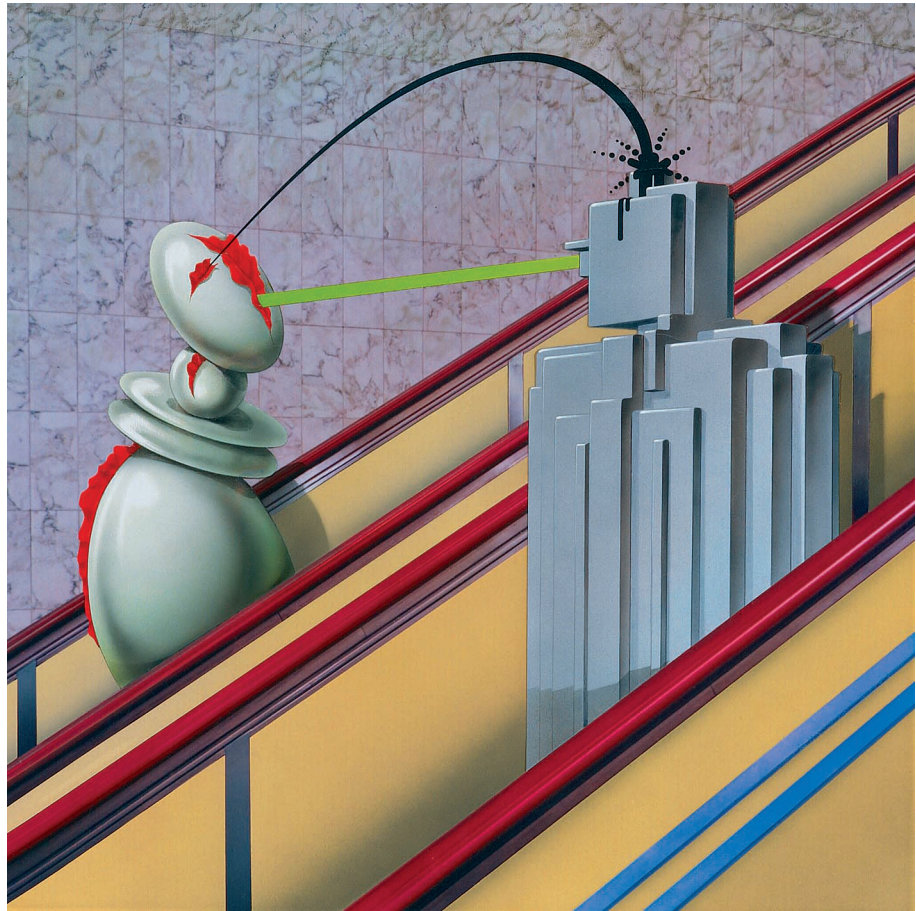
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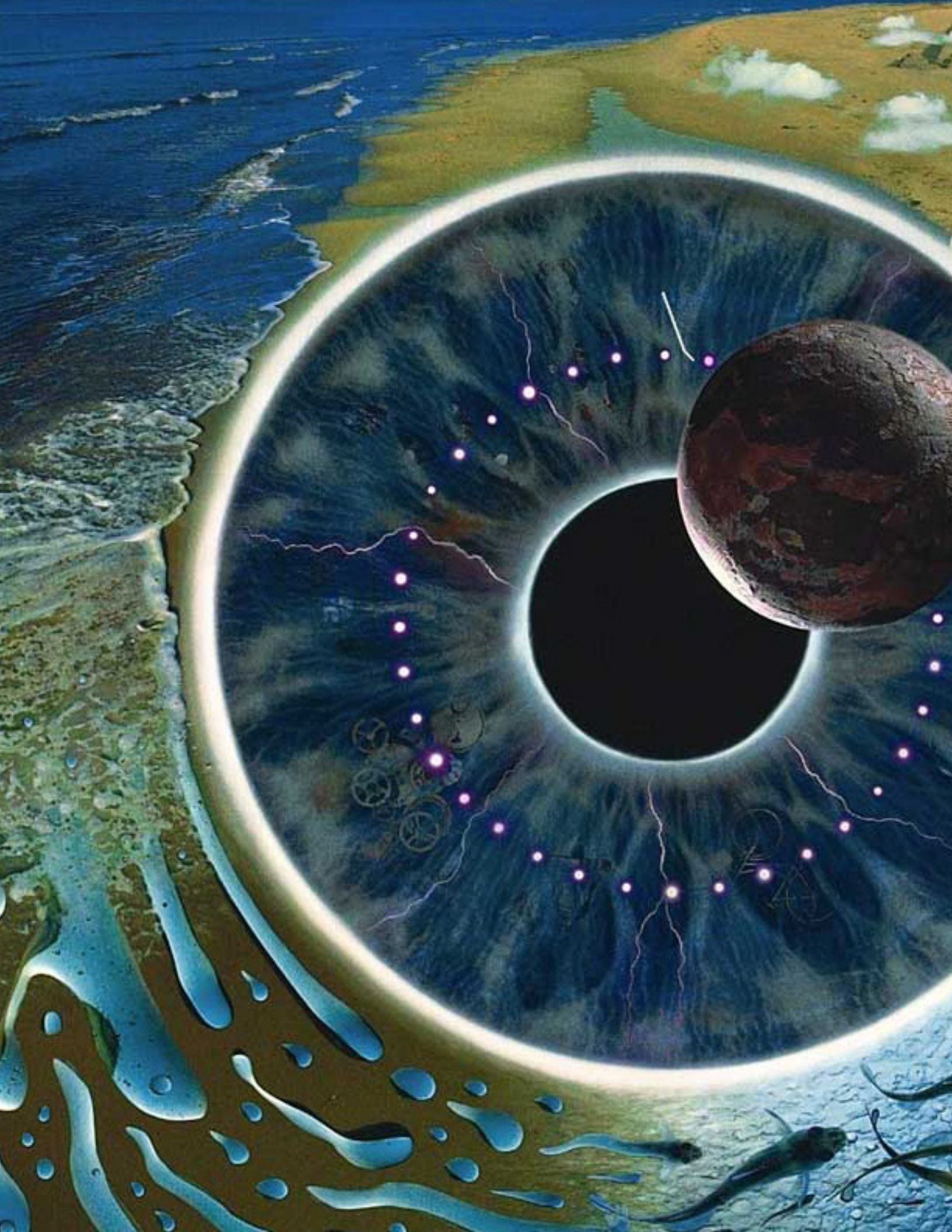
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# WHAT IS FINE ART?

