Art as Therapy

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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 impatience, 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 high 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 which 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.
The Seven Functions of Art
1 Remembering
2 Hope
3 Sorrow
4 Rebalancing
5 Self-Understanding
6 Growth
7 Appreciation

What is the Point of Art?

What Counts as Good Art?
- Technical Reading
  - Political Reading
  - Historical Reading
  - Shock Reading
  - Therapeutic Reading

What Kind of Art Should one Make?
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Remembering

We begin with memory: we’re bad at remembering things. Our minds are troublingly liable to lose important information, of both a factual and a sensory kind.

Writing is the obvious response to the consequences of forgetting: art is the second central response. A foundational story about painting picks up on just this motive. As told by the Roman historian Pliny the Elder, and frequently depicted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European art, a young couple who were much in love had to part, and, in response, the woman decided to trace the outline of her lover’s shadow. Out of a fear of loss, she made a line drawing on the side of a tomb using the tip of a charred stick. Regnault’s rendering of the scene is particularly poignant (1). The soft sky of evening hints at the close of the couple’s last day together. His rustic pipe, a traditional emblem of the shepherd, is held absentmindedly in his hand, while on the right a dog looks up at the woman, reminding us of fidelity and devotion. She makes an image in order that, when he has gone, she will be able to keep him more clearly and powerfully in her mind; the precise shape of his nose, the way his locks curl, the curve of his neck and rise of his shoulder will be present to her, while, many miles away, he minds his animals in a verdant valley.

It doesn’t matter whether this picture is an accurate rendition of the origins of pictorial art. The insight it offers concerns psychology rather than ancient history. Regnault is addressing the big question – why does art matter to us? – rather than the minor puzzle of what was the first pictorial effort. The answer he gives is crucial. Art helps us accomplish a task that is of central importance in our lives: to hold on to things we love when they are gone.

Consider the impulse to take photographs of our families. The urge to pick up a camera stems from an anxious awareness of our cognitive weaknesses about the passage of time; that we will forget the Taj Mahal, the walk in the country, and, most importantly, the precise look of a child as they sat building a Lego house on the living room carpet, aged seven-and-three-quarters.

What we’re worried about forgetting, however, tends to be quite particular. It isn’t just anything about a person or scene that’s at stake;
we want to remember what really matters, and the people we call good artists are, in part, the ones who appear to have made the right choices about what to commemorate and what to leave out. In Regnault’s image of painting, it is not simply the overall form of the departing lover that the woman wishes to keep in mind. She wants something more complex and elusive: his personality and essence. In order to achieve this an art object needs to attain a certain level of sophistication. There are many things that could be recorded about a scene, a person or place, but some are more important than others. We describe a work of art, which might include a family photograph, as successful when it manages to foreground the elements that are valuable but hard to hold on to. We might say that the good artwork pins down the core of significance, while its bad counterpart, although undeniably reminding us of something, lets an essence slip away. It is an empty souvenir.

Johannes Vermeer deserves his status as a great artist precisely in this regard because he knows how to commemorate the appropriate details. The woman depicted in Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window would often have looked rather different, such as when she was bored, cross, busy, embarrassed or laughing (2). There could have been lots of ways to paint ‘her’, but Vermeer has selected a particular situation and moment, when she is taken up, unselfconsciously, in thinking about a distant person or issue. By creating an atmosphere of intense stillness he conveys her capacity for absorption. The way her hands are holding the letter seems characteristic: she lightly clenches her fists when another person might support the letter on their open fingers. Perhaps this is a continuation of a clumsiness of early childhood. We can see her quiet intensity in the slight pull of her mouth as she reads. Vermeer encourages us to look carefully at this part of her face by setting it against a map which is a very similar colour to her skin, almost as though her mind is off somewhere inside the map itself. The clear light is, perhaps, a bit like her mind, which may operate with a clear, steady emotional brightness. Vermeer captures the core of his sitter’s personality. It is not just a record of a person, it is an image of what she was like in a particularly characteristic mood.

Art is a way of preserving experiences, of which there are many transient and beautiful examples, and that we need help containing. There is an analogy to be made with the task of carrying water and the tool that helps us do it. Imagine being out in a park on a blustery April day. We look up at the clouds and feel moved by their beauty and grace. They feel delightfully separate from the day-to-day bustle of our lives. We give our minds to the clouds, and for a time we are relieved of our
Hope

The most perennially popular category of art is the cheerful, pleasant and pretty kind: meadows in spring, the shade of trees on hot summer days, pastoral landscapes, smiling children. This can be deeply troubling to people of taste and intelligence.

