

Artistic Issues

Artists have particular concerns about the works they create, and audiences have slightly different interests, but philosophers bring a third set of concerns, distinct from art's creation and enjoyment. Most of these concerns arise from other areas of philosophy, and focus on thought, emotion, value, ontology and epistemology. There are puzzles about the mental states, the distinctive feelings, the importance, the mode of existence, and the role of truth and understanding in art, and works of art offer examples and problems quite unlike other areas of our experience.

A major modern debate has focused on the role of an artist's **intentions** in the appreciation of artworks. A radical proposal was that an artist's stated intentions are irrelevant, because successful intentions are obvious in the work, and failed intentions are not part of the work. Some works seem to contradict what the artist claimed to be doing, suggesting that intentions may be unconscious. Hence we should just study the work itself. Biographies of artists may give the historical context, but not the artist's intentions.

Responses to this proposal say that you cannot appreciate or judge something if you don't know what it is meant to be. The title of a painting is often crucial for understanding, and if a composer says some music portrays the sea, we can hardly deny their claim. An artwork is a person's achievement, so we have to relate to the concerns of that person. Even in anonymous ancient works, we feel the presence of a creator wanting to show us something. Beautiful flowers are not artworks because we cannot empathise with their creator. Nevertheless, the artwork may not achieve quite what was intended, so the intention felt to be in the work matters more than a stated intention. The artist may even be lying, if the real intention is very private. Discussion is thus divided between the centrality of an artist's 'successful' conscious intention, and the intention perceived to be 'in' the work, ignoring any claims from the artist.

Judging by intentions is further complicated in the case of **copies** and forgeries, usually of paintings (because they are unique and valuable). Artists occasionally copy their own paintings, and comparing the works is very interesting. But an apprentice may copy a master's work (perhaps with supervision), which is harder to assess, and a modern forgery may bear a master's signature, and be accepted as an original. Prints are intended to be copied (up to a point), so that is no problem. Purists may say that only the work matters, and must be willing to accept a forgery as potentially better than an original, but most people reject that attitude. We care about the original, because we care about its creator, and we care about the achievement involved (which is quite different if it is a forgery).

Another issue is the nature of supposed '**representation**' in art. Some paintings, descriptions, and even parts of musical pieces, set out to accurately portray features of the world. Discussion focuses on the value of such activities. If a depiction of reality is very accurate, that seems to have less value than the thing depicted, and to be a mere exhibition of skill. If the value is in the distinctive vision of the artist, that gives accurate representation very little importance. When real historical figures appear in a novel, they almost become fictions. And why is a good painting beautiful even when it represents an ugly object?

One theory says that art is essentially an expression of feeling, but even if that is wrong, it is obvious that **emotion** is very prominent in artistic activity. To explain the emotion in music, the 'arousal theory' says that music is sad if it arouses sad feelings in the listener, but this seems wrong. Music everyone takes to be happy can make me sad, if it has painful associations. Unmusical people may have no emotional response to an emotional piece of music. The consensus is that emotions are embodied (and available) in the music, and sympathetic listeners are just responding to what is there. Words, sounds, colours and shapes can trigger feelings in us, and artists are skilled at using these tools to create works with strong and complex emotional effects. Art may trigger emotions which take us by surprise, because we rarely meet them in normal life. It is even suggested that some emotions found in art are never met anywhere else, though this would be hard to explain. The emotions in art are less threatening than real emotions, but we may perceive them and understand them more clearly in art.

A central question is whether **objectively** correct judgements are possible about art. Mathematics and physics can be objective because it doesn't matter who is making the judgements, but art needs personal and emotional involvement. It is foolish to reject expert views on maths and physics, but experts in the arts have less authority. However, diverse eras, cultures and individuals agree extensively about the 'greatness' of older works of art, and such judgements seem to reflect facts about the works. The difficulty is to demonstrate to neutral observers what those 'great' aesthetic facts are. One strategy says that we *treat* a consensus about greatness as objective, even though we have no rational basis for such treatment. This satisfies fans of the great work, but if the greatness of a work is a fact, then the neutrals *ought* to appreciate it (just as they ought to agree about maths and physics). Total relativism about artistic judgement ignores the features of famous works which have led to the consensus in praising them.

What is the point of art? Why do we, or should we, **value** it? It needs education to appreciate most art, but there are many artists, and audiences can be very large. If we take a broad and non-elitist view of the arts, then the majority of people get pleasure from them. So is it just a matter of pleasure, and hence nothing more than entertainment? Critics of the arts have said just that, and even seen the arts as rivals to superior rational pursuits. Fans of art think otherwise, and are struck by the seriousness and intellectual effort that can be involved, for both creators and audience. It is claimed that we gain self-knowledge, or knowledge of humanity, through the arts, and that the audience is in some way 'improved' by the experience, perhaps gaining clarity, or a healthier and more harmonious mental state. The arts may fill a gap in our lives, somewhere between mere sensation and pure reason.

Older attitudes to art have emphasised its **moral** importance, until a rebellion among artists asserted that art is morally neutral (with the slogan 'art for art's sake'). It had been assumed that beauty led to virtue (or is even the same as virtue), and that even music could improve character. Defenders of morality in art are torn between either requiring that art never be morally corrupting, or more boldly requiring that art only has value if it improves us. A plausible modern view is that art doesn't have to be moral, but it is much more interesting when it is.