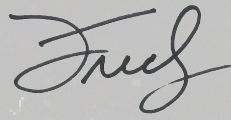
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Forward by Fred Childers

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fred", with a stylized, cursive script.

*To my wife and best friend, I cant do these things  
without you.*

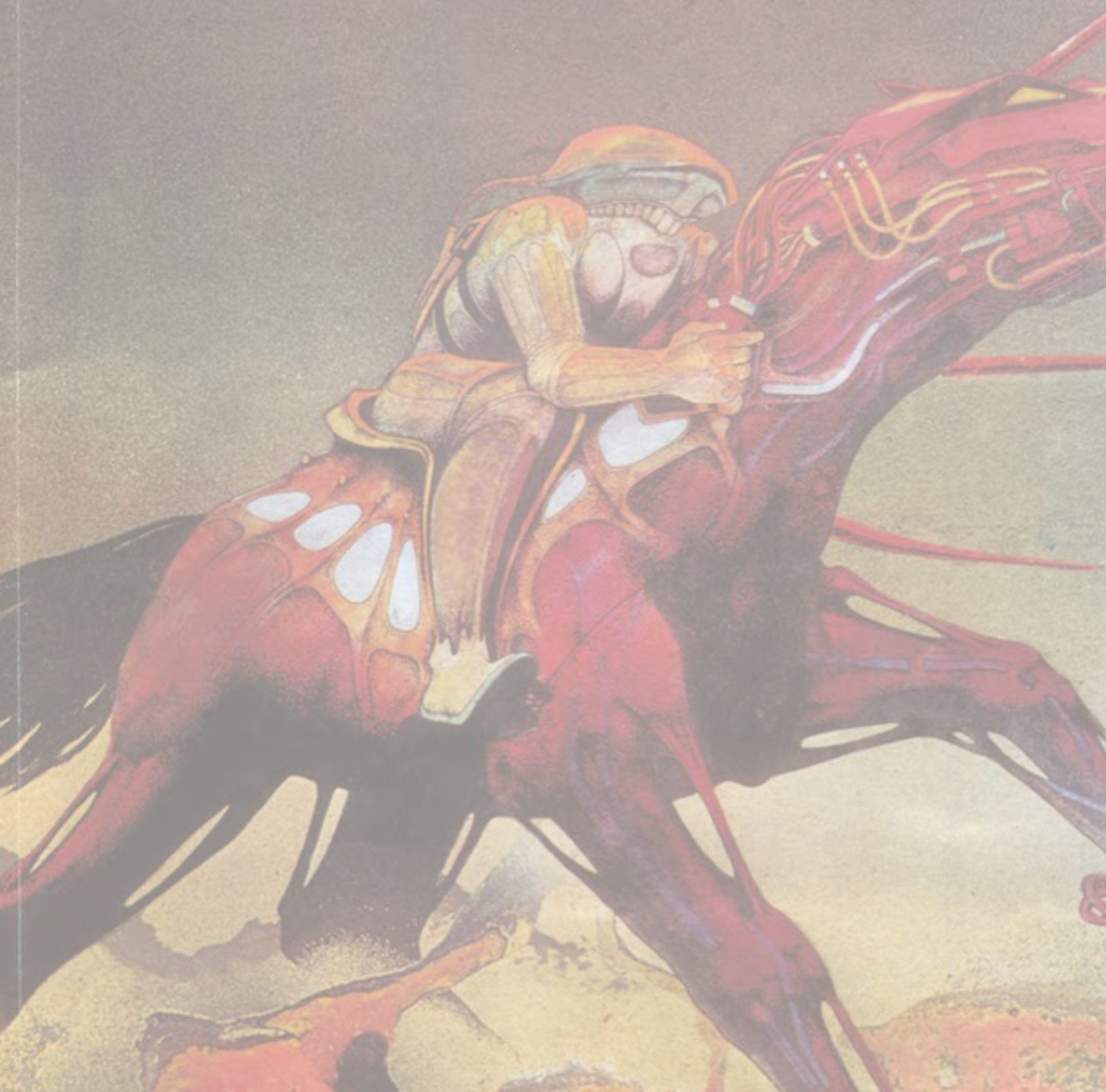


# FORWARD

I have artist's that I love, some of them are in the lexicon of fine artist and some are not. I have wondered why this is, as the paths leading to the arts are in general the same and the mediums they use common. Commercial success particularly in popular culture seems to cause an exclusion from the genre of fine art. This is not always the outcome; many compete and succeed in both commercial and fine art worlds. Andy Warhol, a designer, is now a staple of fine art collections as well as the Dada artist (anti-artist) Hannah Hoch. The impressionist had to fight The 40 Immortals for recognition and legitimacy, artist like Picasso, Monet, Manet, the Bauhaus, Van Gogh, and Marcel Duchamp, all were artist trying to go a new way, trying new techniques or ways to interpret the world. Until WWII the French Academy held considerable sway, but almost a century ago the Academy lost relevance as artist, fled Europe ahead of the NAZI party. The question that I want to address is "what is fine art and who decides", or bestows that status today? To answer this question requires an exploration of the idea of "Art" and then the idea of "Fine art".