The love of prettiness is often deemed a low, even a ‘bad’ response, but because it is so dominant and widespread, it deserves attention, and may hold important clues about a key function of art. At the most basic level, we enjoy pretty pictures because we like the real thing they represent. The water garden that Monet painted is itself delightful, and this kind of art is especially appealing to people who don’t have what it depicts (4). It would be no surprise to find a reproduction of a painting evoking watery, open-air serenity in a noisy, urban, high-rise flat.

The worries about prettiness are twofold. Firstly, pretty pictures are alleged to feed sentimentality. Sentimentality is a symptom of insufficient engagement with complexity, by which one really means problems. The pretty picture seems to suggest that in order to make life nice, one merely has to brighten up the apartment with a depiction of some flowers. If we were to ask the picture what is wrong with the world, it might be taken as saying ‘you don’t have enough Japanese water gardens’, a response that appears to ignore all the more urgent problems that confront humanity (primarily economic, but also moral, political and sexual). The very innocence and simplicity of the picture seems to militate against any attempt to improve life as a whole. Secondly, there is the related fear that prettiness will numb us and leave us insufficiently critical and alert to the injustices surrounding us.

For example, a worker in a car factory in Oxford might buy a pretty postcard of nearby Blenheim Palace, the historic seat of the Dukes of Marlborough, and overlook the injustice of the undeserving aristocrat who owns it (5). The worry is that we may feel pleased and cheerful too readily; that we will take an overly optimistic view of life and the world. In short, that we will be unjustifiably hopeful.

However, these worries are generally misplaced. Far from taking too rosy and sentimental a view, most of the time we suffer from excessive gloom. We are only too aware of the problems and injustices of the world; it’s just that we feel debilitatingly small and weak in the face of them.
People without much of an education in art tend to think that art should be about ‘pretty things’. The cultural elite gets very nervous about this. Beauty has been under suspicion for a while.

5. John Vanbrugh
Blenheim Palace, c. 1724

You have the postcard, I’ll keep the palace.

6. Henri Matisse
Dance (II), 1909

What hope might look like.
Cheerfulness is an achievement and hope is something to celebrate. If optimism is important, it's because many outcomes are determined by how much of it we bring to the task. It is an important ingredient of success. This flies in the face of the elite view that talent is the primary requirement of a good life, but in many cases the difference between success and failure is determined by nothing more than our sense of what is possible and the energy we can muster to convince others of our due. We might be doomed not by a lack of skill, but by an absence of hope. Today's problems are rarely created by people taking too sunny a view of things; it is because the troubles of the world are so continually brought to our attention that we need tools that can preserve our hopeful dispositions.

The dancers in Matisse's painting are not in denial of the troubles of this planet, but from the standpoint of our imperfect and conflicted – but ordinary – relationship with reality, we can look to their attitude for encouragement (6). They put us in touch with a blithe, carefree part of ourselves that can help us cope with inevitable rejections and humidations. The picture does not suggest that all is well, any more than it suggests that women always take delight in each other's existence and bond together in mutually supportive networks.

If the world was a kinder place, perhaps we would be less impressed by, and in need of, pretty works of art. One of the strangest features of experiencing art is its power, occasionally, to move us to tears; not when presented with a harrowing or terrifying image, but with a work of particular grace and loveliness that can be, for a moment, heartbreaking. What is happening to us at these special times of intense responsiveness to beauty?

The most striking feature of the small ivory statuette of the Virgin and Child – just 41 cm (16 1/4 in) high – is the face (7). It is a face of welcome, the kind of look we hope to receive when someone is unreservedly glad to see us. It may remind us how rarely we have met with, or bestowed, such a smile. The Madonna looks full of life, and the incipient gaiety, which looks as though it might break through at any moment, is filled with kindness. It's the sort of good humour that will include you, rather than mock you. Her beauty can give rise to mixed emotions. On the one hand, we are delighted by an awareness of how life should more often be; on the other, we are pained by an acute sense that our own life is not usually like this. Perhaps we feel an ache of tenderness for all the lost innocence of the world. Beauty can make the actual ugliness of existence all the harder to bear.
We appreciate beauty more when we are aware of life’s troubles.

8. Henri Fantin-Latour
Chrysanthemums, 1873

9. Henri Fantin-Latour
Self Portrait, 1861