# The Art of Discernment

In virtually all universities, general education courses are required as part of a degree program. You will gain much from studying a wide variety of subjects. Not only will you broaden your basic knowledge, but you will also increase your critical thinking skills. The humanities speak to the heart, men’s aspirations for the good and the beautiful.

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As you began your formal education at Brigham Young University-Idaho, there were probably many questions running through your mind concerning the classes you took. In virtually all universities, general education courses are required as part of a degree program. You will gain much from studying a wide variety of subjects. Not only will you broaden your basic knowledge, but you will also increase your critical thinking skills and hone your academic prowess.

### The Why

We all use a number of skills learned in general education courses. Writing is important to people in every profession. We use quantitative reasoning in many settings, from the kitchen to the business ledger. The US Constitution and the tradition of the rule of law have had a tremendous influence on nations well beyond the borders of the United States. In our technology-driven world, we are bombarded with science and pseudo-science; we need to be able to tell them apart. As travel and communication have become easier, an understanding of other cultures can make us better equipped to deal with the people we meet in business, church, or on the street. But why the arts? Why would the Church Board of Education mandate that sacred tithing funds be used to offer classes for every BYUI student in the fine arts?

Consider this statement from the 19th century scholar John Ruskin: “Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last.”

In relation to the idea of embracing art as something that can edify your life, consider the following statements:

“No one can feast his or her eyes on the art of Michelangelo and not see the hand of God. Michelangelo himself knew it, as he expressed in this statement: ‘The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection’” (M. Russell Ballard, “Filling the World with Goodness and Truth,” [Ensign](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1996/07/filling-the-world-with-goodness-and-truth?lang=eng)).

“In the first place, some wise being organized my system, and gave me my capacity, put into my heart and brain something that delights, charms, and fills me with rapture at the sound of sweet music. I did not put it there; it was some other being. As one of the modern writers has said, ‘Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.’ It has been proved that sweet music will actually tame the most malicious and venomous beasts, even when they have been stirred up to violent wrath, and make them docile and harmless as lambs. Who gave the lower animals a love for those sweet sounds, which with magic power fill the air with harmony, and cheer and comfort the hearts of men, and so wonderfully affect the brute creation? It was the Lord, our heavenly Father, who gave the capacity to enjoy these sounds, and which we ought to do in His name, and to His glory. But the greater portion of the sectarian world consider it sacrilege to give way to any such pleasure as even to listen to sweet music, much more to dance to its delightful strains. This is another short sermon” (Brigham Young, Delivered in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, April 9, 1852).

In our world, we are bombarded with information—much of it in the form of music and visual images. How can we sort through this sea of information? What are these enduring “remarkable qualities” contained in the humanities that President Hinckley mentions? We will be exploring these questions and concepts throughout this course.

[Doctrine and Covenants 123:12](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/123?lang=eng), says, “For there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it.”

While Doctrine and Covenants 123:12 directly applies to the teachings of the restored gospel, it also has a great deal of merit when considering the virtuous, lovely, of good report, and praiseworthy ([Article of Faith #13](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp/a-of-f/1?lang=eng)). We would have more of these qualities in our lives if we knew where to find it.

There are two ways of reacting to the arts: the heart and the mind. In this chapter, we will explore how the heart and the mind react to the arts so that we can have more of the qualities in our lives described in the Article of Faith 13.

### Two Ways of Reaction to the Arts: The Heart and the Mind

In ancient Greece, philosophers were struck by the dual nature of humans. At times, people can be rational, analytical, thoughtful creatures. At other times, they can be so ruled by their emotions that rationality seems to be wholly cast aside. The Greeks described both aspects of the human condition by ascribing them to two of their deities: Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo was the god of truth, lyric poetry, and the sun. He represented the rational, logical aspects of humanity. Dionysus, by contrast, was the god of wine and fertility. He ran around with satyrs (half-man, half-goat creatures—another duality). He represented the emotional, irrational nature of human beings. Throughout the centuries people have sought to explain and discuss this duality. It has been loosely referred to as classical (Apollo) and romantic (Dionysus), as intellectual and emotional, and as the head and the heart. For our purposes, we will continually make reference to the Apollo and Dionysus dichotomy.

