



Rembrandt's Aristotle contemplating a bust of Homer (1653)

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## AESTHETIC UNIVERSALS

Denis Dutton

### Introduction

Art itself is a cultural universal; that is, there are no known human cultures in which there cannot be found some form of what we might reasonably term aesthetic or artistic interest, performance, or artifact production—including sculptures and paintings, dancing and music, oral and written fictional narratives, body adornment, and decoration. This does not mean that all cultures possess all the various arts. For example, there is no clear analogue in European

tradition for the Japanese tea ceremony, which is nevertheless considered by many to be an art form (Okakura 1906). On the other hand, are cases such as the Dinka, a Nilotic herding people who have no developed indigenous visual art or carving. Instead, their aesthetic interests seem to be directed toward poetic expression and, in the visual realm, toward the markings on the cattle that are so important to their lives: they are, so to speak, keen connoisseurs of cattle markings (Coote 1992). Even within the same cultural region there may be sharp contrasts: in the Sepik River region of northern New Guinea there is an enormous variety of wood carving, while in the Highlands of the same country there is very little carving, with vast effort channeled instead into body adornment and the production of decorated fighting shields.

### **Universalism in Traditional Aesthetics**

Such diverse genres and cultural variability of ways in which aesthetic and artistic interests are focused and expressed raises the question, might it be possible to identify underlying universal features present in all or nearly all artistic forms? It could be argued that much of the philosophy of art and aesthetics has amounted to an attempt to reveal the most important underlying universal features of art. So, to name three aestheticians, Leo Tolstoy believed the universal essence of art is its communicative capacity to tie people to one another (Tolstoy 1959), Schiller argued that art derives from a human impulse to play (Schiller 1967), while Clive Bell found what he considered to be its essential nature in “Significant Form” (Bell 1914). All such attempts to identify universal features of art share an element in common: they presuppose or posit the existence of a fundamental human nature, a set of characteristics, including interests and desires, uniformly and cross-culturally present in the constitution of human persons. In aesthetics, the emphasis on a stable human nature has been taken to entail two further ideas: first, that artistic activity of some kind will be a predictable component of any society (as predictable as, for instance, the use of language, the making of moral judgments, the existence of family organization, and the regulation of sex), and second, that art will itself have predictable content identifiable cross-culturally (just as unrelated languages possess similar syntactic features, kinship systems incorporate some kind of incest avoidance, and moral rules usually forbid in-group homicide).

This universalist conception therefore regards art as a natural category of human activity and experience. This is not in itself a new idea, but goes back to the greatest naturalist of Greek philosophy, Aristotle. He argued that we could expect to find similar arts (by

which he also meant technologies) being invented in independent human cultures all over the world. In discussing various ways in which the state has been divided into classes by cultures of the Mediterranean, Aristotle makes his view clear (*Politics* 1329b25) in an aside: “Practically everything has been discovered on many occasions—or rather an infinity of occasions—in the course of ages; for necessity may be supposed to have taught men the inventions which were absolutely required, and when these were provided, it was natural that other things which would adorn and enrich life should grow up by degrees.” As the existence of these arts and technologies sprang from a shared human nature, Aristotle further believed that their basic forms would also display similarities: so genres of spoken narrative and literary arts would everywhere evolve comedic and serious or tragic forms, there would be carvings, pictures, or other representations, and that, as with the development of Greek tragedy, these art forms would become more complex over time.

Aristotle regarded the visual and dramatic arts as naturally mimetic, in some manner representing something, whether in words, marble, or paint. He viewed the human interest in representations—pictures, drama, poetry, statues—as an innate tendency, and he was the first philosopher to attempt to argue, rather than simply assert, that this is the case: “For it is an instinct of human beings from childhood to engage in imitation (indeed, this distinguishes them from other animals: man is the most imitative of all, and it is through imitation that he develops his earliest understanding); and it is equally natural that everyone enjoys imitative objects. A common occurrence indicates this: we enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight is painful to us, such as forms of the vilest animals and of corpses” (*Poetics* 1448b). Aristotle’s frame of reference for generalizations was specific to ancient Greek culture, but it is impossible to dispute the claim that children everywhere play in imitation of their elders, each other, even animals and machines, and that such imaginative imitation appears to be a necessary, or at least normal, component in the enculturation of individuals. The other side of Aristotle’s mimetic naturalism holds that human beings everywhere enjoy seeing and experiencing imitations, whether pictures, carvings, fictional narrative, or play-acting. For Aristotle, the child’s fascination with a doll’s house with its tiny kitchen and table settings is not to be reduced to a desire for adult power, but in its imitative play is based in the instinctive delight in representation as such. This pleasure, he argues, can be independent of the nature of the subject represented: that is why the sight of a large, black fly walking over ripe fruit might disgust us in the kitchen, but can be a

source of delight in a meticulously painted in a seventeenth-century Dutch still-life.

