

## WHAT IS ART?

From birth we have innate drives to:

- (1) understand our environment (what is it?)
- (2) modify our environment to suit our needs (e.g., peel it)
- (3) utilize our environment (e.g., eat it)

These drives developed early in our ancestry because they were needed for survival. The unexplained could be dangerous on the one hand, or useful on the other. The result is that we have a built-in desire to explore, examine, satisfy curiosity, and figure things out. Tension and discomfort arise when we meet the unknown. Is it a threat? Then we look more closely and find that no, it is not dangerous. We understand! What a relief, what a pleasure! That pleasure is the reward our brains get for satisfying the three drives, making them inherently enjoyable even when there is no tangible gain. We experience this pleasure when contemplating a work of art. What is it? What does it mean? Aha, I see it! I get it! The same is true of humor, which has much in common with art and in fact is an art.

But what is art? Art is expression, the translation of the abstract into the concrete. It includes the imitation, exercising, miming, etc., of the skills necessary to satisfy the three innate drives. Reduced to its basics, whenever man gives physical form to an idea, that is art. Building a rock wall is art, planting a garden is art, writing a letter is art. Even speech is art, since it expresses thought with sound waves.

Oscar Wilde had this to say: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. This results not only from Life's imitative instinct, but from the fact that the selfconscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realize that energy. It is a theory that has never been put forward before, but it is extremely fruitful, and throws an entirely new light upon the history of Art."

Does nature provide examples of art? Can a beautiful sunset be considered art? No. Art is created by humans, not by inanimate nature, which is not capable of "translating" anything. Nature can be beautiful, and art can be beautiful, but beauty in itself is not art, it is an attribute of art.

Art has both content (the abstract) and form (the concrete). Its quality, called beauty, is measured by how much content is expressed with how little form, by how much the familiar is translated into how much of the surprising, by how much diversity is combined with how much harmony, by how much truth is expressed with how little falsehood, and by how emotion-arousing the content is. Beauty in art is the combination of all these characteristics. In short, it is the harmonious combination of diverse elements. But what does "harmonious" mean? It means that the elements are combined economically, the art expressing its concept(s) fully with a minimum of material and no internal conflict, giving enjoyment to the mind by way of the senses. It's doing the "mostest with the leastest," a principle exemplified in simple form by the great caricaturist Al Hirschfeld, who could capture the essence of a personality with a few strokes of the pen.

Italian scholastic philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) put it this way: "The senses delight in things duly proportioned."

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," said John Keats. He would have been more accurate (but less poetic) if he had said that beauty is truthful, and truth is beautiful. Truth in art need not be literal, however, provided its exaggeration or distortion communicates a concept better than literal truth would. Mary's

lap in Michelangelo's *Pieta*, on which dead Jesus lies, is much too large in relation to the size of her head, but this only serves to enhance what the sculpture expresses. The hands of his *David* look rather large, don't they? No wonder, he is about to use them to slay Goliath with his sling.

"Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight a while, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth."— Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his edition of Shakespeare's plays.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) said, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." "Eye" includes all the senses, of course, so he is saying that beauty is in the *mind* of the beholder, as David Hume (1711-1776) said: "Beauty in things exists in the mind which contemplates them." Individuals have their own unique vision of the abstract, so they see art in different ways, judging its beauty by how well the expression meets their expectations.

To repeat, whenever we give physical form to a mental concept we are producing art. That's "art" with a small "a." I'll use "Art" with a capital "A" when it has sufficient beauty to inspire great admiration in us, or in most of us. Take the concept in a primitive man's mind of a tool that can be used to scrape meat from bones. He turns the concept into reality by shaping a stone to do the job, and the result is art. It isn't Art to us but it may be to him. His art is beautiful if the tool comprises a minimum of material to express the concept fully by its efficacy in doing the task it was designed for, while adhering to the constraint of durability.

Constraint enhances art, it is not a negative. To quote Orson Welles: "The enemy of art is the absence of restraint." Shakespeare constrained himself to a certain sonnet structure, with an imposed meter, line length, and rhyme scheme, into which he squeezed great poetry. In unrhymed free verse without meter most of the magic would be lost. A stone wall of even height and width is the more artistic for adhering to these constraints. In 1956 a magazine writer asked Robert Frost whether he would like to try his hand at free verse—no rhyme, no meter, no form except as it may suit the poet's fancy to call it that. Frost answered, "I'd just as soon play tennis with the net down."

Art can also be enhanced by the inclusion of pleasing sense stimuli, as may be achieved with color, sound, smell, texture, and even taste (e.g., an artistic food presentation), provided they harmonize with the overall artistic expression. The element of surprise can be an enhancement, as when an unexpected word at the end of a line of verse finishes the line beautifully, or when a well-written short story's ending is both totally surprising and totally fitting.

A chief business of the cerebral cortex is pattern processing: the recognition, comparison, matching, modification, and output of patterns in order to satisfy the three innate drives. When constraints are minimal, patterns are minimal and pleasure is minimized. When art has no discernible pattern, no meaningful content, as with much of modern art, it is art that will be forgotten in years to come. It may please the senses, but it is empty art, not Art. As Will Durant said, mere novelty is not originality. Originality is not parthenogenesis; it is, like parentage, a novel combination of pre-existing elements.

"The discovery and elaboration of new forms of expression whether in literature, art or music are often the work of the least talented. The search for a new form of expression is often an attempt to camouflage the fact that one has nothing new to express." -- Eric Hoffer, in *The Passionate State of Mind*.

Why do we see today so little production today of what can be called Art? Where are the artists? They are not the dilettantes who call themselves artists and dabble in what they think is Art. No, among the

true artists are the engineers whose works will be admired far into the future. It is they who are translating abstract concepts into physical form to produce a beautiful product. To turn an airplane concept into reality a designer, or rather design team, must reconcile the conflicting demands of range, weight, size, performance, aerodynamics, flight characteristics, strength, stiffness, durability, human factors, and payload capability. The result is certainly a harmonious combination of diverse elements, and if the job is done well it is Art, beautiful Art.

Other artists of today are the film producer-directors. Talk about the harmonious combination of diverse elements, look at what they must combine: script, casting, direction of actors, locale selection, cinematography, music and other sound, set decoration, costumes, special effects, and film editing. Each element is art in itself, and if they are individually beautiful and combined harmoniously, the result is Art. Similarly, the producer-directors of “Broadway musicals” are artists. Still others are those industrial designers and architects who economically combine form and function as beautifully as possible while heeding the emotional needs of the users.

I don't see why many games should not be considered art. The master chess player must move pieces optimally in order to overcome an opponent, and the master bridge player must bid and play a hand optimally in order to reach the best contract and win the most tricks. Both utilize the pattern-recognition capability of the brain to achieve their goals, an activity that is innately satisfying.