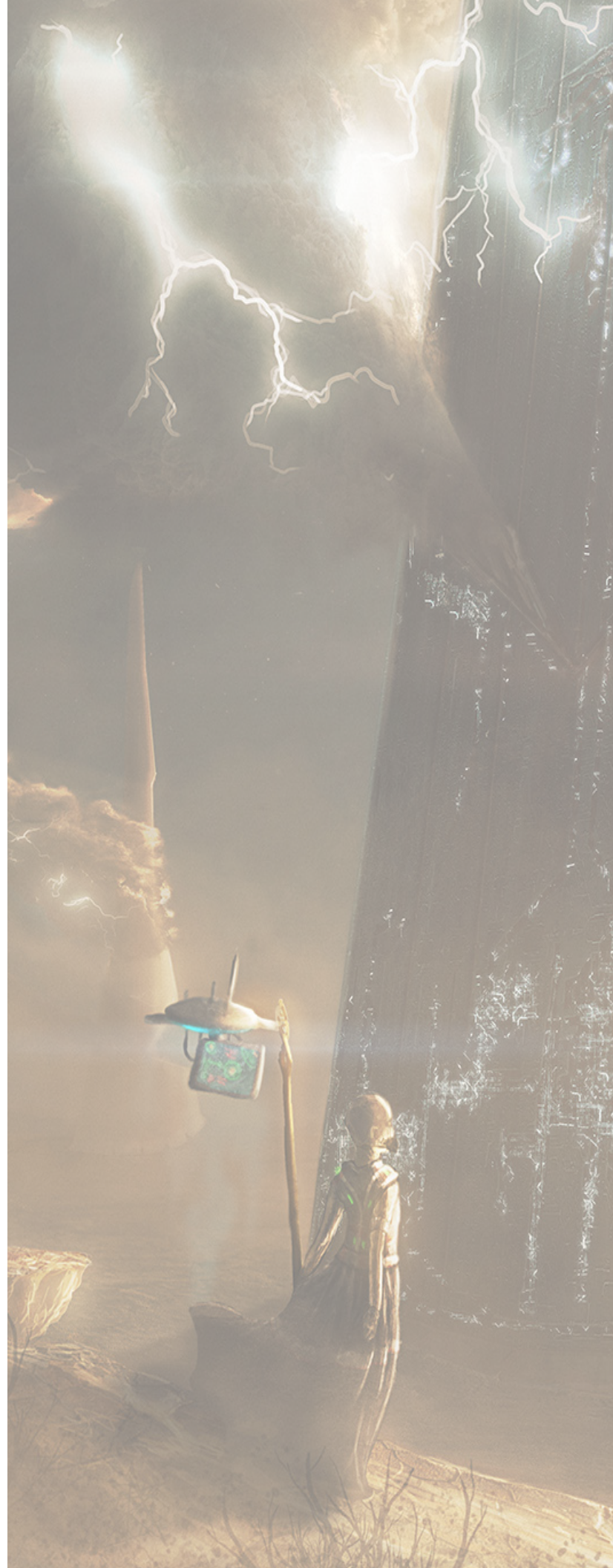




THERE IS NO WORD FOR ART  
IN GREEK

*Then Moses said to the people of Israel “see the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge and with all craftsmanship. Exodus 35:30*

The fine art world, or more specifically, the patron of the fine art world in general, will look at the canon of fine art and include painting, sculpture, poetry, music, theatre and opera into a broad net of fine art. The net will extend generally back to Greece about 500 BC. Artwork prior to that is defined differently, as more decorative and informational. As the quote above demonstrates, what we today call art, three thousand years ago was considered craftsmanship. The term art and artist didn't exist. No concept in any culture existed to describe the creative process and those that create to an equivalent of Art and Artist today. The Jewish nation used the skill of their greatest craftsman to decorate the tabernacle and later the temple of David. This skill was thought to be divine in nature, as the book of Exodus described the skill and craftsmanship. During this same historical period, Persepolis was decorated beautifully in a way to tell the history of Persian dominance and was part of the tools used to intimidate the conquered nations. The craft was propaganda. Tombs in Egypt were engraved and painted with instructions to enter the realm of the dead, or told historical tales of the Pharaoh and his conquest or successes. Egypt and early cultures used the craftsman to tell stories, pass down the myths of the culture, and teach religious and spiritual lessons. The Greeks had no word for art. They had the word “techne”, or craft: to make or imitate from nature. But art has no equivalent word in Greek. The Romans had the word “ars” its meaning is essentially the same as the Greek “techne”. “Techne” or “ars” included skills such as carpentry, shoe making, poetry, and medicine. The two words referred more to the ability to make or perform. Hippocrates and Cicero distinguished productive arts, such as shipbuilding or sculpture, where the outcome was more or less certain, from medicine or rhetoric. Aristotle in the Nicomache-



an Ethics defined productive *techne* (craft) as “the trained ability of making something under the guidance of rational thought”. For the most part Greeks defined a wider sense of *techne* as *metis*: the cunning intelligence. The Greeks did not consider imagination, originality, and autonomy as vital to the artisan or craftsman. The Greeks demonstrated a strong aristocratic prejudice against all manual production; no matter how inspired or genius the creation was. The official adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire in the 4th century locked art into the ideas of “instruct and please” and “use and delight”. That is, to have a purpose, art did not exist merely to be appreciated but to teach, tell and reinforce the narrative of the church and the church sponsored government.

