

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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A Point of View: How do we know real a when we see it?



In the last of a three-part series, writer and philosopher Roger Scruton tries to define the elements which make a great work of art.

The world of art, I have suggested, is full of fakes. Fake originality, fake emotion and the fake expertise of the critics - these are all around us and in such abundance that we hardly know where to look for the real thing. Or perhaps there is no real thing? Perhaps the world of art is just one vast pretence, in which we all take part since, after all, there is no real cost to it, except to those like Charles Saatchi, rich enough to splash out on junk? Perhaps anything is art if someone says that it is. "It's all a matter of taste," they say. But is there nothing to be said in reply? Do we have no way of distinguishing true from false art, or saying why art matters and how? I shall make a few positive suggestions.

First, however, we must ignore the factors that distort our judgment. Paintings and sculptures can be owned, bought and sold. Hence there is a vast market in them, and whether or not they have a value, they certainly have a price. Oscar Wilde defined the cynic as the one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. And the art market is inevitably run by cynics. Utter trash accumulates in our museums largely because it has a price tag. You cannot own a symphony or a novel in the way you can own a Damien Hirst. As a result there are far fewer fake symphonies or fake novels than there are fake works of visual art.



Things are distorted too by the channels of official patronage. The Arts Council exists to subsidise those artists, writers and musicians whose work is important. But how do bureaucrats decide that something is important? The

culture tells them that a work is important if it is original, and the proof that a work is original is that the public doesn't like it. Besides, if the public did like it, why would it need a subsidy? Official patronage therefore inevitably favours works that are arcane, excruciating or meaningless over those that have real and lasting appeal.



- Roger Scruton is a writer and philosopher

So what is the source of that appeal, and how do we judge that a work of art possesses it? Three words summarise my answer - beauty, form and redemption.

For many artists and critics, beauty is a discredited idea. It denotes the saccharine sylvan scenes and cheesy melodies that appealed to Granny. The modernist message, that art must show life as it is, suggests to many people that, if you aim for beauty, you will end up with kitsch. This is a mistake, however. Kitsch tells you how nice you are. It offers easy feelings on the cheap. Beauty tells you to stop thinking about yourself, and to wake up to the world of others. It says: "Look at this, listen to this, study this - for here is something more important than you." Kitsch is a means to cheap emotion. Beauty is an end in itself. We reach beauty through setting our interests aside and letting the world dawn on us. There are many ways of doing this, but art is undeniably the most important, since it presents us with the image of human life - our own life and all that life means to us - and asks us to look on it directly, not for what we can take from it but for what we can give to it. Through beauty, art cleans the world of our self-obsession.

Our human need for beauty is not something that we could lack and still be fulfilled as people. It is a need arising from our moral nature. We can wander through this world, alienated, resentful, full of suspicion and distrust. Or we can find our home here, coming to rest in harmony with others and with ourselves. And the experience of beauty guides us along this second path. It tells us that we are at home in the world, that the world is already ordered in our perceptions as a place fit for the lives of beings like us. That is what we see in Corot's landscapes, Cezanne's apples, or Van Gogh's unlaced boots.



Petites Maisons Villageoises Avec Une Vieille Femme Et Une Petite Fille by Camille Corot

This brings me to my second important word - form. The true work of art is not beautiful in the way an animal, a flower or a stretch of countryside is beautiful. It is a consciously created thing, in which the human need for form triumphs over the randomness of objects. Our lives are fragmented and distracted - things start up in our feelings without finding their completion. Very little is revealed to us in such a way that its significance can be fully understood. In art, however, we create a realm of the imagination, in which each beginning finds its end, and each fragment is part of a meaningful whole. The subject of a Bach fugue seems to develop of its own accord, filling musical space and moving logically towards closure. But it is not an exercise in mathematics. Every theme in Bach is pregnant with emotion, moving with the rhythm of the listener's inner life. Bach is taking you into an imagined space, and presenting you, in that space, with the image of your own fulfilment. Likewise Rembrandt will take the flesh tints on an ageing face and show how each one captures something of the life within, so that the formal harmony of the colours conveys the completeness and unity of the person. In Rembrandt we see integrated character in a disintegrating body. And we are moved to reverence.