A concept of naturalism akin to Aristotle's, but without its specified content, was advocated in the eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant and David Hume. Kant claimed that judgments about artistic beauty, which he called "judgments of taste," are more than expressions of merely personal, subjective liking: they have the necessary property of demanding universal agreement from the rest of mankind (Kant 1987). While Kant's aesthetics treat the demand for universality as a purely logical feature of judgments of taste, Kant also thought that there was a uniformity of human nature that validated the demand. He called this the *sensus communis*, or shared human sense. The pleasure of beauty for Kant derived from the way in which the experience of a beautiful object engaged the harmonised activity of the imagination and rational understanding in what he called disinterested contemplation, that is, experience of the object cut off from the merely personal and idiosyncratic desires and preferences of the individual. If I receive aesthetic pleasure from a Beethoven sonata, my affirmation of its beauty therefore implies the notion that all other human beings, were they in my position as listener, should agree. Kant's idea of the uniformity of human nature requires this implication, despite the fact that, as Kant also realized, in actual life there is frequent disagreement on questions of beauty: there are too many personal and cultural variables which affect aesthetic judgements to expect agreement in all cases.

David Hume, in his 1757 essay, "Of the Standard of Taste," also acknowledged disagreements in questions of evaluating beauty (Hume 1987). He nevertheless held, not unlike Kant, that "the general principles of taste are uniform in human nature." It is such uniformity, in Hume's view, that makes it possible that the "same Homer who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and London." While we may be temporarily blinded by fashion or prejudice to the value of classics such as the Homeric poems, we will sooner or later see their beauties, "which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments" in human beings of every epoch. The best works of art pass Hume's so-called Test of Time because they appeal to a human nature that remains constant in different cultures and in different historic periods.

### **Empirical Psychology and Universalism**

In the twentieth century, research into the existence of universal aesthetic values has come primarily from psychology and anthro-

pology. Although the speculative psychological theories of art in the work of Freud and Jung no longer excite scientific interest, the same cannot be said for more empirically-based psychology, especially work centered on perception. D.E. Berlyne's *Aesthetics and Psychobiology* (Berlyne 1971) summarized the state of psychological aesthetics and inspired considerable research since it was published. Following Berlyne, Colin Martindale has conducted many experiments attempting to establish universal patterns of stylistic change in art (Martindale 1990). In a varied series of studies conducted since the late 1960s, Martindale and his colleagues have shown that artistic change in all cultures rests not on an instinctive "will to innovate" but rather on a universal human desire to avoid repetition and boredom. The craving for novelty is based on well-known psychological principles of habituation, the principle that predicts the tenth mouthful of an interesting and delicious food will not be as piquant as the first, that people will sometimes change perfectly adequate wallpaper, and that ten Vivaldi concertos in a row may well prove tedious. Martindale calls habituation "the single force that has pushed art always in a consistent direction ever since the first work of art was made." It is the universal mainspring of artistic change.

Among many cross-cultural examples adduced by Martindale is the evolution of similes in French poetry. In the eighteenth century, Andre Chenier writes, "Beneath your fair head, a white delicate neck / Inclines and would outshine the brightness of snow." The connection between the white neck and snow might have struck its original audience as fresh; the connection is certainly closer than one found in Laforgue's later line that the sun "lies on top of the hill...like a gland torn out of a neck." Sun and gland are more remote images, but not as far apart as the relations given in two still-later lines from Andre Breton: "I love you opposite the seas / Red like the egg when it is green." This increase in metaphorical distance—outlandishness—is an example of "a historical movement of similes and metaphors away from consistency toward remoteness and incongruity." This progression can be generalised as follows: in the arts, a form, genre, or style is invented, and once established is gradually elaborated over time by increasing what Martindale calls the general "primordial content" of the style—its use of emotion, greater complexity and variability, more ornamentation. The "arousal potential" of the style or genre is gradually increased until some end point is reached where it is fully exploited. Attention then turns to the style itself, which is typically changed or abandoned in favor of a new style. The cycle repeats itself and this new style matures, again through the incremental increase of emotion, complexity, etc. Though Martindale does not