In the medieval period the terms *artista*, one who studied the liberal arts, and *artifex*, producer of performance or a craftsman of mechanical methods, were the usual terms for what today would be the academic and the artist. Craftsman belonged in many cases to guilds, such as the Druggist Guild; because painters ground their own pigment. The architects belonged to the Masonry Guild and sculptors to the Goldsmiths Guild. Saint Bonaventure, (Giovanni di Fidanza, seventh Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, he was also a Cardinal Bishop of Albano), described the artificer as a maker not a creator.

“God creates nature out of nothing, nature in turn brings potential being to actuality, the artificer simply modifies what nature has made actual”.

Western civilization started to develop the idea of art and fine art from 1350 to 1600 during the renaissance. Humanist philosophy added the *studia humanitatis* to the Liberal arts trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic and to the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. The *studia humanitatis* contained grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. This change did, in no way, create an equivalent to the terms “art” or “fine art” as we know it today. The term artisan had formed in the early renaissance to describe gifted craftsman. Those that had impeccable skill and attention to detail were

artisans. A skilled and talented artisan could reach a semi autonomous state of employment, though this was not the norm. There is still no equivalent to the modern artist or musician during the renaissance. Most musicians during the renaissance remained composer/players (songwriter/singers) turning out functional pieces on schedule for their employers; freely recycling parts of their own pieces and borrowing from others. Through history the craftsman and artisan work to create what the wealthy or ruling class required of them, and paid them, or supported them as part of the household or court. During the span from the 15th century to the 16th century painting and music became more nuanced. That is while works were correct in composition and structure at the beginning of the renaissance, by 1600, grace and beauty were mature, as well in the visual, poetic, and musical arts. The idea of “judgment of sense”, or the “proto-aesthetic” was present in writings by Alberti in the 15th century or Lamazzo at the end of the 16th century. The idea of detached aesthetic of modern art appreciation had yet to develop before the 17th century.

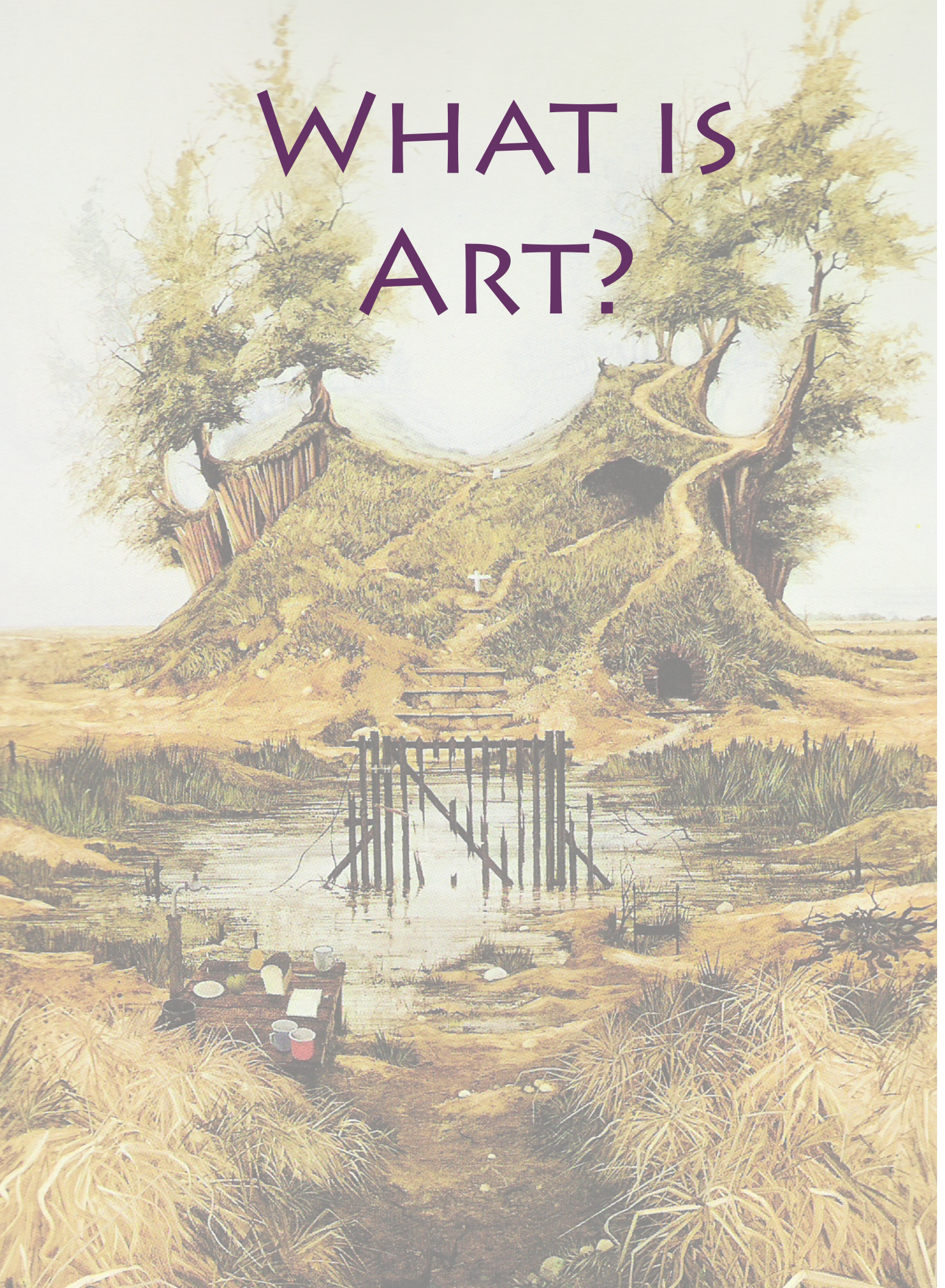
In the 17th century while most artist, are still bound to patrons or shops, the French monarchy established the Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1648. The academy was founded during a squabble between the “Master Painters and Sculptors of Paris”, and the “Painters protected by the King”, and was a step in the separation of artisan/artist from craftsman. The academy portrayed the academy painters and sculptures as defending “two arts which ignorance has almost confused with lesser professions”. At this point I think the art of promoting painting and sculpture, rather than the paintings and sculptures themselves is key in the creation of the academy, especially the art of The 40 Immortals as the members were called. As in all modern branding, there is self-promotion: selling academy art and artist as an exclusive, and promotion to enhance the value of academy painters and sculptures. This would also de-value sculptures and painters who are not academy members or sanctioned by the Academy, and, by extension the King of France.

