
DENIS DUTTON
**THE ART INSTINCT: BEAUTY,
 PLEASURE, & HUMAN EVOLUTION**

REVIEWED BY
 HANNAH ROSE BURGESS

Denis Dutton's book *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, & Human Evolution* marks a turning point in the literature on aesthetics and art. The originality and incisiveness of thought, lucidity of style and cogency of argument all clearly signal that this book is, and will remain, a significant contribution to the history of thinking about art and our experience of it.

Dutton's book seeks to explain those universal features of art – inclusive of all cultures and times – by examining it through an evolutionary lens. He draws on a large and varied body of works to advance his thesis, from Johannes Brahms's Symphony no. 4 in E minor to *Finnegans Wake*. An obvious strength of this book is the author's wide and varied knowledge of the arts, which informs both his particular critical judgements, as well as the overall argument of the book. Dutton's own fieldwork in Papua New Guinea and the examples and experience drawn from this also prove invaluable in the context of this book. The extensive empirical component of *The Art Instinct* strengthens its arguments and contributes to its readability. This book will be enjoyed by both specialists in philosophy, aesthetics and art history, and also a much broader public. All readers, I think, will find it provocative, stimulating and controversial. This work tackles some of the most important and persistent aesthetic questions which have been puzzling us since Aristotle. It also raises new questions and pushes at the boundaries of the domain of aesthetics.

The primary goal of Dutton's book – to explain art and our experience of art in the terms of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution – may seem immediately odd. Darwinian evolutionary thinking has been successfully applied to many spheres of life, but to apply it to art seems somewhat counter-intuitive. Art, and our experience of it, is that aspect of human life which escapes rules and prescribed formulas. Its primary characteristic is surely originality and a departure from determinism. The other way round, it is in the arts that we find some

of the greatest manifestations of human rationality, wit and conscious control. Thus, to explain art in terms of a universal *instinct* for it could appear to be something of a contradiction in terms. Furthermore, for many well versed in twentieth and twenty-first century art historical and anthropological literature, the very notion of a cross-cultural definition of art, born of innate human nature, may seem politically and intellectually troubling. Dutton's book is a sustained attempt to dispel such prejudices.

One of the most important contributions to art theory and aesthetics that this book makes can be found in Dutton's discussion of the question 'what is art?' He offers a set of twelve Wittgensteinian-style 'cluster criteria' which, he argues, define art and our aesthetic experience of it. These comprise: direct pleasure, skill and virtuosity, style, novelty and creativity, criticism, representation, specific focus, expressive individuality, emotional saturation, intellectual challenge, art traditions and institutions and imaginative experience. Dutton's cluster criteria serve as principles against which we can judge the art status of various objects or acts. One may wonder whether such a set of criteria circumscribes the freedom or scope of our concept of art in any sense. The answer to this query must be, emphatically, no. The advantage of offering a cluster-definition is precisely that it remains flexible and fluid. Dutton's cluster-criteria offer us a definition of art which I find plausible, useful and illuminating. Its plausibility is reinforced in Chapter Eight, when Dutton applies these criteria to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) in an attempt to establish its art-status. The author's attempt to define art is both bold and admirable. The greatest value of such a move may lie not in the definition itself, but in the debate about it that will surely ensue.

Perhaps the best feature of *The Art Instinct* is the significant advances that it makes in discrediting the notion that art is culturally relative. Some very sharp scholarship adopts this view, but many of its forms can either be false or easily collapse into tautology. *The Art Instinct* takes a decisive stand against them. The chapter entitled 'But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art' is, in part, an attack on this. The author applies vigorous logic to reveal the incoherence of forms of this view. A particularly nice piece of reasoning occurs in Dutton's discussion of anthropologist Joanna Overing's claim that 'because the category of aesthetics is specific to the modern era', it therefore 'characterizes a *specific consciousness in art*'. She iterates further that 'the "aesthetic" is a bourgeois and elitist concept in the

most literal historical sense, hatched and nurtured in the rationalist enlightenment' (p. 65). Dutton responds:

it is striking how even writers who would reject 'our' intuitions as shot through with a bourgeois ideology or ethnocentrism, and who would prefer to stipulate definitions for their own theoretical purposes, are themselves reliant on the very intuitions they repudiate. Overing's argument by stressing 'the hidden dangers' for anthropologists of bringing concepts of western aesthetics 'to the task of understanding and translating other people's ideas about the beautiful' is reduced to contradiction and incoherence. She cannot have it both ways: on the one hand denying that aesthetics is a cross-cultural category, while on the other hand affirming that 'other people' also have 'ideas about the beautiful' (p. 67).

To this discussion I feel inclined to add one point. Namely, that a *theory* of aesthetic judgement is not a necessary condition of aesthetic judgment itself. It seems that Overing believes that aesthetic judgement could not have been a feature of human experience before the Enlightenment. Yet no one would seriously maintain that gravity did not exist before Galileo or oxygen before Joseph Priestley.