refer to Aristotle's evolutionary sketch of the history of Greek tragedy, Aristotle's account—increasing numbers of actors, the introduction of painted sets, complexity of plotting, language and costuming—fits his theory and so, Martindale is able to demonstrate, do the histories of British, French and American poetry, American fiction and popular music lyrics, European and American painting, Gothic architecture, Greek vases, Egyptian tomb painting, pre-Columbian sculpture, Japanese prints, New England gravestones, and various composers and musical traditions. As audiences become satiated, artists increase the psychic impact of art forms by turning up the volume, increasing density of words, vividness of images, making things more emotional, erotic, or shocking. The history of movies bears out Martindale's hypothesis well, with general increases in violent and erotic content for the last century. Similar patterns can be seen in the history of music in the progression from baroque to classic to romantic to modern.

The most recent research on universal features in art has come out of evolutionary psychology, which attempts to understand and explain the experience and capacities of the human mind in terms of characteristics it developed in the long evolutionary history of the human species. Evolutionary psychology postulates that human pleasures, such as the pleasures of sex or the enjoyment of sweet or fatty foods, have their genesis in evolutionary history: our ancestors who actively enjoyed sex and consumed fats and carbohydrates survived and left more living offspring than those who did not. The same argument can be applied to countless other aspects of the emotional dispositions of human beings, including, for example, responses to human faces and comportment, or to the threats and opportunities presented by the natural world and its flora and fauna. The argument can also be applied to art and its content.

Studies of human reactions to photographs of landscape habitats show patterns which are stable across cultures (Orians and Heerwagen 1992). Given a series of photographs, older children and adults, familiar with a wide variety of landscape types, showed no pattern of preference for any one type of landscape (scenes included tropical, deciduous, and coniferous forests, desert, and East African savanna). Young children, however, demonstrate a preference for open savannahs, even when the children had never seen such landscapes in real life. This predisposition survives from the adaptive history of the early ancestors of contemporary humans, whose emotional responses to the natural world were adaptively formed in the Pleistocene savannahs of East Africa. It is an expression of a general human tendency to prefer landscapes combining

open spaces and trees (preferable trees that fork near the ground, i.e., offer escape from predation), water, green flora, flowers, and variegated cloud patterns.

These preferences received unexpected confirmation when two artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, gained financial backing to conduct an extensive, systematic poll of the art preferences of people of ten different countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas (Wypijewski 1997). Their poll recorded surprisingly uniform interests in the pictorial content of art worldwide. The most favored color was blue, followed by green. Generally, people expressed a liking for realistic, representative painting, with water, trees and shrubbery, human figures (women and children preferred, or historical figures), and animals, especially large mammals, both wild and domestic. Komar and Melamid used the poll findings as the basis for producing paintings: an *America's Most Wanted* painting, and one for each of the nine other countries. The works had obvious tongue-in-cheek elements (the American painting showed children, George Washington, and a hippo beside a lake), but they were accurately in line with the poll results, tending to resemble each other, and moreover to resemble much standard calendar art, photographic or painted, of outdoor scenes. In commenting on the poll and their work, Arthur Danto has suggested that the fact the Komar and Melamid paintings looked like realistic European landscape or calendar art, rather than resembling the indigenous art of any of the countries where the poll was conducted, demonstrates the international power of calendars to form and influence conventional artistic taste and content preference. Kenyans, Danto notes, preferred an art that more resembled a realistic Hudson River School landscape than they preferred art in any recognizable African style; they also tended according to the poll to have calendars in their homes (Danto, in Wypijewski 1997: 134). Danto's explanation, however, begs the wider question: why do calendars worldwide feature landscapes that match the very content evolutionary psychology would predict? The answer to that question may well be the evolutionary psychology hypothesis which posits a Pleistocene genesis for such basic pictorial interests.

Another realm of uniformity of content is in narrative fiction. It has been said that the themes and subjects of literature are limitless. While this may be true in principle, in actual fact most world literatures tend to return a limited list of abiding vital human interests (Carroll 1995). These prominently include questions of life and death, sex and love, conflict in social relations, exploration adventure, and struggle and success in overcoming adversity. Aristotle had already noted the tendency for tragic narrative to focus on the

disruption of family relations: a mortal dispute between two strangers will be of lesser interest compared to a story of two brothers who fight to the death (*Poetics* 1453). Indeed, conflict within families is one of the most persistent themes in literature, from the Greek tragedies through Shakespeare, the Hindu epics, Chinese and Japanese literature, down to this afternoon's television soap operas.

