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Public Art: An Introduction

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What exactly is "public art"? Public art differs from art produced for display in a museum, gallery, or other public place, and from art collected by individuals, in three major ways:






1. **It is commissioned by a very public process**, in which the community has a clear and defined role in selecting the artist, the site, and the artwork
2. **Public money funds the creation of the art piece**, especially in the case of percent-for-art ordinances. This arrangement means that the art has many audiences to please, not just the artist and the selection committee, and that there is a degree of accountability assumed about the artwork that artists do not encounter as much when creating work for private use or display.
3. **It is associated with a sense of longevity**. Whereas a work of studio art or in a museum collection may be sold or removed at a predetermined time, a work of public art, is protected by the Visual Artists Rights Act and must go through an official process (called Deaccession) if it is to be sold or removed.. It also must be designed to rigorous standards, as it is often expected to last from 20-50 years, if not more, in an outdoor, fairly unprotected environment.

(At right: topiary sculpture, San Diego Zoo, San Diego, CA)

For general purposes, the term "public art" refers to the following kinds of artworks and media:

- **Sculpture**: in the round, bas relief, kinetic works (mobiles), electronic works, light works; figurative, abstract, statuary; formed from any material that provides the type of durability required for the project;
- **Mosaics** including engravings, carvings, frescoes;



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- **Fountains or water elements;**
- **Fine art crafts:** clay, fiber (tapestries), textiles, wood, metal, plastics, stained glass;
- **Mixed-media video and computer-generated works,** collage, photography;
- **Installations;**
- **Earthworks and environmental artworks;**
- **Decorative, ornamental, or functional elements** designed by an artist;
- **Murals, drawings, and paintings;** and
- **Monuments**



(At left: "Group of Four Trees" by Jean Dubuffet, Chase Plaza, New York, NY)

Generally speaking, a work of art cannot be considered as "public art" if it is not one-of-a-kind or an original (in the case of a work of sculpture or painting) or it is reproduced in editions of over 200 (in the case of fine art prints and photographs). In general, reproductions, unlimited editions/mass productions, decorative, ornamental, and functional elements of architecture, directional elements such as super graphics, signage, and color coding, and landscape usually are NOT considered artworks unless done by an artist.

(At top: Lucien Labaudt mural depicting San Francisco life, the Beach House, San Francisco, CA)

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