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What is the Value of Creative Works of Art to a Society?

by Ashley Gonzalez

(Philosophy 1100)

Van Gogh. Monet. Beethoven. Shakespeare. Art has left an imprint throughout the history of society. Just as art inhabits many forms, so does the essence of creativity inhabit any number of us. Some may resonate more with theatre, film, literature, visual arts, or lyrical voices and a steady beat, while others still appreciate art as a canvas on a museum wall. Yet the most defining attribute of art is its ability to unite people across the spectrum of humanity. Above anything, art is significant to society in that it serves to fulfill our sense of beauty and wonder about the world, and provides an outlet for creative expression and documentation of history.

Too often art might be hastily generalized as something experienced only with the senses. After all, the first ideas that may come to be associated as art are drawings and visual works. In order to understand why creative arts are important to society, one must understand in depth what art is. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, art can be described in a group of overlapping terms such as:

- (1) possessing positive aesthetic properties; (2) being expressive of emotion; (3) being intellectually challenging; (4) being formally complex and coherent; (5) having the capacity to convey complex meanings; (6) exhibiting an individual point of view; (7) being original; (8) being an artifact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill; (9) belonging to an established artistic form; (10) being the product of an intention to make a work of art.

Still others refuse to define art at all because they believe that any description would set up a barrier of what art can and cannot be. For the purpose of clarity, art will be defined in the terms recited above, in forms that include, but is not limited to: visual arts; performing arts such as drama and dance; music, literature, architecture, sculpting, film, photography, fashion, and graphic design.

One of the primary reasons that creative arts are valued in society is for the sake of beauty. Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy involved with the nature of art and the judgments of beauty. Just as debate lingers over the exact definition of art, the same can be applied to the definition of beauty. Some might believe the pursuit of it to be a materialistic, selfish concept – however, the opposite is true. In *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* by Roger Scruton, the concept of beauty is traced back to Plato. He believed that beauty was an ultimate value, “something that we pursue for its own sake, and for the pursuit of which no further reason need be given” (2). Beauty, Plato affirmed, was held on par with truth and goodness, “ultimate values which justify our rational inclinations” (2). In simpler terms, beauty isn’t appreciated as a means to an end – it is an end within itself. One should not seek out beauty because it makes them feel good, but because it is beautiful, and that’s that! Expanding on this concept is St. Aquinas, a philosopher who held that beauty was a transcendental value: a feature of reality “possessed by all things, since they are aspects of being.” (3). If Aquinas is correct everything has a beauty value to it, regardless of whether our tastes in beauty may differ. Plato believed similarly in this idea of beauty as a permanent, universal attribute of all things. In his *Symposium*, he even went as far as to describe the pursuit of beauty as a ladder, in which our materialistic appreciation of looks inhabited the lowest, primitive rung, and through study and enlightenment humans could aspire to reach the highest rung. Here beauty became an abstract idea

and a form of virtue, unimpeded by flimsy judgments. It is at this highest rung that beauty is described as “an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades”. It is this indescribable form of beauty that has likely led many to try to apply it into a form of art.

The relationship between creative arts and beauty thus becomes one of mutual balance. Just as artists may be driven to interpret this eternal form of beauty and contribute to it with their own style, society also benefits with the appreciation of the beauty that results. Ideally, this appreciation is one of “disinterested interest,” a term coined by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. We observe beauty not because it does something for us, but because it is by its own means beautiful.

Of course, as humans, we are affected by our tastes which have been shaped throughout our life. As such, we may decide we appreciate a play because it is a comedy, or listen to a song because it evokes a nostalgic sense of sadness. Scruton expands on this inner indulgence by describing a more meaning-driven appreciation of art. Works of art have a dominant function as objects of aesthetic interest. He states that they may fulfill this function in “a rewarding way, offering food for thought and spiritual uplift, winning for themselves a loyal public that returns to them to be consoled or inspired” (84). At this level, art becomes something that we can consume to nourish our spirits. Furthermore, as people assign meaning to art, the art in turn becomes “moving and tragic, melancholy or joyous, balanced, melodious, elegant, and exciting” (106) and carries the viewer through a wide range of emotions and thoughts. In some cases, this can mean foregoing the fittingness of aesthetics and making the work’s effect its focus. Scruton writes, “although beauty and meaning are connected in art, some of the most meaningful works of recent times have been downright ugly and even offensive in their raw-nerve impact.” Picasso’s *Guernico*, is an example of such impact. Scruton argues that in calling it beautiful, we may be diminishing the root of the art’s message. However, to do so would be to reduce beauty only to the subjective physical plane of the artwork and ignore the meaningful abstract beauty of its meaning. Indeed, ultimately, this is where the magic of art lies, in its ability to serve not only an aesthetic beauty that we find satisfying, but to offer a meaningful truth to the observer, both to be each appreciated inherently for what they are. At its core, we admire the arts as a means within itself, because it is pleasing, and it is inherently beautiful.