The general agreement among educated classes, that artisans/artist and craftsman merely copied what nature, and God/gods had created, and that man did not create anything. The idea that man merely modified what is there, or exposed it (making it actual), still persisted at the end of the 17th century. The struggling independent genius artist, in history, is a construct of the Academie Royale and it's thinking during and after the 18th century. The Academie Royale raised the status of the painter and sculpture to an elevated plain of creation, of genius, and away from the idea of "craftsman – exposer" and "maker of things actual". Some found this heresy, but secularism was gaining a foothold in western culture as it moved away from the totalitarian model of the church as arbiter of what is permitted to be made, and the standards that the artisan/craftsman were allowed to produce. Many art movements started and spread from France over the next 4 centuries. Many of them were not considered "art" or "fine art" as they appeared; the French Academy's successful marketing of itself, as the arbiter of "art" and "artist" had a lot to say about what was, or was not "art" through the first part of the 20th century. The Academy's usual pattern was to declare the new movement "not art", disparage the movement, and then over time as the movement gained support among the membership, become accepted, and be added to the lexicon of "Fine Art".

The philosophy of the process of becoming "art" and "fine art" has been debated among western philosophers extensively since the 18th century, but not outside of Western Europe. The idea of "fine art" had yet to spread to the east by the time of the 19th century and the international expositions. Japan under the Meiji government in 1872, prepared to exhibit in the 1873 international exhibit, and they found the western academic distinctions of "art" and "fine art" a political and diplomatic issue. Japan, since 1868, had been on an urgent mission to modernize all facets of Japanese culture and society, to avoid the fate of China as it was carved up into exclusion zones under the Unequal Treaties of the 1850's. Japan formed an "Exhibition Bureau" as work began to participate in the exhibition and being exposed to the term "fine art"

at an official level, early in the process found they did not have a term in their own language for "Fine Art," specifically in specifications for Group 22 of the rules for categorization and exhibition. Because of confusing translations from German, to English, and then Japanese, the Japanese translated the specifications to read "applied arts for museums". The Japanese, not having a word for fine art concocted the word "bijutsu," using the characters in Japanese language for beauty and technique. Prior to the word bijutsu, the Japanese used the term "gigei," which emphasizes the performance of skill, materials and techniques perfected over centuries or generations. Gigei like the Greek techne, or the Roman ars, is a term of craftsmanship, and opposed to the all-inclusive ideas of 21st century "fine art". In 1890 the Japanese created the term "Kogei" for decorative art. The two new terms for art divided fine art "bijutsu", and decorative art "Kogei," in the Japanese language. The terms and work of the Japanese, in regards to attempting to conform to western art cultures "fine art" and "decorative art" in the international exhibitions, did not solve the problem that they had. Japanese art is by nature a decorative art form, and was not exhibited with European fine art at the exhibitions, Although because of its popularity among influential French artist, specifically Claude Monet, some pieces were displayed in the fine art group in the International Exhibition of 1878.

# WHAT IS ART?



# ART:

George Dickie in “Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis” defines art as (1) an artifact and (2) a set of aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the art world).

The question that Dickie is attempting to answer is “what is art.” Countless conversations are had among artist and layman about that question and to answer the question “what is Fine Art” some form of understanding of what “art,” is or isn’t, is necessary. It would be simple to appropriate Justice Potter Stewart’s opinion on pornography in *Jacobellis vs. Ohio* 1964 and say regarding art, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it,” and be done with the question, but the question is not that easy. In the early 21st century, the question of art is more abstract and ambiguous than at any other time. For the Society of Independent Artist exhibition in 1917, Marcel Duchamp bought a urinal and entered it into the show. The committee rejected, it despite saying they would accept all entries if the fee was paid. It was his intent to question, “what is art” in the established art scene. That question did not stay confined to the context in which it was asked, and artist and the public have been arguing ever since.