Rembrandt's Self-portrait With Two Circles at the National Gallery, London

Formal perfection cannot be achieved without knowledge, discipline and attention to detail. People are slowly beginning to understand this. The illusion that art flows out of us, and that the only purpose of an art school is to teach us how to open the taps, is no longer believable. Gone are the days when you can make a stir by wrapping a building in polystyrene like Christo or sitting in silence at a piano for four minutes and 33 seconds like John Cage. To be really modern, you must create works of art that take modern life, in all its disconnectedness, and bring it to fullness and resolution, as Philip Larkin did in his great poem "The Whitsun Weddings". It is fine for a composer to lard his pieces with dissonant sounds and cluster chords like Harrison Birtwistle, but if he knows nothing of harmony and counterpoint the result will be random noise, not music. It is fine for a painter to splash paint around like Jackson Pollock, but the real knowledge of colour comes through studying the natural world, and finding our own emotions mirrored in the secret tints of things, as Cezanne found peace and comfort in a dish of apples.

In art, beauty has to be won and the work is harder as the surrounding idiocy grows”

If we look at the true apostles of beauty in our time - I think of composers like Henri Dutilleux and James Macmillan, of painters like David Inshaw and John Wonnacott, of poets like Ruth Padel and Charles Tomlinson, of prose writers like Italo Calvino and Georges Perec - we are immediately struck by the

immense hard work, the studious isolation, and the attention to detail which have characterised their craft. In art, beauty has to be won and the work is harder as the surrounding idiocy grows. But the task is worth it, and this brings me to my third important word - redemption.

In the face of sorrow, imperfection and the fleetingness of our affections and joys, we ask ourselves: "Why?" We need reassurance. We look to art for the proof that life in this world is meaningful and that suffering is not the pointless thing that it so often appears to be, but the necessary part of a larger and redeeming whole. Tragedies show us the triumph of dignity over destruction and compassion over despair. In a way that will always be mysterious, they endow suffering with a formal completion and thereby restore the moral equilibrium. The tragic hero is completed through his fate. His death is a sacrifice, and this sacrifice renews the world.



The Badminton Game by David Inshaw

Tragedy reminds us that beauty is a redemptive presence in our lives. It is the face of love, shining in the midst of desolation. We should not be surprised that many of the most beautiful works of modern art have emerged in reaction to hatred and cruelty. The poems of Akhmatova, the writings of Pasternak, the music of Shostakovich - such works shone a light in the totalitarian darkness, and showed love in the midst of destruction. Something similar could be said of Eliot's Four Quartets, of Britten's War Requiem, of Matisse's chapel at Vence.

Poetry mentioned here

- "They watched the landscape, sitting side by side/ - An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,/ And someone running up to bowl - and none/ Thought of the others they would never meet/ Or how their lives would all contain this hour." (from *The Whitsun Weddings* by Philip Larkin)
- "Footfalls echo in the memory/ Down the passage which we did not take/ Towards the door we never opened/ Into the rose-garden. My words echo/ Thus, in your mind." (from *Burnt Norton* - part one of *Four Quartets* by TS Eliot)

Modernism arose because artists, writers and musicians held on to the vision of beauty as a redemptive presence in our lives. And that is the difference between the real work of art and the fake. Real art is a work of love. Fake art is a work of deception.



Matisse's chapel at Vence

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Here is a selection of your comments.

I understand Roger Scruton's frustration with the over-mediatised contemporary art scene but in the end I feel he is making the same mistake as the people he criticises. That is, telling

us what "great art" is, making a hierarchy of "important artists" and not leaving us to make our own explorations of contemporary and historical culture to make what we want of it, each one of us. Moreover, his "modern" examples seem not to extend much beyond the first half of the twentieth century and I wonder if familiarity is an important part of his personal appreciation of works of art. David Inshaw, yes fine, but perhaps he is a personal friend of Scruton? Too many subjects are excluded - context, class, changing artistic media etc. Knowledgeable and thoughtful as he certainly is, I feel Scruton is defensive and could open himself up to many deep and rich experiences he is missing.

