life-force. Nietzsche, who lamented the weakening of Germany's 'pure and powerful core' by 'foreign elements', celebrated Wagner for revitalizing German/European culture by evoking primitive roots of ancient Nordic and Teutonic mythology—using Aryan rather than Semitic myths.

But in 1888 Nietzsche published The Case of Wagner, berating the composer and Parsifal. Why this turnabout? Nietzsche found Parsifal's music wonderful; he praised its clarity, 'psychological knowingness', and 'precision', and even called it 'sublime'. However, Nietzsche rejected Parsifal's message as too 'Christian', with its theme of a sacrificial saviour and redemption: 'Wagner ... sank down, helpless and broken, before the Christian cross', 'decaying and despairing and decadent'. Nietzsche found the plot life-denying and 'sick', not full of affirmation—not truly Dionysian. Well-educated musically, Nietzsche felt that Parsifal's sheer beauty only made things worse, by tempting one to succumb to the composer's intentions. When he lampoons the mass adulation of Wagner at Bayreuth, Nietzsche sounds like Plato warning about the seductive powers of tragedy.

Some modern commentaries feel a similar ambivalence about Wagner: while they may appreciate the beauty and complexity of his music, they find aspects of Wagner's 'Aryan' mythologizing repugnant. Wagner's rabid anti-Semitic writings were read by an admiring Hitler, and his operas became virtual state music for the Nazis. This has led to his music being unofficially banned in Israel until quite recently. Even without this worry, some people ridicule Wagner for grandiose themes and plots, or for his self-absorbed characters like Tristan and Isolde, with their unwieldy 40-minute love duet. We need not share Nietzsche's critical view to dismiss the plot of Parsifal as pretentious mumbo-jumbo, regardless of religion and politics. For many people, and not just Nietzsche, then, aesthetic and moral concerns clash to create a quandary in assessing Wagner's operas.

**Brillo Box and philosophical art**

Andy Warhol, with his well-crafted image—the platinum hair, whispery voice, dark eyes—was expert at self-promotion. Obsessed with celebrities, Warhol loved jet-setting and partying. Yet he said, 'I think it would be terrific if everyone was alike', and coined the cynical slogan that everyone has their fifteen minutes of fame. Warhol emerged in the Pop Art movement of the 1960s, a movement tied into fashion, popular culture,
and politics. He brought attention to everyday visual products in the environment around us and claimed he wanted to paint like a machine. Phenomenally successful, he left an estate valued at over $100 million.

Lest Warhol seem lightweight, we should recall his sobering disaster images: Civil Rights riots with attack dogs, the electric chair, and grisly auto accidents, all transformed (like his Marilyn Monroes) into brightly coloured silk-screened panels. Warhol is hard to pin down. His Last Supper series done in Italy (based on Leonardo’s ‘real’ one) was meant seriously by the artist who had remained a devout Christian.

Warhol helped spark the transition from macho New York Abstract Expressionism to playful gender-bending postmodernism. Warhol was already successful as a commercial artist when he exhibited stacks of hand-stencilled plywood boxes at the Stabler gallery in New York in 1964. The boxes had a tremendous impact on philosopher Arthur Danto, who has repeatedly discussed them (he even wrote a book titled Beyond the Brillo Box). Warhol’s Brillo Boxes looked just like one in a supermarket, and Danto found this puzzling:

Why was it a work of art when the objects which resemble it exactly, at least under perceptual criteria, are mere things, or, at best, mere artifacts? But even if artifacts, the parallels between them and what Warhol made were exact. Plato could not discriminate between them as he could between pictures of beds and beds. In fact, the Warhol boxes were pretty good pieces of carpentry.

Danto wrote a much-discussed paper, ‘The Art World’, about this puzzle. His essay, in turn, prompted philosopher George Dickie to formulate the ‘institutional theory of art’, according to which art is ‘any artifact . . . 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)’. This meant that an object like Brillo Boxes was baptized as ‘art’ if accepted by museum and gallery directors and purchased by art collectors.

But, Danto objected, the Brillo Boxes were not immediately accepted by the ‘artworld’: the director of the National Gallery of Canada declared they were not art, siding with Customs inspectors when a dispute arose about shipping them; hardly anyone bought them. Danto argued instead that the artworld provides a background theory that an artist invokes when exhibiting something as art. This relevant ‘theory’ is not a thought in the artist’s head, but something the social and cultural context enables both artist and audience to grasp. Warhol’s gesture could not have been made as art in ancient Greece, medieval Chartres, or
nineteenth-century Germany. With *Brillo Boxes*, Warhol demonstrated that anything can be a work of art, given the right situation and theory. So Danto concludes that a work of art is an object that embodies a meaning: "Nothing is an artwork without an interpretation that constitutes it as such."

Danto has criticized earlier views of art (like those we have surveyed in this chapter):

> [M]ost philosophies of art have been by and large disguised endorsements of the kind of art the philosophers approved of, or disguised criticisms of art the philosopher disapproved of, or at any rate theories defined against the historically familiar art of the philosopher’s own time. In a way, the philosophy of art has really only been art criticism.

Danto himself tries to avoid endorsing any particular type of art. His pluralist theory helps explain why the artworld now accepts such diverse entries as bloodfests, dead sharks, and plastic surgery as art. He sees his job as describing or explaining why people have held different things to be art in different eras; they theorize about art differently. In our time, at least since some of Duchamp’s work and Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, almost anything goes. This makes the narrow and restricted views of earlier philosophers, who defined art...
in terms of Beauty, Form, etc., seem too rigid. Even shocking art like Serrano’s *Piss Christ* can now count as art: an object with the right sort of idea or interpretation behind it. Serrano and his audience share some background theory or context within which the photo may be viewed as art: it communicates thoughts or feelings through a physical medium.

Danto argues that in each time and context, the artist creates something as art by relying on a shared theory of art that the audience can grasp, given its historical and institutional context. Art doesn’t have to be a play, a painting, garden, temple, cathedral, or opera. It doesn’t have to be beautiful or moral. It doesn’t have to manifest personal genius or devotion to a god through luminosity, geometry, and allegory.

Danto’s open-door theory of art says ‘Come in’ to all works and messages, but it does not seem to explain very well *how* an artwork communicates its message. As the art critic for *The Nation*, he must suppose that some works communicate better than others. (Saying that something is art is not at all the same as saying that it is *good* art.) Writing as critic, rather than as philosopher, Danto sometimes praises and sometimes finds fault. He explains that, ‘The task of criticism is to identify the meanings and explain the mode of their embodiment’. This requires considering both material and formal features of artworks: the poetic diction of Euripides, the play of waters in Le Nôtre’s fountains, the height and light of Chartres cathedral, Wagner’s chord progressions and instrumentation—Danto even noted that Warhol’s plywood Brillo boxes were well-made. Many details are relevant to how artists embody their ideas in art. I want to look further into issues of meaning and value. But first let’s do more touring, this time around the globe, to consider examples of non-Western art.