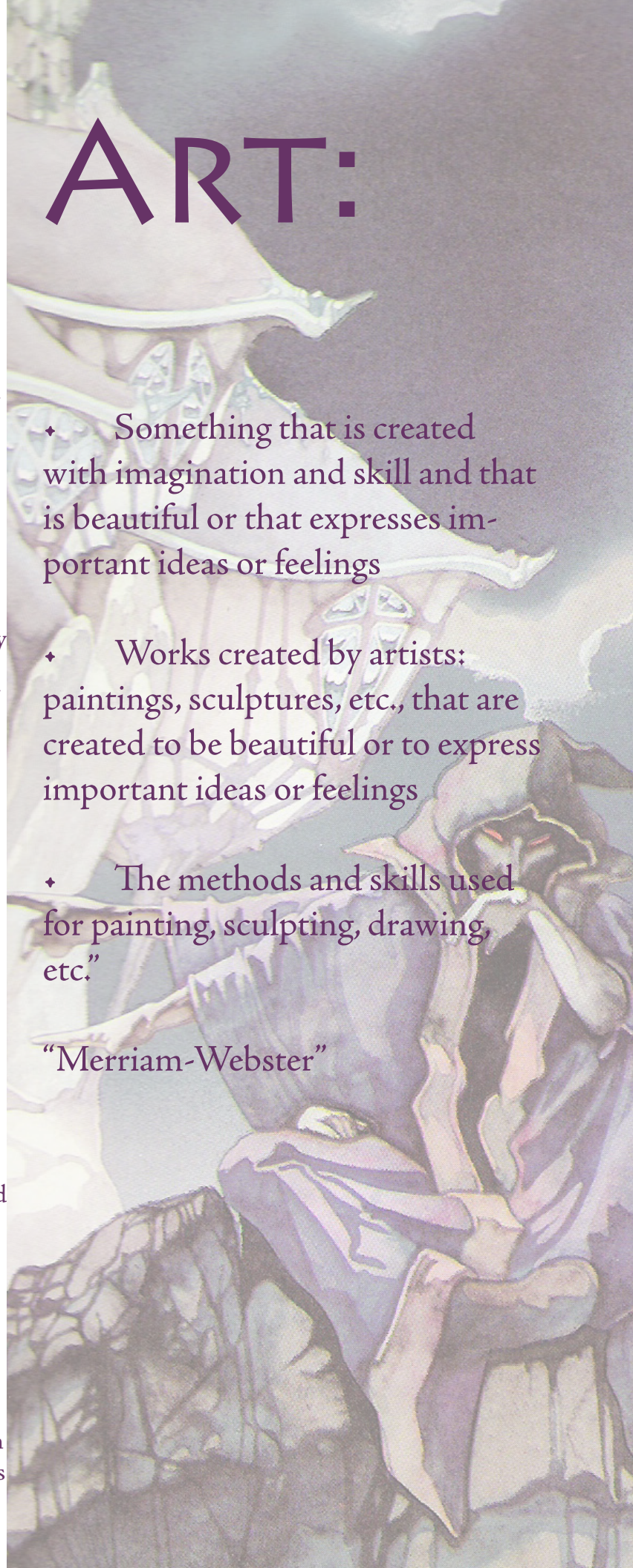
It is my own opinion that art should contain skill and craft. I am, by nature, a craftsman. I understand the idea that art is a state of mind, however I do not always agree that the art state of mind includes some manifestations of endeavor. I think many artist, myself among them, are torn by the need to show skill, but want to be open to a broader definition of art, and the practice of it. Art today makes statements, takes political stands, shapes minds to philosophies, and carries messages. Art and advertising cross-pollinate, and, at times are blurred by message and the outlook of the art community at any given point in history. Artist, in general, are ideological and emotional: the art many times leans to one side or another of the political spectrum, depending on the level of emotion for the artist involved. But art, as defined in Webster’s

- ♦ Something that is created with imagination and skill and that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings

- ♦ Works created by artists: paintings, sculptures, etc., that are created to be beautiful or to express important ideas or feelings

- ♦ The methods and skills used for painting, sculpting, drawing, etc.”

“Merriam-Webster”



dictionary, is simplistic and not at all helpful in defining art. Art is what people decide it is, "fine art" more so. As people decide that a genre or movement is "art" or "fine art", many modern artists have tried to live outside of either term, "anti-art" if you will, an escape from the terms and conditions within art worlds. This attempt is generally a failing attempt: as movements progress, the anti-art becomes "Art" and over time "Fine Art" as opinion and taste change, and then dictate. Dada, impressionism, shock art, lowbrow, mousse all found their way into collections of "fine art." The "anti-art" of today will be tomorrow's "fine art." It's an inevitable transition among art worlds, where art style and genre trickle up, rather than down, snubbed today, and appreciated tomorrow.









WHAT IS FINE  
ART?

HR Giger

Generally "Fine Art" is defined in the populates mind as the art in the Museums. Returning to George Dickie and his analysis of art, we can extend Dickie's definition further and say then, that a subgroup of persons acting on behalf of the art world, or one art world of many art world's, has decided that certain works, or style of work is "Fine Art." A urinal bought in 1917 on the way to the exposition is now "Fine Art". Going further if the urinal is now "fine art" can a gold painted turd be "fine art"? According to Harlan Levy in MODART, no, its mousse, or rather the word mousse standing in for shit, or mousse art. But I know artist, and art professors, that would declare gold painted feces "art" and "fine art", becoming Dickie's authorized representatives. "Art" and "Fine art" classification becomes debatable, and therefore political in nature. An artist may not intend the "art" or work to be "Fine Art" or to conform to any art world, or its constituent's idea of art or fine art. The gold plated turd is a comment about the art world or the world in general, but when the art world defines the art, to suit its taste and idea of status, the artist has lost control of the creation and the statement. All modern movements that attempted to separate themselves from the traditional art world eventually find themselves compromised, and added to the lexicon of "fine art". Further the term "Fine Art" is a capitalist term, an advertisement if you will, of a quality and mind set, in the trading and selling of artwork. To bestow the term "Fine Art" on a piece or work, determines that the work is worth more, in a monetary way, than a work not awarded the status of "fine art". This bestowal of "Fine Art-ness", in many cases is a hopeful thing for some artist, as they "have hope" that the work will bring fame and fiscal reward. For other artist, being declared "Fine Art" is a curse, a sign that an artist has sold out, or become creatively and politically compromised in relation to the political statement they hoped to make. Being awarded "Fine Art-ness", in an art world, is purely arbitrary and, again, political depending on the art world an artist is considered part of. Because of the way art world's work, and, in particular, if relying on Dickie's analysis, then "Fine Art" has a life of its own, and is un-definable in its current state. Paul