Perhaps the most significant reason for art being valuable is that it allows freedom of creative expression. The real world, as varied and full of possibilities as it may be, also contains structures which many consider limiting. We cannot make our fancies a reality, all the time! Society structures us. Physics restricts us. The way things are already set up holds us back. For instance, no matter how much your favorite color might be maroon, or brown, the sky cannot instantaneously become that color. Nor can one rein in clouds from the sky to become one’s bed, or breed fantasy creatures, or even fly. Within the world of creativity, there are no rules and anything is possible.

Art is also used as dedication for something that holds great meaning to a person. Countless famous artworks exist celebrating Christianity, and beautifully designed churches hold worship services. A common practice has recently sprouted with the growth of digital art where artists draw portraits and scenes of favored fictional characters from media and literature. Or, as is often the case, the meaning may be more complex or nonexistent to some observers. For example on viewing Van Gogh’s painting of *The Yellow Chair*, one might be inclined to say there is no meaning to it – Van Gogh simply painted what he saw, a scene that appealed to him. Scruton suggests, however, that “the real meaning of the painting is *bound up with, inseparable* from, the image – that it resides in the very shapes and colors of the chair” (93). To attempt to pick apart meaning from artwork is to deconstruct the meaning and the work itself. Meaning is inherently tied to the creative expression, seen and understood rather than explained.

Outside of the abstract, the concept of creative expression also allows for new, innovative ideas to take place. On such case is the architecture behind the famous Cathedral of Florence: the

Santa Maria Del Fiore, built during the Italian Renaissance. For decades after construction began, the roofing to the chapel of the church remained incomplete. After submitting his own architectural designs for implementing a domed roof, the architect Filippo Brunelleschi received the commission. What was shocking, however, is how he intended to construct the dome without the use of any support beams to hold the dome in place. Instead, he came up with a complex method of laying down the brickwork for the dome, such that vertically placed bricks would intersect and hold in place the horizontally placed bricks to counteract the pull of gravity. According to Ross King, author of *Brunelleschi's Dome*, his designs faced much opposition and skepticism, since “so astonishing was the plan that many of Filippo’s contemporaries considered him a lunatic” (41). Yet, today it remains the biggest dome ever built. With the power to bring forth new and revolutionary ideas borne from creative minds comes true ingenuity. Both of these points often undergo heavy opposition by those who feel the world needs more structure, and choose to rely on logic and facts and assert, “it is what it is” or “it’s the way things are” and dismiss anything art-related as an otherwise fruitless pursuit. This is not to say that those who find solace in creativity cannot share these qualities. STEM fields and labor typically take high precedence within academic institutions and society itself, with the technologic and scientific boom fueling its growth. However, creativity arguably links with invention, which has always been a crucial factor in human excellence. Leonardo da Vinci, for instance, while widely known for his artistic works like the Mona Lisa, was also involved extensively in scientific observation and sketched detailed human anatomical models and physiological diagrams. As an engineer, he also proposed designs for mechanical inventions.

Moreover, to denounce the creative arts is to denounce human expression itself. In creating art, one is creating something that they can identify with, that they can take pleasure in and fill their life with objects of both beauty and passion. It is perhaps the root of human nature to make meaning of life, with art being one of the many key forms of doing so. Furthermore, dissuading others from pursuing or admiring arts has long been juggled as a subject in dystopian ideas when suggesting the erasure of creativity from society and opting for a more systematic way of life, in order to contemplate its effects. Such systemization then ties in as a form of oppression of society. For instance, during the World War II era, many works of art such as paintings, ceramics, and books were seized by the Nazis – either to be put in Hitler’s newly proposed museum, hidden, or destroyed. Though the above example may be considered extreme, the reality we face in a world commanded solely by function and neglectful of the arts is bleak and stunted. Prosperity cannot exist without creativity. When problems arise, we look to creative solutions to solve them, and the arts have always encouraged creativity to thrive.