Joining a long line of philosophic speculation that goes back to Plato, the linguist Steven Pinker has argued that drama and fictional narrative have didactic or instructional value for life. Stories are a way to explore strategies and scenarios for social and family relations and the general challenges of life before they are faced in reality: a kind of practice for living (Pinker 1997). If the basic adaptive value of story-telling for human beings was as practice for survival and reproduction, it should not surprise us that the prevalent, universal themes of the history of literature should also involve questions of survival and reproduction: sex, love, and death, as they would impinge on the life of a protagonist and his or her kin.

The interest in identifying such grand universal themes in literature may be granted, but it is hardly the whole story of art. The content of art which evolutionary psychology both partially predicts and partially explains as universal is not peculiar to high or fine art in any cultural tradition: this content is continuous with the content of the most mundane instances of story-telling, gossip, news gathering (including criteria of what counts as news), household decoration, craft traditions, popular entertainments, such as television dramas or sentimental fiction, tourist snapshots and postcards, sporting and patriotic events, landscaping of public parks and private gardens, and on and on, into virtually all areas of life and experience. So what of the so-called high arts? Ellen Dissanayake has theorized that the deepest aesthetic experiences bring together elements that are layered in the aesthetic response to art objects, performances, and occasions. These include the appeal of basic experiential qualities (e.g., sparkling lights, vivid colors, or arresting rhythms); the incorporation of such experience into rituals and activities which have a power to unite people in a sense of common purpose or shared emotion; the achievement of what she calls "evocative resonance," a feeling that there is deep and rich meaning embedded in the experience; and "satisfying fullness," the feeling that in the art experience something complete and significant has been accomplished by the percipient (Dissanayake 1997). The sense of intense social involvement in the experience of art is emphasized by Dissanayake, along with the fact that art works of



all kinds offer ways in which human beings can enjoy the pleasure putting to work their powers of discrimination and evaluation. The systematic application of these latter capacities, along with extensive knowledge of an art form, becomes connoisseurship.

### **Universal Features of Art**

Given all that cross-cultural investigation has so far accumulated, it is possible to list the signal characteristics of art considered as a universal, cross-cultural category. These features that follow are not necessarily criterial for the presence of art; on the other hand, it would be difficult to imagine a social practice that was characterised by most of them which was not art in some sense. Every feature on the list is, however, also present in non-art experiences and activities; reminders of these are included in parentheses:

(1) Expertise or virtuosity. The manufacture of the art object or execution of the artistic performance usually requires the exercise of a specialized skill. This skill may be learned in an apprentice tradition in some societies or in others may be picked up by anyone who finds that she or he “has a knack” for it. Where the skill is acquired by virtually everybody in the culture, such as with communal singing or dancing in some cultures, there still tend to be individuals who stand out by virtue of special talents. Technical artistic skills are noticed in societies worldwide and are generally admired. (The admiration of a recognisable skill extends to all technical areas of human activity where its presence is made apparent, from cooking to public oratory to marksmanship. In modern society, sport is a major area when technical virtuosity is publicly admired and rewarded.)

(2) Non-utilitarian pleasure. Whether narrative story, crafted artifact, or visual and aural performance, the art object is viewed as a source of pleasure in itself, rather than as a practical tool or source of knowledge. The embodiment of the artwork may be in some respect useful: a tool (a shield, a knife) or a means to information (a sacred poem). Aspects of the embodiment, however, give pleasure in experience aside from these practical or information/communication considerations. (This pleasure is called aesthetic pleasure when it is derived from the experience of art, but the pleasure of sport and play, or of watching larks soar or storm-clouds thicken, could equally be “for its own sake.”)

(3) Style. Art objects and performances, including fictional or poetic narratives, are made in recognizable styles, according to rules of form and composition. The degree of stylistic determination

varies greatly, as much in premodern cultures as in the arts of literate civilizations. Some art objects and performances, typically those involving religious practice, are tightly circumscribed by tradition, while others are open to free, creative, individual variation. A style may derive from a culture, or a family, or be the invention of an individual; styles involve borrowing and sudden alteration, as well as slow, changes. (Style is an element in almost all cultural activities beyond art, from language use to table manners; it is crucially but not uniquely important to art.)

