

## Understanding the "A" in WMA

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As we all know, the acronym WMA stands for Western Martial Arts - an expression that has become intimately familiar to anyone who practices our disciplines. We call our arts Western (or European) because they flourished in Europe; we call them martial because they had defensive, offensive and military applications. And we call them arts mostly because... we are used to it.



After all, don't our friends who practice Kung Fu call their discipline a martial "art?" So if theirs is an art so must be ours. And don't the masters who wrote the historical treatises call their disciplines "arts?" So arts they must be.

Indeed, professions such as swordsmanship were called arts in the Renaissance - by the very men who created them and passed them down to posterity in the form of treatises. For instance, practically all the

historical Italian fencing texts that I have examined make a reference to fencing being an art - sometimes even in the title. Monte (1509) names his treatise *Artis Militaris Collectanea* (compendium of martial art), while Capoferro devotes a long paragraph to the definition of fencing as an art as opposed to a science. But oftentimes we are in such a hurry to see how to acquire a few tricks to defeat our opponents that we completely overlook these consistent definitions and their implications - thereby severely impairing our ability to achieve the very goal we strive for.

As with all definitions, understanding why swordsmanship was called an art is indispensable towards understanding its essence and structure. This is especially true in light of the fact that the modern mind often associates the word "art" with things that are only tangentially related to what this term meant from the time of the Ancient Greeks to the end of the XVIII Century.

So what is art? In the commonsense understanding of the word, we call art a whimsical creation of our free spirit - a form of unfettered self-expression designed to please our senses - generally our sight and hearing. Thus an artist is often imagined as an eccentric *beau esprit* who wears a French beret and creates out of sheer inspiration, free from any fetters imposed by mores, society, science or tradition.

The dangers of understanding martial arts in this light are twofold. First of all, this concept of art is utterly anti-historical. Secondly, there is the risk of regarding the rules of a martial art as arbitrary conventions or creations of the master's sense of aesthetic - and consequently discarding them as "unfit for a real fight" or other such nonsense I've heard all too often.

The correct way to approach the definition of art is strictly philological. By discovering what "art" meant to the men who wrote the period treatises we also discover how to study these texts. So, let's turn to the *Vocabolario Della Crusca*, the standard authority on the Italian language since 1612. Here is the definition given:

- ART: Derived from experience, it is the use of reason to tackle any matter, as is the case with the seven liberal arts and the mechanical arts. Latin *ars*.
- Albert[i]. c. 46. Arts serve Nature, and knowledge rules them. Art comes from the Latin *arcere*, which means to force or constrain. Art is a finite disposition of infinite things. Put another way, art is a collection of rules all aimed at the same end. Knowledge of all things can be obtained through practice [*uso*], and what man knows, he knows through either art [*arte*] or practice [*uso*]. Likewise, arduous strain satiates man, while sleepless art often gives him great riches. Apply yourself to study, so that you may learn art, whose rules will help your mind as practice helps your hand: art gives, while practice has. If you join art and practice, a difficult journey will appear short.

This definition is complete and gives an idea of the very essence of how art was understood in the late Renaissance. So, let's analyze some of the salient points of this definition of art to see a) how it stacks up against today's commonsense understanding of the word and b) how these points may be relevant to our martial disciplines.

**[Art] is the use of reason to tackle any matter.** Immediately, this goes against any notion of arts being just a free, childlike expression of something whimsical. Arts are instead founded upon the use of reason, and have a specific purpose - the purpose of tackling matters and situations. This is also why arts (martial and otherwise) are not just a mere performance of "what's natural," since reason has to first filter whatever observation of nature we derive through experience, and then order such observation into *rules*. Rules, in turn, are designed to achieve a specific goal in a repeatable manner.

**Arts serve Nature, and knowledge rules them.** Arts are to nature what a gardener's shears are to his plants, or what a tutor is to a growing child. In each of my analogies, the first term "serves" the second in the sense that it "forces" or "coerces" it (just like in the Latin sense of the word *arcere*) to grow or develop in a certain way - a way contrary to randomness. We all know that defense is in our nature - even an infant, as Alfieri reminds us, will raise his hands in defense of his face when he perceives that physical harm is imminent. But a martial art serves our natural self-defense instincts in the sense that it channels them into the margins of repeatable efficiency and effectiveness. In turn, arts are ruled by knowledge - how would a gardener or a tutor be able to ply their professions and "serve" nature without it? And how could a martial artist achieve his goals without a conscious knowledge of the rules that allow him to obtain repeatable results?