In conjunction to art providing methods for creative expression is its function as emotional expression. Apart from beauty, creative arts best utilize symbolism in order to illustrate abstract concepts, like feelings and moods, and can even elicit a certain thought or reaction from the viewer. In Scruton’s *Beauty*, “True artists control their subject matter, in order that our response to it should be their doing, not ours” (90). In this case, artists, or true artists as Scruton dubs it, take care to evoke a response in their art that doesn’t stem from our own impulses, but rather exists because the artist wants us to acknowledge and realize it. Similarly, Scruton observes specifically of the art form of fashion that, “it permits people to play with appearances, to send recognizable messages to the society of strangers” (78). Such messages often include cues, such as the color yellow eliciting a sense of cheer. After all, art is often intended to be performed or seen, and great lengths are taken to ensure that others may see and recognize exactly what the artist envisioned, and feel exactly as they felt creating it.

Art can also be valued as a source of emotional healing. Artists and art observers look upon art as a form of catharsis – that by indulging in art that reflects our emotions, such as listening to sad music when depressed, some of the emotional tension is released, providing relief. Picasso made heavy use of such methods in his paintings, primarily using blue colors in his art while he was

depressed; the resulting collection was called the Blue Period. Different fields such as art therapy and music therapy exist from this concept of catharsis as well, providing emotional and physical healing with self-expression through these facets. Aside from cathartic means, art also provides a source of comfort. One who might feel trapped by routine may draw a self-portrait running through the fields, or write a script about a traveler exploring new worlds, or design a house abundant with windows. One might also, rather than create these art pieces, choose to partake in them, and observe art that makes them feel more open and free. This is in, many cases, the primary value behind all creative art – they give us something to admire, and they allow us to feel something meaningful.

Lastly, another significance of creative works to a society is in how art illustrates history. Just as humans have existed for a tremendous period of time, so has art, and as humanity has evolved over the centuries, art grew to reflect the current times and changes taking place. Rather than keeping history confined to written literature, where it mainly remains impersonal and factual, imbedding history within the spectrum of the arts allows for the depiction of historical events to still carry emotion over to later generations. Since the early ages of cave paintings, humans have been compelled to record evidence of their existence, to celebrate and illustrate the happenstances of their own lives. Even Renaissance art was mostly dominated by events in spiritual history, with countless paintings dedicated to Christian faith and the divine. One famous historical painting in particular is *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugene Delacroix. In this work a woman meant to symbolize liberty and freedom leads forth a group of people while clutching a musket and the French flag – a painting commemorating the French Revolution. We may understand by reading how the Revolution came about and how it was experienced by those living through it, but through art pieces like these we are able to understand the rallying power of the pursuit of liberty in uniting the French people, with Liberty itself taking a patriotic stance as she marches forward.

Within such historical contexts, art also manages to document the human experience. That is, rather than shedding light on a historical event itself, it sheds a deeper, personal light on a person existing within that time period. Thus, rather than observing the aftermath, we view history through the lens of a person caught in the whirlwind of events. For instance, such as in the poem *I, Too, Sing America* by Langston Hughes, he lamented on the unequal treatment and racism he faced before the Civil Rights Movement, but envisioned a future where he will one day join whites ‘at the table’ and be regarded as beautiful and part of America. Hughes had no idea at the time of writing the poem that the Civil Rights Movement would come about soon afterwards, which amplifies the impact of his poetry since we are getting a personal glimpse into a shaky society only reminisced from history books and documentaries. It is creative works like these that manage to bridge the gap between history and human experience, that allow us to briefly step into the shoes and mind of someone who not only learned history, but lived it.

Through creating a sense of beauty and wonder, acting as a means of creative expression, and documenting the history of humanity, creative works of art hold a high value within our society. Humans are, and always have been, creative – forever finding new ways to mark our existence in the form of beauty and identity. Art also allows us to create innovation and change. As long as humanity continues to grow, we will always have creativity and artwork there to guide us and grow along with us.

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