

Art as Therapy

Alain
de Botton

John
Armstrong



What is Art For?

The modern world thinks of art as very important – something close to the meaning of life. Evidence of this elevated regard can be found in the opening of new museums, the channelling of significant government resources towards the production and display of art, the desire on the part of the guardians of art to increase access to works (especially for the benefit of children and minority groups), the prestige of academic art theory and the high valuations of the commercial art market.

Despite all this, our encounters with art do not always go as well as they might. We are likely to leave highly respected museums and exhibitions feeling underwhelmed, or even bewildered and inadequate, wondering why the transformational experience we had anticipated did not occur. It is natural to blame oneself, to assume that the problem must come down to a failure of knowledge or capacity for feeling.

This book argues that the problem is not primarily located in the individual. It lies in the way that art is taught, sold and presented by the art establishment. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, our relationship with art has been weakened by a profound institutional reluctance to address the question of what art is for. This is a question that has, quite unfairly, come to feel impatient, illegitimate, and a little impudent.

The saying 'art for art's sake' specifically rejects the idea that art might be for the sake of anything in particular, and therefore leaves the high status of art mysterious – and vulnerable. Despite the esteem art enjoys, its importance is too often assumed rather than

explained. Its value is taken to be a matter of common sense. This is highly regrettable, as much for the viewers of art as for its guardians.

What if art has a purpose that can be defined and discussed in plain terms? Art can be a tool, and we need to focus more clearly on what kind of tool it is – and what good it can do for us.

Art as a Tool

Like other tools, art has the power to extend our capacities beyond those that nature has originally endowed us with. Art compensates us for certain inborn weaknesses, in this case of the mind rather than the body, weaknesses that we can refer to as psychological frailties.

This book proposes that art (a category that includes works of design, architecture and craft) is a therapeutic medium that can help guide, exhort and console its viewers, enabling them to become better versions of themselves.

A tool is an extension of the body that allows a wish to be carried out, and that is required because of a drawback in our physical make-up. A knife is a response to our need, yet inability, to cut. A bottle is a response to our need, yet inability, to carry water. To discover the purpose of art, we must ask what kind of things we need to do with our minds and emotions, but have trouble with. What psychological frailties might art help with? Seven frailties are identified, and therefore seven functions for art. There are, of course, others, but these seem to be among the most convincing and the most common.

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What
is the
Point
of Art?
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What, then, are the consequences of holding to a therapeutic vision of art? Principally, the conviction that the main point of engaging with art is to help us lead better lives – to access better versions of ourselves. If art has such a power, it is because it is a tool that can correct or compensate for a range of psychological frailties. To summarize some of these frailties:

1. We forget what matters; we can't hold on to important but slippery experiences.
2. We have a proclivity to lose hope: we are oversensitive to the bad sides of existence. We lose out on legitimate chances of success because we fail to see the reasonableness of keeping going at certain things.
3. We incline towards feelings of isolation and persecution because we have an unrealistic sense of how much difficulty is normal. We panic too easily, as we misjudge the meaning of our troubles. We are lonely – not that we have no one to talk to, but because those around us can't appreciate our travails with sufficient depth, honesty and patience. This is partly because the ways we show the pain of our choppy relationships, envy or unfulfilled ambitions can easily seem pejorative and insulting. We suffer and we feel that this suffering lacks dignity.
4. We are unbalanced and lose sight of our best sides. We aren't just one person. We are made up of multiple selves, and we recognize that some of these are better than others. We meet our better selves too often by chance, and when it is too late; we suffer from a weakness of will in relation to our highest ambitions. It's not that we don't know how to behave, we simply fail to act upon our intermittent best insights because they aren't available to us in sufficiently convincing forms.
5. We are hard to get to know: we are mysterious to ourselves and therefore no good at explaining who we are to others, or being liked for reasons we think are appropriate.
6. We reject many experiences, peoples, places and eras that have something important to offer us because they come in the wrong wrapping and so leave us unable to connect. We are prey to superficial, prejudiced judgements. We think things are 'foreign' far too defensively.
7. We are desensitized by familiarity and live in a commercially dominated world that highlights glamour. Hence we often end up dissatisfied that life is humdrum; we are gnawed by the worry that life is elsewhere.