Apollo and Dionysus

Image from [nypl.getarchive.net](https://nypl.getarchive.net/media/apollo-and-dionysus-2a33ec) CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain

As humans, we are a bundle of contradictions. That’s why we simultaneously want to get good grades and don’t want to study hard. We want to be married in the temple yet find ourselves attracted to the bad boys or girls. We all have ideals that we ardently believe in but don’t live up to, and often the ideals themselves are contradictory—we want to have a successful career and be a model parent at the same time. The ancient Greeks embraced these contradictions and expressed them in the worship of a god or goddess that best embodied a particular emotion or viewpoint, like in the case of Apollo (the classical and logical side) and Dionysus (the romantic and emotional side).

This is perhaps best illustrated in two different religious cults that were both important in ancient Greek worship, the cults of Apollo and Dionysus. Worshippers of Apollo wrote and performed poetry and music that was logical, balanced, orderly, and clear. Apollonian music appealed more to the intellect than to the emotions. Musicians sang hymns to Apollo and accompanied them on the lyre (a plucked, stringed instrument like a small harp). It was ideal for meditative solitude, the perfect accompaniment to an afternoon of careful and quiet reasoning.

In contrast, Dionysus was the god of wine, and by extension, the god of unbridled emotion and wild revelry. Worshippers of Dionysus sang and danced to music that was loud and rhythmical. Instead of a single lyricist singing a quiet, simple, meditative tune, Dionysian festivals featured a full chorus chanting all the words together, dancing and acting out the drama, all accompanied by a noisy, nasal, double-reed instrument called the aulos, which was not a particularly beautiful instrument, but one that could be heard over the din of the Dionysiacs. The ultimate form of worship for Dionysus was the tragedy, a play that displayed men and women in the grip of passion, singing and acting and dancing in a great communal celebration of man’s humanity. Instead of reason, tragedy was all about emotion—the emotions of the characters in the tragedy and the emotions the audience feels as they behold it.

While some art is obviously aimed at emotions, and other art is clearly more analytical, it is safe to say that both logical and emotional elements exist in all works of art. Some works of art achieve their quality largely through excellence in the structural details. Others, such as an Indian raag or raga, offer a melodic framework that evokes richness and mystery, drawing on more subtle emotional elements. In fact, the word raag is said to have been derived from the Sanskrit word rang, which means color in many Indian languages. So we can say a raag is a work that colors the mind with a particular emotion. In the end, although both of these kinds of art feature structure and carry emotional appeal, in nearly every work of art either the logical or the emotional aspect prevails. The greatest works, like a Bach fugue or an Indian raag, have the capacity to affect us logically and emotionally. Our pleasure is enhanced by understanding both the emotional and intellectual elements of the works we encounter. We’ll be able to analyze the logical and emotional elements of various art forms.

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### Considering Art Forms

In our exploration of the arts, we’ll be focusing on several art forms: painting, sculpture, music, literature, and cinema. Of course, there are other mediums as well, but examining these will give us adequate skills to analyze others as well.

Certain art forms, like music or literature, could be considered time art. These works of art don’t occupy a physical space such as time, as they have a definite temporal beginning, middle, and end. For example, the Book of Mormon begins, “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents” marks the beginning while the end is marked by Moroni’s: “And now I bid you farewell, I soon go to rest in the paradise of God, until my spirit and body shall again reunite, and I am brought forth triumphant through the air, to meet you before the pleasing bar of the great Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead. Amen.” As a work of art moves along through time, we might consider if there are repeating patterns, or if the highs and lows of the artwork are temporally spaced in what seems to us a natural way.

Some forms of art (painting, sculpture, architecture) could be considered space art. In other words, these works occupy physical space and are experienced, or (received, and consumed,) in a spatial order: top to bottom, back to front, and so on. The issue of time doesn’t come into the evaluation of space art as it does with time art. From a time standpoint, we can’t answer these questions about a painting: Where is the beginning? What about the middle? Where does it end? How long will it take to experience the work? Statues exist in space more than in time just as novels exist in time more than in space.