(4) Criticism. There exists some kind of indigenous critical language of judgment and appreciation, simple or elaborate, that is applied to arts. This may include the shop talk of art producers or evaluative discourse of critics and audiences. Unlike the arts themselves, which can be immensely complicated, it has often been remarked that this critical discourse is in oral cultures sometimes rudimentary compared to the art discourse of literate European history. It can, however, be elaborate even there. (The development of a critical vocabulary and discourse, including criteria for excellence, mediocrity, competence/incompetence, and for failure, is intrinsic to almost all human activities outside of art.)

(5) Imitation. In widely varying degrees of naturalism, art objects, including sculptures, paintings, and oral narratives, represent or imitate real and imaginary experience of the world. The differences between naturalistic representation, highly stylized representation, and nonimitative symbolism is generally understood by artists and their audiences. (Blueprints, newspaper stories pictures, passport photographs, and road maps are equally imitations or representations. While imitation is important to much art—notable exceptions being abstract painting and music—its significance extends into all areas of human intellectual life.)

(6) “Special” focus. Works of art and artistic performances are frequently bracketed off from ordinary life, made a special and dramatic focus of experience. While there are plenty of mundane artistic objects and performances (such as decorated parts of Baule looms, or communal singing done to pass the time while mending fishing nets), every known culture has special art works or performances which involve what Ellen Dissanayake calls “making special” (Dissanayake 1997). These objects or performance occasions are often imbued with intense emotion and sense of community. They frequently involve the combining of many different art forms, such as chanting, dancing, body decoration, and dramatic lighting in the case of New Guinea sing-sings. (Outside of art, or at its fringes, political rallies, sporting events, public ceremonies such

as coronations and weddings, and religious meetings of all sorts also invoke a sense of specialness)


(7) Finally, the experience of art is an imaginative experience for both producers and audiences. The carving may realistically represent an animal, but as a sculpture it becomes an imaginative object. The same can be said of any story well told, whether ancient mythology or personal anecdote. A passionate dance performance has an imaginative element not to be found in the group exercise of factory workers. Art of all kinds happens in the theatre of the imagination: it is raised from the mundane practical world to become an imaginative experience. (At the mundane level, imagination in problem-solving, planning, hypothesising, inferring the mental states of others, or merely in day-dreaming is practically co-extensive with normal human conscious life.)

### **Relativism Versus Universalism**

In the generations that have followed the Second World War, humanistic scholarship has tended to emphasize the cultural context of all human activities. This has meant that in aesthetics, as much as in popular ethics and social theory, relativism has become a dominant orthodoxy: aesthetic values were understood as having their reality only relative to local cultural and historical conditions. A good work of art was therefore “good” only in a specific culture; cross-cultural standards were thought impossible to ascertain. A dismissive attitude toward universal values in art has been bolstered by countless anecdotes seeming to illustrate the cross-cultural unintelligibility of the arts. One such oft-repeated story concerns the Indian sitarist who, performing before a naive Western audience, was vigorously applauded when he’d finished tuning his instrument.

As mentioned earlier, theories of universal aesthetic value, which are dead-set against absolute relativism, go hand-in-hand with hypotheses about the universal nature of human beings; supporters of aesthetic relativism have therefore been generally hostile to such accounts. Scientific theories of human nature have been branded “essentialist,” and have been portrayed as potentially limiting human creativity and freedom or as having elements in common with racist varieties of biological determinism used by fascist ideologues in the first half of the century. The rejection of universalism, and with it the acceptance of culture as the ultimate determinant of aesthetic value, has also been seen by relativists as a way to oppose the notion of a European superiority in cultural value.

Aesthetic relativism, although adopted with the best of intentions, has blinded investigators to the elements arts have in common worldwide. Not every putative cross-cultural misunderstanding can be turned into a general denial of the possibility of universal aesthetic values. It is important to note how remarkably well the arts travel outside of their home cultures: Beethoven and Shakespeare are beloved in Japan, Japanese prints are adored by Brazilians, Greek tragedy is performed worldwide, while, much to the regret of many local movie industries, Hollywood films have wide cross-cultural appeal. As for sitar concerts, anyone who has sat through the tedious tuning of a sitar might well want to applaud when the music was finally set to begin. And even Indian music itself, while it sounds initially strange to the Western ear, can be shown to rely on rhythmic pulse and acceleration, repetition, variation, and surprise, as well as modulation and divinely sweet melody: in fact, all the same devices found in Western music.

A balanced view of art will take into account the vast and diverse array of cultural elements that make up the life of artistic creation and appreciation. At the same time such a view will acknowledge the universal features arts everywhere share and recognize that arts travel across cultural boundaries as well as they do because they are rooted in our common humanity. 

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Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

Homepage: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>

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