



**Smithsonian Institution**

*Archives of American Art*

## **Celebrating 175: Aline Saarinen, Article for Harper's Magazine, "Uncle Sam as an Art Expert," 1954**

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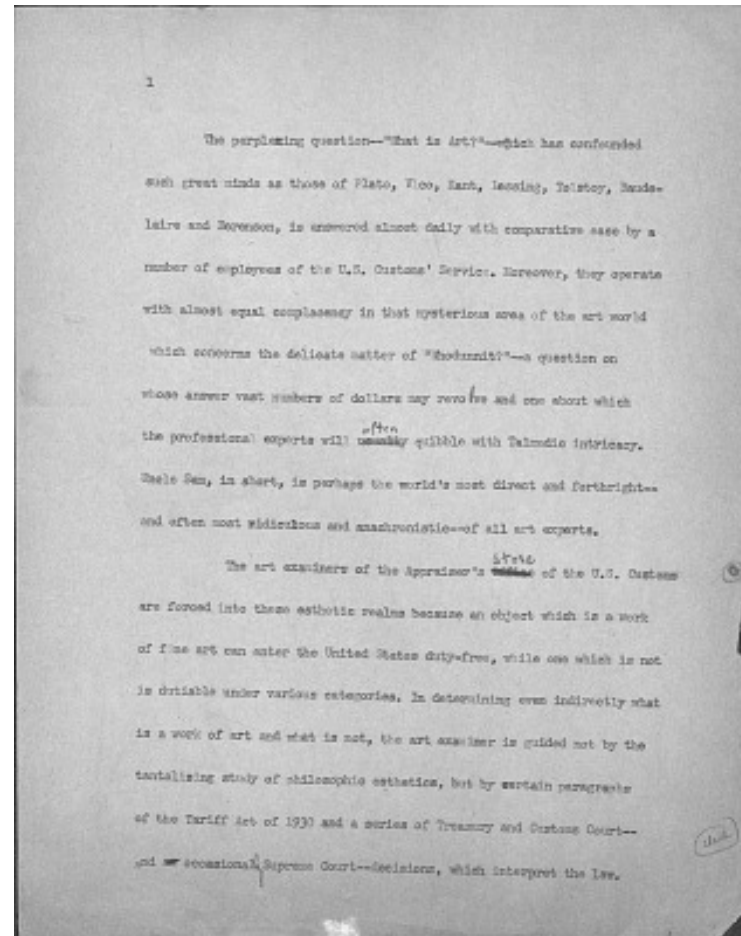
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The perplexing question--"What is Art"--which has confounded such great minds as those of Plato, Vico, Kant, Lessing, Tolstoy, Baudelaire and Berenson, is answered almost daily with comparative ease by a number of employees of the U.S. Customs' Service. Moreover, they operate with almost equal complacency in that mysterious area of the art world which concerns the delicate matter of "Whodunnit?"--a question on whose answer vast numbers of dollars may revolve and one about which the professional experts will ~~usually~~ often quibble with Talmudic intricacy. Uncle Sam, in short, is perhaps the world's most direct and forthright-- and often most ridiculous and anachronistic--of all art experts.

The art examiners of the Appraiser's ~~Office~~ ~~store~~ of the U.S. Customs are forced into these esthetic realms because an object which is a work of fine art can enter the United States duty-free, while one which is not is dutiable under various categories. In determining even indirectly what is a work of art and what is not, the art examiner is guided not by the tantalizing study of philosophic esthetics, but by certain paragraphs of the Tariff Act of 1930 and a series of Treasury and Customs Court-- and ~~an~~ occasionally Supreme Court--decisions, which interpret the law.

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