There are some art forms that combine their existence in both time and space. A play exists in physical space: on a stage, yet a play clearly has a delineated temporal beginning, middle, and end. Consider, for example, the transformation that takes place when a work of art moves from time to space. If you read William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, you have experienced the art in time. Consider what happens when the play is staged or filmed. Act 1 Scene 1 of the play is the beginning, but now we are also going to consider spatial elements. What kind of set is created? How do the actors move? Does the spatial arrangement of the characters contribute to an atmosphere of tension and unease? These elements allow us to deepen our understanding of this work. Other forms that are combined art include dance and cinema.

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### Art and Subject

Many works of art are created to represent or explore a specific subject. Subject in art answers the question, “What is it about?” Literature is an art form that nearly always has a subject. Paintings and sculptures are mostly representations of subjects. Architecture is, however, an art form that does not usually depict a subject. Architecture is mostly functional. It is an art form based more on “What for?” rather than “What is it about?” Music occupies an interesting middle ground in the realm of Subject. Some works of music were composed with a specific subject in mind, like Handel’s Messiah. Others were written simply as expressions of musicality, like the great traditions of folk music of indigenous cultures throughout the world. Music with a subject is known as program music. Music without a subject is called absolute music.

When a work of art is associated with a specific subject, we can consider it along those terms. When we understand the subject being presented, it gives us an opportunity to make some personal evaluation of the work. We can ask how effectively the artist has depicted the subject, but remember that the quality of the depiction is often more important than the quality of the subject. This leads us to an important consideration in the arts: the relationship between art and nature.

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### Art and Nature

Pablo Picasso is reported to have said that “art is the lie that tells the truth.” Isn’t this paradoxical? When you looked at Michelangelo’s Moses, did you find yourself saying “He’s in really good shape for a man of 80 years old,” or did you think about a powerful prophet and leader? That’s likely what Michelangelo intended. The spiritual power of Moses can be in part revealed to us through the artificiality of the sculpture.

This artificiality is much of what appeals to us as we look at human creation. When informed that his wife has died, William Shakespeare’s character Macbeth responds with this:

“She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle;
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.” (Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5)

After you’ve read the original language, read this modern-day translation below and consider the meaning:

“She should have died sometime in the future. The word future used to mean something, but not anymore. Time now moves slowly, one day after another, until the end of time. Everything we’ve done in the past doesn’t matter. Those things just lead us to our death. Then our lives can go out like a candle being blown out. Life is just a shadow, like a bad actor on the stage. Then, it’s over. It’s like a story told by an idiot, full of sounds and passion, but meaning nothing.”

Macbeth’s monologue is an unrealistic statement from a bereaved husband, yet it reveals the futility of a life of evil. This is a profound exploration of the human condition—something that art allows us to ponder, like our place in the world and the very meaning of life. The truths this speech reveals to us represent in large measure the art of William Shakespeare.

Another example of using unrealistic elements from visual art is Nok terracotta sculptures from the Yoruba tribe in Nigeria. The people who created these sculptures lived from about 500 BC to 200 AD. The heads on the terracotta sculptures from this group are larger than the figures' bodies, which, of course, is unlike a real human body. The sculptures’ striking facial features are abstract, with oversized, oval eyes and highly decorative hairstyles. They do not look realistic, but they still clearly express emotion, although the exact nature of the emotion and their purpose is not known.

Kneeling figure, Nok culture.

Photo Credit: [Wikipedia](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AKneeling_figure%2C_Nok_culture%2C_terracotta%2C_Honolulu_Museum_of_Art%2C_8348.1.JPG) CC0

Nature certainly is the source of a vast number of art subjects. An obvious and famous example of nature in art is the woodblock print, Under the Wave of Kanagawa (the Great Wave), created by Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai between 1830–1832. Notice how the artist cleverly plays with perspective to make Japan’s grandest mountain, Mount Fuji, appear as a small triangular mound within the hollow of the cresting wave.

Under the Wave of Kanagawa (the Great Wave).