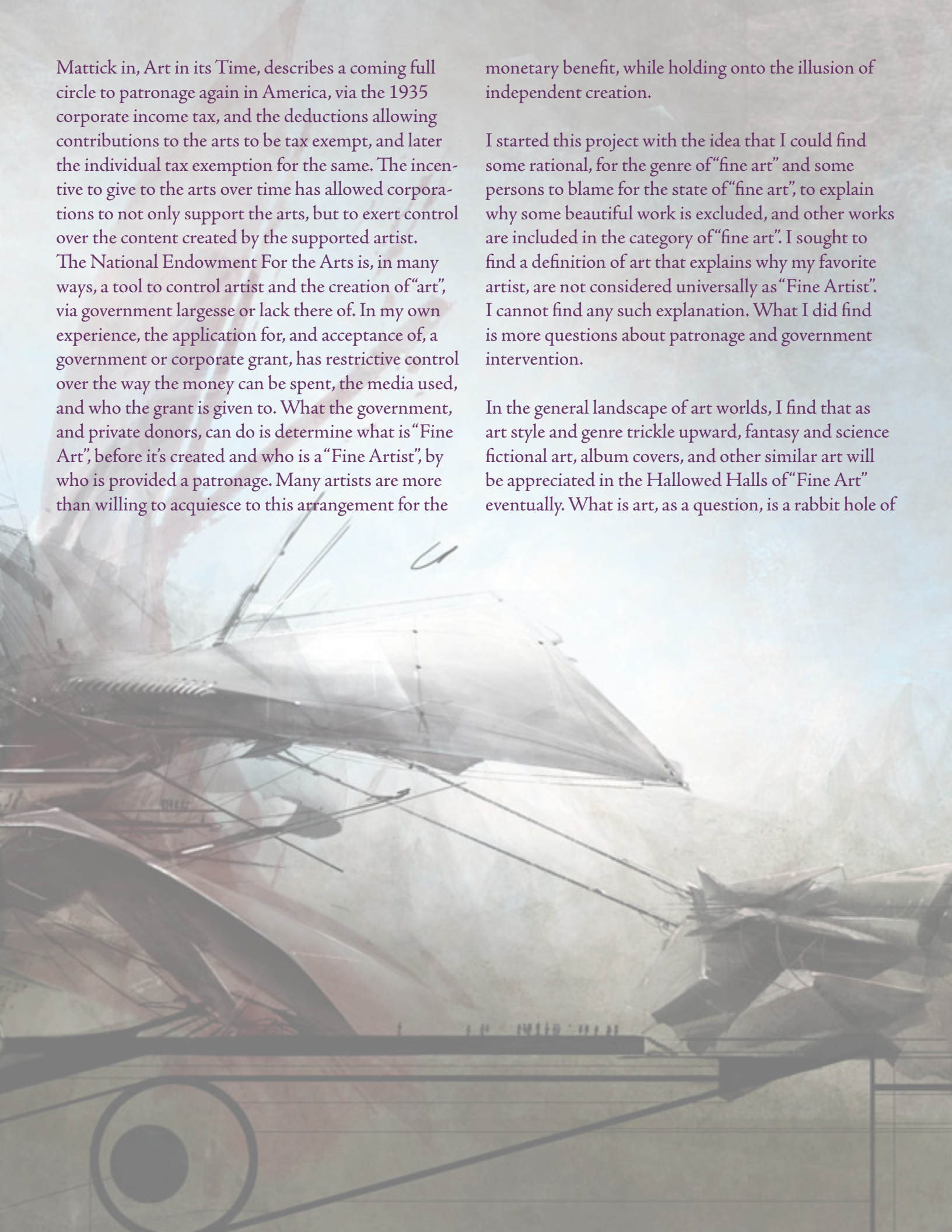
Mattick in, *Art in its Time*, describes a coming full circle to patronage again in America, via the 1935 corporate income tax, and the deductions allowing contributions to the arts to be tax exempt, and later the individual tax exemption for the same. The incentive to give to the arts over time has allowed corporations to not only support the arts, but to exert control over the content created by the supported artist.

The National Endowment For the Arts is, in many ways, a tool to control artist and the creation of "art", via government largesse or lack there of. In my own experience, the application for, and acceptance of, a government or corporate grant, has restrictive control over the way the money can be spent, the media used, and who the grant is given to. What the government, and private donors, can do is determine what is "Fine Art", before it's created and who is a "Fine Artist", by who is provided a patronage. Many artists are more than willing to acquiesce to this arrangement for the

monetary benefit, while holding onto the illusion of independent creation.

I started this project with the idea that I could find some rational, for the genre of "fine art" and some persons to blame for the state of "fine art", to explain why some beautiful work is excluded, and other works are included in the category of "fine art". I sought to find a definition of art that explains why my favorite artist, are not considered universally as "Fine Artist". I cannot find any such explanation. What I did find is more questions about patronage and government intervention.