Will Menter, France

How refreshing to have a critic state clearly that beauty is worth striving for and one of the essential qualities of art. For too long now the public have been led by those whose financial interests combine to prevent the rest of us from seeing the obvious. Those interested parties have debased and denigrated all that we once held valuable, and they have done this in the name of art. This has left the inexpert in this field watching a game without rules, or worse, a game where those who profit from the game make the rules. The spectators meanwhile are so bemused they forget that once there was a purpose and a shared culture of which art was one manifestation. And this destruction of our shared heritage is not costless- it undermines our value system, and in the end, our society itself. When we hold nothing sacred- neither beauty nor truth, we are very close to destroying the very ground upon which we stand.

Jonathan Chiswell Jones, East Dean

I find myself both in agreement and rejecting ideas in this article. I am a scientist, who was schooled and began life working in the sciences at a time when we were told that it was impossible to be both a scientist and an artist. I totally rejected art, especially painting, drawing and poetry, viewing photography and science fiction as vastly superior. Then after many years as a bachelor, I suddenly found myself a wife who is an artist. This is very hard to adjust to. I had to find a way of looking at visual art and deciding whether it had value or not. I chose to look for whether it communicates with me or not. Not all real visual art is beautiful. For me Bacon's work is quite simply *VILE*. It celebrates all the nastiness in the source of the image. There is no doubt that the huge impact his work has on me demonstrates his artistry and sheer ability as an artist - I still prefer to look the other way. Of course, being married to an artist has effects on someone taught to believe in the fiction that art and science are immovably locked either side of an unbridgeable divide. To my total surprise, in my late 50s, I started writing poetry. Modern, non-rhyming, not necessarily rhythmic words that spill out as what I have been told is "flow of consciousness" poetry. I didn't even recognize that it is poetry until beaten into submission on this point (part of me still doubts this)... Interestingly, the painting I enjoy above all others, is a sketch in oils by Anna Ancher, the native of Skagen, who became one of the "Skagen's painters" (Skagnesmalere) around the turn of the 19 and 20th centuries. I can't even remember the title but it will live with me for the rest of my life. It depicts an empty street in Skagen in the heat of a mid-summer mid-day. The temperature is above 40 C and the painting radiates heat on the coldest of days. Why should it be so important to me? I've no idea - but neither have I any doubts.

David Walland, Billingham, UK

I have long been appalled by the contemporary art scene's elevation of individuals whose main skills seem to be to court publicity, (often through an ability to come up with an original idea that shocks, disturbs or is politically fashionable). Of course the art world is tied up with use of certain works as a store of value, originality as a means of creating high prices for works, and so making them only available to the super rich. Originality in my view should not have been accorded such status by the art establishment. In painting, artistic skill: the display of an exquisite mastery of form, use of colour, texture, harmony or deliberate controlled

disharmony, has been sacrificed to a gimmicky exploitation of fashionable and politically correct ideas. Conceptual Art has driven truly talented visual artists out of the room. It is about time that the power of the Art establishment was broken. They know who they are, and we must work to remove them from their elevated positions, so that we no longer are subject to fake art.