The Art Instinct also addresses some of the hottest topics in modern aesthetic theory, including the validity of appealing to the intentions of artists in understanding, interpreting and explaining art, and the theoretical problems surrounding art forgery. Of course, the problem of appealing to artistic intention is not a new one, but it is persistent and highly relevant to contemporary theories of art writing as well as literary theory. Dutton makes a case for the importance of understanding the intentions of artists. It remains unclear, however, exactly what Dutton supposes an understanding of intentions will contribute to. Is it our *understanding* of a work, our *appreciation* of a work, or our *aesthetic response* to a work that is enhanced through knowledge of artist intention? Dutton claims that 'It is not up to interpreters arbitrarily to impose conventions in order to produce an interpretation that puts the work in the best possible light' (p. 171). Why not? The author argues that irony, when it is intended to be such, is best appreciated when it is understood as irony (as opposed to being taken literally). In exploring the question the other way around, he claims that Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* might be a better book if it had been intended to be ironic, which it clearly was not. According to Dutton, to take it as ironic would be to 'endow the

work with an illusionary significance and value' (p. 171).

This is a mistake for two reasons. While bringing knowledge of artistic intentions to bear on our aesthetic judgements *can* contribute to our appreciation or experience of a work, such knowledge is in not necessary, and may not even contribute to our experience. For example, having the knowledge that a knife, carved in Tenochtitlan, is intended for use in human sacrifice, does not necessarily contribute to my aesthetic appreciation of it as a beautiful art object. Such knowledge may contribute to my appreciation of the object on other levels, but not necessarily my *aesthetic* appreciation. I may, in the light of knowing such an intention, be able to recognise that it is good of its kind or fitting with regard to its purpose. In this way, it may inform my aesthetic judgement by altering the stock of concepts that I bring to bear on it, or measure it against. Nonetheless, such knowledge will not necessarily strengthen my judgement, and could even hinder my appreciation of it. A rather famous objection to the importance of artistic intention is also worth noting. This concerns the gap between the intentions and outcomes. Many artists probably intend their works to be aesthetically pleasing, pictorially inventive and even, perhaps, stylistically groundbreaking. Obviously many such intentions are not fulfilled. An artist may intend their work to be beautiful, but if I, or any viewer, do not find it so, the intention of the artist cannot change our response. Dutton's argument downplays the importance of the viewing subject's *response* to art.

A highlight of *The Art Instinct* is Dutton's discussion of the possibility of the aesthetics of smell. The author argues against the possibility of smell becoming the medium for a 'grand art tradition'. He appeals to Monroe Beardsley's claim that the problem for the possibility of smell as an artistic medium is that smells have no 'intrinsic relations' existing between themselves. But this is not the case. They can be systematised, and indeed have been since the time of the Egyptians. Smells are now thought to fall into six main classes, namely, sweet, fruit, putrefaction-like, spicy and paint (terebenthene). Dutton also objects that 'smells are oddly without intrinsic emotions of the sort that seem to inhere in the structures of music or the expressively coloured forms of painting' (p. 212). I disagree. While perhaps Dutton is right in claiming that smells are not as emotionally expressive as music, I think that they are equal in this ability with colour. Red may signify hatred, passion, rage, love – or all of these. It

is powerfully evocative but equally non-specific in the emotion(s) that it evokes. Similarly, the dizzying smell of human blood will surely incite non-specific but powerful emotional responses – perhaps fear or concern. Likewise, the smell of freshly baked bread may evoke feelings of happiness and fulfillment. Smell, in my opinion, is deeply evocative of emotion. Dutton's discussion of smell will, I hope, provoke further dialogue and exploration in this fascinating new area of aesthetics.

The Art Instinct is witty, entertaining, well-reasoned and passionate. A striking feature of this book is the author's infectious love for the arts. This is second only to an obvious love for those who practise art and judge beauty; we creators and critics of the beautiful. This book is, and will remain, tremendously important.

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IAIN SHARP
HEAPHY

REVIEWED BY TOM BROOKING

Like many New Zealand historians, I have long been fascinated by Charles Heaphy's iconic watercolour painting *Mount Egmont from the southwards* because this audacious piece of promotional spin is at one and the same time visually appealing and amusing. To idealise Taranaki's less than symmetrical form, Heaphy blatantly reshaped the mountain; he showed it capped by large amounts of snow in summer and presented the vegetation as non-threatening and easily subdued. The mountain looked easy to travel around and through. In reality, however, it was impenetrable and at its lowest point stood higher than a man on a horse. The painting provides an extreme example of New Zealand Company propaganda. Some years ago I could not resist putting it in a History Bursary exam paper, knowing that many candidates would fail to realise that such an aesthetically pleasing image was also a blatant piece of real estate promotion. Further inspection of Heaphy's paintings reproduced in this book suggests that many of them have contributed to a romantic and nostalgic view of early colonial history in New Zealand. Thanks to Iain Sharp's fine book, we now know a lot more about the artist who produced these striking if unreal images, both as a man and as a painter.

A key to understanding this ambitious man – who never refused any patronage – is contained in the unusual dynamics at work within his family. His father, Thomas, had worked hard, owned property in the leafy London suburb of St John's Wood, and climbed into the middle class. Trained as an engraver, Thomas taught himself to paint and had much success with his depictions of street scenes of working-class London before moving upmarket to produce more elegant counterparts of the wealthy suburbs. He served as a war artist in the Peninsular campaign in Portugal, where he painted portraits of the wealthy, including one Arthur Wellesley, later first Duke of Wellington. This assignment won the attention of the Prince Regent and commissions followed from the profligate George. Thomas Heaphy, like Charles, also worked in watercolours and oils, which added to his commercial success.