**Art is a finite disposition of infinite things.** What makes it hard to travel on sea (or in a desert) is that the excess of freedom can get you lost. Instead, driving through the perpendicular grids of America's numbered highways is easy because the finite geometry of these roads helps you maintain your bearings at all times. So the finite disposition of roads and paths enhances the possibility of your reaching your destination safely and quickly. Likewise, the rules of art are nothing less than a roadmap against the randomness of fields that can admit infinite combinations between the elements it comprises. For instance, the rules of musical harmony are a hedge against the infinite combinations that are possible between notes, and the rules of grammar serve the same function to restrict the infinite combinations possible between words and word-forms. And the rules of a martial art do the exact same thing. Aren't Fabris' four guards or Silver's four governors ways to



confine an infinite thing into finite parameters? These elements or rules are what makes Fabris' and Silver's systems arts.

**Art is a collection of rules all aimed at the same end.** Please dwell on these two words: *rules* and *end*. Art is not an end-in-itself proposition. Its rules are the arrows in the artist's quiver - arrows that are all to reach the same target, or else they are ineffective. And this goes to the heart of the argument on whether the rules of a martial art are just whimsical dictates of a master's fancy - they are not, because they are aimed towards achieving an end. They are the most direct way to achieve the art's goal, which in our case is to remain unscathed while presenting the most formidable threat to the opponent. This means that an art cannot, by definition, be an art unless it has *both* rules to follow and an end to attain - and that the masters who wrote the treatises we study very likely went by this very definition.

**Knowledge of all things can be obtained through practice [*uso*], and what man knows, he knows through either art [*arte*] or practice [*uso*].** This is one of the most salient parts of the definition - and not only for the obvious appearance of the two words *arte* and *uso* in Capoferro's treatise (isn't it amazing to what understanding a good dictionary can lead us?). What this sentence means is this, put into a more prosaic paraphrase: direct experience (practice) of a subject eventually leads to learning what we call the "ropes" of the subject; these ropes (if they work in a repeatable manner) are nothing but the rules of the art. Thus, these "ropes" or "rules" can be subsequently taught, saving the second generation of learners a little trial and error in their learning through practice or experience alone. Along these lines, we can surmise a greatly simplified genesis of martial arts from what must have been mere individual combat experience into sets of teachable rules designed to spare the novice some dangerous dead ends (pun intended).



**Likewise, arduous strain satiates man, while sleepless art often gives him great riches.** Experience will give you a good working knowledge of your discipline, knowledge that is perishable as daily experience diminishes. Art, on the other hand, will give you a thorough command of what you do, thanks to the permanent understanding of rules. An experienced instinctive fighter will have a good idea of what to do and what not to do in many situations, and the focus of his understanding will be directly proportional to his direct experience; while a martial artist will always *know* what the right thing to do is, with the certainty of a mathematician. And even

though an artist remains inactive for a period, his understanding of the discipline will remain steady even when his reflexes and body-mechanics start becoming less sharp.

**Apply yourself to study, so that you may learn art, whose rules will help your mind as practice helps your hand: art gives, while practice has.** This is the direct consequence of the previous sentence. If you learn the rules of your art, your practice will be pointed and extremely efficient, because every action you learn and rehearse will be designed to fulfill a very precise tactical purpose. With the knowledge of the art, your mind will lead your hand like a knowledgeable coachman leads a team of well-trained horses. In this sense, art gives the directions, while practice *has* the physical means to feel them and actualize them. Dwell on this principle, because it is extremely important.

**If you join art and practice, a difficult journey will appear short.** Let's remain with the analogy of art being the coachman and practice the team of horses. The higher the quality of both coachman and horses, the more efficient and bump-free the journey. If either element is lacking, we fall into two equally unacceptable situations. If the horses are strong and fast but the coachman is not knowledgeable, the power of the team is applied randomly and aimlessly, and the many wrong turns can lead the coach astray. Worse yet, the very strength and speed of the horses will make the coach reach the wrong destination even faster. Conversely, if the coachman is top-notch but the team is lame, his knowledge of the road is useless against the many stops and tentative starts. Martially speaking, this sentence means that if you want your learning journey to be efficient you need to join a rock-solid knowledge of the theory with assiduous and well-pointed practice. Swinging a longsword or a rapier four hours a day without knowing exactly what's *right* and what's *wrong* is all but a waste of those hours; as is reading texts in your room for 4 hours a day without spending an equal amount of time sword-in-hand against an opponent.

So why are our disciplines arts? Because they are a collection of rules (derived from experience) designed to achieve a repeatable result - that of hitting without getting hit. Direct experience is what allowed the masters of the past to build the self-contained blocks of the art (the rules) so that they could teach them directly to their students or pass them down in the form of treatises.

Next time you hear the expression "martial art," think of art as what it meant to the Renaissance mind, and apply that concept to the way you learn and practice your discipline. Be aware of the need for rules: identify them in your art - even when the master does not alert you by saying "this is an important rule" he may still enumerate a list of rules in a more or less obvious fashion. It is up to you to find them, so that you always know what's right and what's wrong in any given situation. And be aware of the need for practice - rules without practice are like a coachman without a good team of horses. Make the horses strong and keep them lean and well-nurtured, and your journey will indeed be shorter and more trouble-free.