Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art"

"The Origin of the Work of Art" [OWA] is a translation of a lecture delivered by Heidegger in 1936. It is a subtle, difficult and obscure text. But if it is read carefully and thoughtfully, you will also find it to be philosophically rewarding. The key is to read it slowly—line by line—extracting as much meaning as you can from each sentence. The following introduction provides some background and a few markers about Heidegger's creative and poetic use of language.¹

Introduction

This essay is an investigation into the "origin" of the work of art. Heidegger's word for "origin" is the German der Ursprung, the source or "springing forth" of a thing. Thus, Heidegger is asking where art originates—where it "springs" from. Moreover, he is trying to understand what springs from the work of art itself. These concerns about the origin relate art to Heidegger's notion of truth (Aletheia) as the "showing forth" or "unconcealment" of that which is hidden or covered over. Art is unique in its capacity to reveal the truth.

A work of art, whether it is a poem, painting, song, etc. is also a "thing". Thus, Heidegger says that works of art have a "thingly" character. To better explain this generic concept of "the thingliness of things" in relation to art, Heidegger examines three traditional ideas about what it means for something to be a "thing".

• There is, going back to the Greeks, the concept of a thing as a substance to which various qualities are attached, e.g. a chair (substance) which is red, made of wood, has four legs, etc. (its qualities). These relations of substance and quality are expressed in sentences by means of the grammatical subject, which identifies a [particular thing or substance that one is talking about, and the predicate, which characterizes the quality or property associated with this thing.

• There is also the notion of a thing as the unity or bundle of sensations in the mind that provide us with a perception, or a thing as an object of thought, e.g. an apple, unicorn or next week's reading assignment.

• Finally, there is a concept of a thing as matter that has a certain form imposed on it.

Now according to Heidegger these ways of thinking about what it means to be "a thing" have their origin in our everyday involvement with tools or equipment. Thus, they are derivative and distort the real character of "thing" and "work". [For more on this, see Being and Time §15-18.] The inadequacy of these traditional concepts of "thing" is made apparent when we consider a work of art, e.g. a painting by Van Gogh of what appear to be a common pair of boots.

¹ This introduction is adapted from Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings, David Farrell Krell, ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 143-7.
According to Heidegger, this painting reveals ("unconceals" in Heidegger's terminology) the world of the peasant who walks in these boots on the earth. Both these terms—"world" and "earth"—take on special meaning for Heidegger. Every real work of art constructs a world which "opens a space" for Dasein (Heidegger's word for "human being"), an openness that rests on the stable, enduring and "all-sheltering earth". Through the work of art we experience the creative strife of world and earth. The investigation of this "strife" is the key to Heidegger's analysis.

World and Earth

To understand Heidegger's use of the term "world" we can turn to his discussion of "worldliness" in Being and Time §14-18. There he talks about the world as the entire structure of meaningful relations that constitute our experience as human beings or Dasein. This world then includes equipment (tools that we use to get things done), natural objects and other human beings. The world is that range of possibilities within which we live as purposeful human beings rather than simply as animals or inanimate objects.

The concept of earth is a bit more difficult to understand. It seems to have for Heidegger an ancient, mythic and primeval sense to it. It is an all-encompassing source of nourishment, protection and life—the Mother of All.

Key Terms

Dasein
ontological difference (Being vs. beings)
truth (Aletheia)
clearing
world
earth
riss (rift) - that which unites opposites.

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