Photo Credit: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3A%E5%86%A8%E5%B6%BD%E4%B8%89%E5%8D%81%E5%85%AD%E6%99%AF_%E7%A5%9E%E5%A5%88%E5%B7%9D%E6%B2%96%E6%B5%AA%E8%A3%8F-Under_the_Wave_off_Kanagawa_%28Kanagawa_oki_nami_ura%29%2C_also_known_as_The_Great_Wave%2C_from_the_series_Thirty-six_Views_of_Mount_Fuji_%28Fugaku_sanj%C5%ABrokkei%29_MET_DP141063.jpg)

It is important for us to stop and clearly ponder the distinct differences between art and nature. The words of two French authors can lead us to some productive thinking about art and nature. Honoré Balzac speaking of art said, “The mission is not to copy nature, but to express it.” Think how a work of art isn’t an exact copy of nature. Michelangelo’s famous Moses statue at first glance seems lifelike with its dramatic musculature and wonderful proportions, but at its heart, the statue is unnatural. Moses wasn’t all one color; his hair, eyes, skin, and robe were not all variations of white. The light that people saw coming from his head ([Exodus 34: 29–35](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/ot/ex/34?lang=eng)) wasn’t two marble horns. Moses wasn’t stuck inside a niche when he descended from Sinai either; he was capable of movement and speech. If we want to be particular, we must admit that this statue is not realistic. And yet, the reality of what Michelangelo is exploring is profoundly accurate.

Moses, Michelangelo, 1513–1515, San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.

Photo Credit: [Livioandronico2013](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User%3ALivioandronico2013) at [Wikimedia](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AMichelangelo%27s_Moses_%28Rome%29.jpg). CC BY SA 4.0

In this context, one can more easily understand the words of author André Gide: “I admit there is only one thing that is not natural: art.” And yet so often we explain to others that we like a particular painting, movie, or piece of music “because it seems so real.”

Maybe that’s not exactly what we mean. Perhaps we’re saying that the work of art has communicated something very deep in us that relates to our own reality. The art has spoken to our construction of things. Take a moment and read this excerpt of a poem (translated into English) by the Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi:

Spring has come and joyfully
 The birds greet her with glad song,
While at Zephyr’s breath the streams
Flow forth with sweet murmurings.

Her chosen heralds, thunder and lightning,
Come to envelop the air in a dark cloak;
Once they have fallen silent, the little birds
Return anew to their melodious songs.

Translation and the original can be found at [Antonio Vivaldi](https://baroque.boston/vivaldi-four-seasons)

Vivaldi then used these lines of poetry as the basis of his famous violin concerto, [Spring](https://brighamyui-nml3-naxosmusiclibrary-com.byui.idm.oclc.org/catalogue/item.asp?cid=00028947915546), from his larger set of works, known as the Four Seasons. Listen to the first movement. Listen for the way the solo violin imitates bird calls by playing short notes at a high pitch, and how lower-string instruments depict a gently flowing stream by playing flowing, connected notes. The listener hears the thunder when the lower stringed instruments rapidly move the bow back and forth on the same note (this is called tremolo). The violin solo then plays a rapid tone to represent the lightning.

People have loved these compositions for close to three centuries. Hearing it in conjunction with the poetry makes it even more enjoyable, and yet serious reflection leads us to some interesting questions: Does any species of bird sound like that? Does a stream flow stay within the confines of a set musical key? Does the noise lightning makes resemble a rapid violin? Logically, we know the answer to this is an emphatic “no,” yet there is something in this artificiality that speaks a truth to us — an artistic truth.

#### Ponder and Prove

The idea of artistic truth is closely tied to the “Ponder and Prove” step of the [BYUI Learning Model](https://www.byui.edu/learning-model/). It requires effort to reflect on the truths in a work of art. Some are obvious; others might be called “hidden treasures.” Think about music you’ve heard that expresses this truth, even though the piece has artificial characteristics (it is art after all).  Musicians often interplay human emotion, artistic truth, and artificial characteristics to create music that challenges conventional boundaries and engages listeners on multiple levels. Consider Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D minor with the Ode to Joy sung by a choir. Perhaps a more recent group to consider is Piano Guys or One Republic.

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