Jeff Laurents, Ramsgate, England

I am reminded of the critic Camille Mauclair (1872-1945) who wrote of the Fauvist painters (including Matisse that Roger Scruton does seem to acknowledge as being a great artist) "A pot of paint has been flung in the face of the public" when he says in the article "The culture tells them that a work is important if it is original, and the proof that a work is original is that the public doesn't like it. Besides, if the public did like it, why would it need a subsidy? Official patronage therefore inevitably favours works that are arcane, excruciating or meaningless over those that have real and lasting appeal" Does the reverse hold true that if most like it and it lasts then it must be great art. Perhaps then we should include the Athena poster "Tennis Girl" within the cannon of great art? I do like modern and challenging art forms and see it somewhat differently. I would define good and great art as that which contains a narrative, a 3 way conversation between artist, artefact and viewer. The best work makes you view life, environment, the human condition or current events in a new and different way. The political and moral commentary of Picasso's Guernica or the portrait of Myra Hyndley by Marcus Harvey made up of imprints of children's hands are powerful and challenging and above all meaningful. They allow your thoughts to chase down novel corridors which may not otherwise have been open to you. The work of Richard Long which while based in the landscape cannot claim the beauty that is inherent in the location, rather seems to me to be represent an exploration of humanity's history and impact upon the natural world - a psychoarchaeology if you will, speaking to me of millions of years of human/environment symbiosis. Anthony Gormley's body of work, including The Angel of The North is not beautiful in any conventional sense even though its form and craft are evident as is the redemption/resurrection that it embodies. Again a piece that was controversial and hated at first and now commonly accepted and valued by local people. I would agree that beauty is a worthwhile pursuit but beauty is not a static concept. The article implies a classical and static definition of beauty but to me all of the above mentioned works have their own sort of beauty and art can present a political redefinition of this - there are many examples of this but one which comes to mind is Marc Quinn's sculpture "Alison Lapper Pregnant" presenting the beauty of people despite unconventional bodies. I agree that much 20th /21st century art is driven by commercial motives and that some lauded work is tedious in the extreme having neither intrinsic interest nor a novel conversation. It is not alone in this historically. Many galleries have potboiler works by the Canaletto souvenir factory - the majority of his attributed output was not even touched by his brush yet his pieces sit along true masters such as Rembrandt and Turner. I agree that craft is important, but I am content that the craft may not be a physical one as long as the craft is evident in the mind - that 3 way conversation. However I think that to include redemption as a hallmark of great art makes no sense as this is only one of many responses that art can choose to stimulate "We look to art for the proof that life in this world is meaningful and that suffering is not the pointless thing that it so often appears to be, but the necessary part of a larger and redeeming whole" -is this a religious statement? In any case it is a statement only of what the author values. Art is like an argument - an argument can be coherent, provocative and be capable of giving one a new perspective or it can be trite, mundane, disordered or ill-founded with unsupportable assumptions. I think that the article advances upon the unspoken assumption that only the art preferred by the author is capable of being great and that the innumerable personal

conversations that others hold with art and its artefacts are therefore of lesser value. This is an unsupportable assumption and therefore it is a poor argument.

Richard Beckett, Birmingham

What I like is beautiful, formal and redemptive. What I don't like is fake. Above all, I am governed by contempt - it rules me utterly, preventing any of my thoughts from having good effect or at least from allowing them to communicate to others. Other people pass through the world of art, liking this and ignoring that. Appreciation being a form of resonance perhaps rather than perception. As time passes such appreciation communicates among the general group until some idea of what is good congeals, and this communication includes the work of critics and interpreters.

Tony harms, London

I think Roger Scruton is right, to draw a distinction between true and false art. I would like to add, as a writer myself, that when art - of any kind - stays with you and somehow burrows deeper into your soul over time (not the short sharp shock of the new and different), then it is true. It has a good deal to do with beauty and redemption, but also a kind of truth that speaks to the deeper inner parts of our being.

Deborah, Bristol, UK

I can still remember the difficulty that I had at school over Keats's 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.' I thought then, and still do, that I was in a big house, looking out over a formal garden with statues (our prefect's house at school had such a view) but I knew nothing of the allusions they represented, knew none of the names of the shrubs and flowers. I glimpsed some sort of intuitive light that shone through as though I knew this was important but I just didn't have the key to understand it. I have spent some time wandering around art galleries and indeed dabble in watercolour and oils myself, and when I look at a new painting I still tend to 'feel' its quality rather than interpret it through a set of cyphers. Or do I? How can any of us be free from the cultural conditioning that has made us what we are?

John Earnshaw, St Helens, Isle of Wight

I will no longer feel guilty about preferring Dutch Old Masters or French Impressionists to "modern" art. Rembrandt, as mentioned in the article, possessed great skill in representing what he saw, whereas much modern abstract art is literally just a series of lines and colours, which I do not possess the skills to "read into" any meaning.

Danny Kreft, Swadlincote