It is in relation to these seven psychological frailties that art finds its purpose and value as a tool, and offers us seven means of assistance:

1. **A CORRECTIVE OF BAD MEMORY:** Art makes memorable and renewable the fruits of experience. It is a mechanism to keep precious things, and our best insights, in good condition and makes them publicly accessible. Art banks our collective winnings.
2. **A PURVEYOR OF HOPE:** Art keeps pleasant and cheering things in view. It knows we despair too easily.
3. **A SOURCE OF DIGNIFIED SORROW:** Art reminds us of the legitimate place of sorrow in a good life, so that we panic less about our difficulties and recognize them as parts of a noble existence.
4. **A BALANCING AGENT:** Art encodes with unusual clarity the essence of our good qualities and holds them up before us, in a variety of media, to help rebalance our natures and direct us towards our best possibilities.
5. **A GUIDE TO SELF-KNOWLEDGE:** Art can help us identify what is central to ourselves, but hard to put into words. Much that is human is not readily available in language. We can hold up art objects and say, confusedly but importantly, 'This is me.'
6. **A GUIDE TO THE EXTENSION OF EXPERIENCE:** Art is an immensely sophisticated accumulation of the experiences of others, presented to us in well-shaped and well-organized forms. It can provide us with some of the most eloquent instances of the voices of other cultures, so that an engagement with artworks stretches our notions of ourselves and our world. At first, much of art seems merely 'other', but we discover that it can contain ideas and attitudes that we can make our own in ways that enrich us. Not everything we need to become better versions of ourselves is already to hand in the vicinity.
7. **A RE-SENSITIZATION TOOL:** Art peels away our shell and saves us from our spoilt, habitual disregard for what is all around us. We recover our sensitivity; we look at the old in new ways. We are prevented from assuming that novelty and glamour are the only solutions.

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What
Counts
as Good
Art?
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We grow up with a canon of art: a widely accepted list of the art we should revere if we want to lay claim to being intelligent, educated citizens. One is more or less required to regard certain artists as important. Caravaggio and Rembrandt are the great painters of the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, Chardin is quite important, but Goya more so. In the nineteenth century, Manet and Cézanne deserve special respect; in the twentieth, the key names are Picasso, Bacon and Warhol. Of course, the canon varies from time to time and is nuanced by experience, but we tend to be fairly loyal, perhaps without really noticing, to some approximation of this list. It would take a lot of nerve to depart publicly from it. This leads to a strange paradox: we may well end up unimpressed or cold before works that, in theory, we regard as masterpieces. Or we may dutifully attempt to force the appropriate reaction.

Faced with Caravaggio's depiction of the Biblical Judith's decapitation of the Assyrian general Holofernes, one might feel one ought to like it because it doesn't try to be prim about what it might be like to cut someone's head off, because the light falling on Judith's dress is particularly vivid and because it shows that women can be violent, thereby counteracting the patronizing notion of the gentle sex (38). Many people enthuse about this artist's work, but in honest moments one might admit to not really liking it.

We all have some version of this story. That is, an experience of the gulf that can separate the prestige of the work from its power to touch one's soul. This happens because the canon is in many ways disconnected from our inner needs. There may be instances of overlap, but the disconnect is not really very surprising because the list of prestigious works and artists is not really intended to focus on what is going on in our lives. This becomes clear when we look at how – until now – works of art became canonical or prestigious. Ideas about what is 'good art' are not formed by themselves. They are the result of complex systems of patronage, ideology, money, and education, supported by university courses and museums, all of which guide our sense of what makes a work of art especially worthy of attention. In time, this becomes just common sense. In 1913, for example, Raphael was very popular and many people at the time would have thought him the greatest painter who had ever lived. In 2013, this may be far less likely. At either point, people would probably struggle to explain the reasons behind their convictions. This is why it's worth studying some of the principal reasons why art has historically been judged important.



It can be even more
frightening to feel
that one doesn't get
the famous work.

8. Caravaggio,
Judith Beheading
Holofernes, c.1599

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How important
is the artist's
technique to you?
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39. Paul Cézanne,
Mont Sainte-Victoire,
1902–4

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Part of the long
history of man's
search for justice.
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40. Thomas
Gainsborough,
*Mr and Mrs
Andrews*, c.1750

Technical Reading

This method of evaluating art sees it as a succession of 'discoveries' or inventions in the representation of reality, and privileges those artists who made the first move towards them. It is akin to a scientific way of reading history, in which we look out for inventors and explorers (Who discovered America? Who put together the first steam engine?). This method tells us that Leonardo da Vinci was crucial because he was an early adopter of *sfumato*, an artistic technique for showing shapes without using outlines. Braque was important because he introduced, or was the first to extensively explore, the idea of depicting the same object from more than one point of view.

Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* is sometimes described as one of the most important paintings in the world because it is one of the earliest works to radically emphasize the flat surface of the canvas (39). In his image of the mountain as seen from Les Lauves, his property near Aix-en-Provence, Cézanne uses blocks of paint to evoke shrubs, but they are first and foremost coloured marks forming an abstract pattern. (This is most apparent if the top half of the painting is covered.)

Political Reading

According to a political reading of art, a work is seen as good to the extent that it makes important points about man's search for dignity, truth, justice, and the due allocation of financial rewards. According to these criteria, Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* is a very significant picture, for it can be understood as a thesis about land ownership (40). The couple stand in solitary possession of their acres. They don't have to till the soil or bring in the harvest, they simply enjoy the fruits of others' labour. Gainsborough has suggested, by the way he has painted their faces, that these are smug, mean-spirited people, so the picture can be seen as making a point against the moral corruption of the dominant land-owning class. From the political point of view, this is positive and progressive art, for it is on the side of the future.



Historical Reading

A work of art can be valued for what it tells us about the past. Carpaccio's painting is a rare visual record of a famous bridge before it was reconstructed, and has a lot to teach us about the architecture of Venice around 1500 (41). However, it is also highly instructive about the role of religion in civic life; the ceremonial processions; how patricians and gondoliers used to dress; what kinds of hairstyle people went in for; how the painter imagined the past (the ceremony had taken place over a hundred years before the picture was painted); the economics of art (the image is part of a series commissioned by a wealthy commercial fraternity); how business was linked to social and religious life. And – of course – very much more. In a less scholarly way, the richness with which a past era is made visually present allows us to imagine what it would be like to clatter across the wooden bridge, to be rocked along the canals in a covered gondola and to live in a society where belief in miracles was part of the state ideology.

Shock-value Reading

We are conscious that, individually and collectively, we may grow complacent. Art may therefore be highly valued for its capacity to disrupt and shock. We are particularly in danger of forgetting the artificiality of norms. It was once taken for granted that women should not be allowed to vote, and that the language of ancient Greek should dominate the curriculum of English schools. It is easy to see now that those arrangements were far from inevitable, and that they were open to change and improvement.

Chris Ofili has worked against received ideas about what art can be made of. After its first appearance in the 'Sensation' exhibition of 1997 in London, his painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* caused controversy around the world, from raising the ire of New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to being smeared with white paint by a gallery visitor as a protest (42). Through his use of dried and varnished elephant dung in place of a more traditional representation of the Virgin's breast, Ofili challenges our assumption that excrement, and all it symbolizes, is worthless. We are being shaken from our views of what is respectable and what is not, and nudged towards a more positive evaluation of a by-product of digestion. If we are shocked, the problem lies not with Ofili, but with



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An insight into what the Rialto Bridge in Venice looked like in the early fifteenth century (it collapsed about 30 years later).

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41. Vittore Carpaccio,
The Healing of a Man Possessed by a Demon (The Miracle of the Reliquary of the Holy Cross), c.1496

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*The power to
shock sometimes
seems like the most
important quality
in art.*

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42. Chris Ofili,
*Holy Virgin
Mary*, 1996

the inflexibility of our own ideologies. We are being encouraged not to make the same mistake as those who, in previous eras, would have denied women the vote or insisted that ancient Greek was an indispensable part of the curriculum.

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Therapeutic Reading

This book introduces a fifth criterion for judging art: that it can be deemed important in so far as it helps us in a therapeutic way. A work can be 'good' or 'bad' depending on how well it caters to our inner needs, how well it can address one of the seven psychological frailties we have identified, from a poor memory to a failure to appreciate the more modest unnoticed details.

To adopt this fifth criterion will have a range of consequences for our understanding of the canon. This way of reading will outline what might be happening in our inner depths when we say that works of art are good or bad. We may well end up liking the same works judged worthy by other readings, but we would love them for different reasons: because they had helped our souls. Getting something out of art won't just mean learning about it – it will also mean investigating ourselves. We should be ready to look into ourselves in response to what we see. Art will be deemed not good or bad *per se*, but good or bad *for us* to the extent that it compensates for our flaws: our forgetfulness, our loss of hope, our search for dignity, our difficulties with self-knowledge and our longings for love. Before one reaches a work of art, it will therefore help to know one's own character, so that one knows what one might be seeking to soothe or redeem.



VIRGIN

MARY