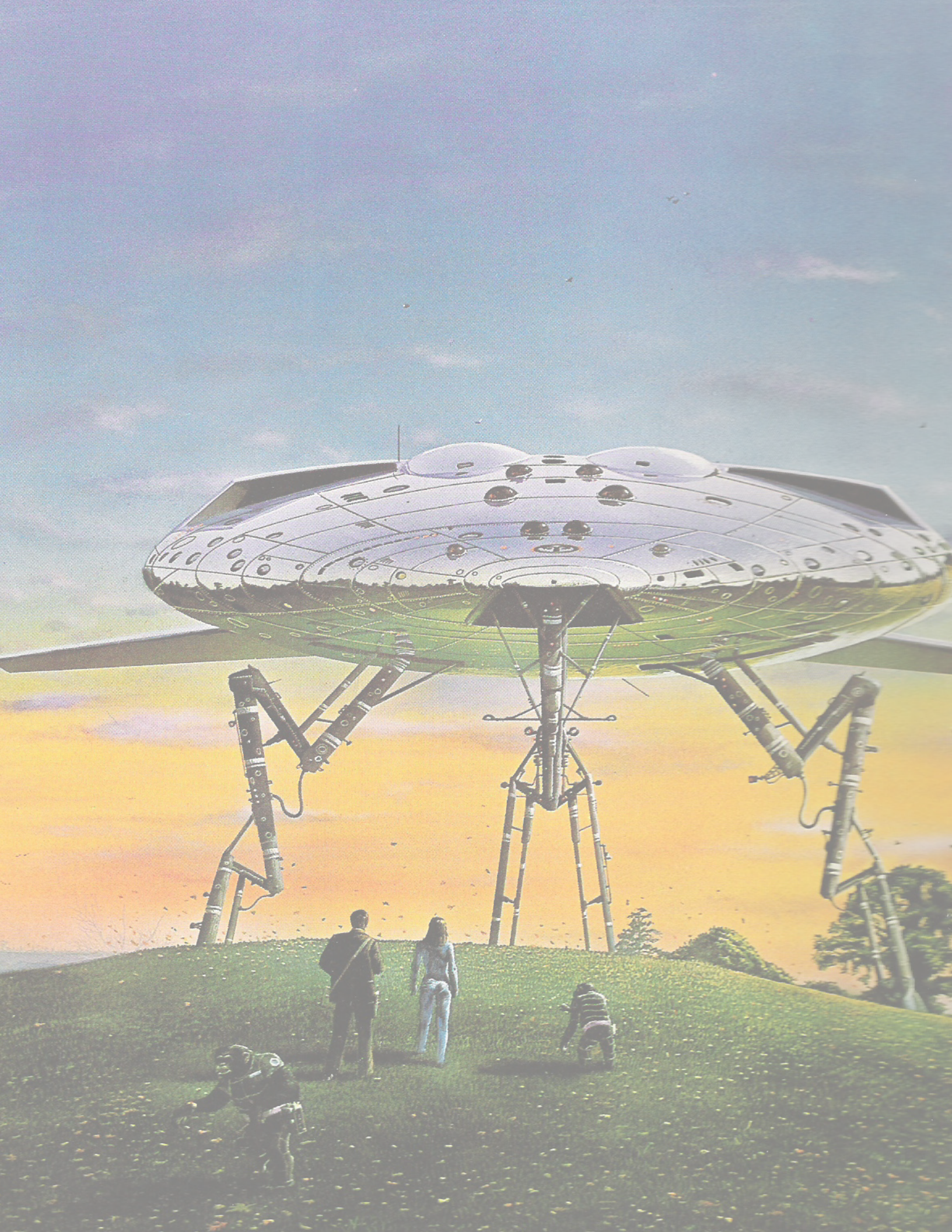
In the general landscape of art worlds, I find that as art style and genre trickle upward, fantasy and science fictional art, album covers, and other similar art will be appreciated in the Hallowed Halls of "Fine Art" eventually. What is art, as a question, is a rabbit hole of



art and aesthetic philosophy that, in short, allows anyone with any tenuous claim, to belonging to an art world, to declare any thing art and then to promote it to “Fine Art”. The political landscape of the art world, and the patron, though will determine who gets to benefit from such a claim to “Fine Art”. There is no answer to the question “what is art and what is fine about it” in a philosophical sense. The art community, and its sub-communities, government and influential patrons, determine “art” and “fine art”. Sometimes the greater populace agrees, and sometimes disagrees: agreement and disagreement are also arbitrary, and dependent on the audience and setting in which the art is promoted or denigrated. Even co-opting the statement, “they know it when they see it”, is corrupted by patronage for personal, corporate, or governmental entities, and separates art into classes for common and elite patrons, or admirers of art worlds.

I find the idea of “Fine Art” as a genre, or an artificial characterization of art or its value hollow. The accepted category of fine art only works in relation to an economic system, intended to elevate and enhance value to a buying public. Many things are considered “fine art” that, more appropriately could be categorized another way. Art, as an idea, at the beginning of this century, is in many ways returning to the idea of craft and skill, of knowledge and apprenticeship, a cycle in contrast to an ever faster paced world and its technological leaps and bounds. The idea that art can be slow, that it can take skill and knowledge and be an imperfect one of a kind creation, brings the artist back to a manageable level of control and skill sets. Art that does connect with physical means and physical media (things that are tangible when the electricity goes off) are disconnected from the mad pace of the digital world, harder to characterize day by day. The art in the many art world’s, is mankind’s escape from the grind of technology, and mans method of retaining humanity in an inhuman world. Art makes us human and connects us with our spiritual selves; art saves us from the machine of modern life. We, the public, decide what is art and what is Fine about it.





# ILLUSTRATIONS

ROGER DEAN

Palidin  
Dragon  
Green Slade Sea  
Unknown

FRANK FRAZETTA

Phantom Warrior

COLLIN HAY

The embedding

HR GIGER

Birth Machine

CHRIS FOSS

Slan

STORM THORGERSON/AUBREY  
POWELL

Technical Ecstasy

Pulse

TIM WHITE

Autumn Meeting

MELVYN GRANT

Space Vikings

UNKNOWN

Use is covered by fair use in education

Tank  
Ship





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