

# Art like Manna Tastes “to Every Man as He Wishes”†

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**ABSTRACT** | This text is an investigation into the manifold experiences and their interpretations provided by the perception of the art object and claims relativism in the meanings and interpretation of art. Beginning with speculations of diverse responses to art and reports of people from varied environments and occupations on their thoughts about their art experiences, the text concludes with supporting arguments from Joseph Margolis’ philosophy of art and aesthetics.

**KEYWORDS** | Margolis; Relativism; Interpretation; Perception; Aesthetic Experience

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† Steinberg (1962, 39). In this text Steinberg sees contemporary art similar to Manna from Exodus Ch.16

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## Aesthetic Experience – Art Perception

Philosophical discourse abounds with explanations about the role of the arts and of aesthetic experience for society and for the individual. For Kant (1987) the judgment of beauty created a *virtual* common sense amongst people. One of the most important theories is Hegel's historicist claim about art's assuming the spiritual and evolutive role in rendering consciousness and spiritual depth to the individual and to society. However, Hegel's (1975) discussion in favor of the arts is only carried as far as Philosophy's taking over this role from the arts to fulfill the completion of the spiritual depth and consciousness of humankind. Hegel does not question art, but takes it for granted as an already evolved meta-physical force of the object accepted as a work of art. Another important argument is on aesthetic education that is elaborated by Schiller (1954) who claims that rather than nature culture nourishes man's intellect and soul and through art and the contemplation of beauty opens the way to freedom. For Heidegger (2008), art's essence is poetic and creates contact with Being, establishing Truth. Many other philosophers, trying to define art have ventured into long discussions on nature and life and often on morality, where finally any definition becomes equivocal in the claim for universality against the diversity of art objects and spectators.

As obvious, aesthetic theories' final judgments about art revolve around abstractions such as 'truth', 'reality', 'being', 'spirit', words to which each person can give her own meaning without necessarily arriving at a clear understanding.

What happens when we are viewing a work of art, or an object that solicits our attention because of its formal or narrative qualities? It is possible as Clement Greenberg claimed that one's judgement of art is immediate at the instant of perception. But, does perception and the mental questioning and understanding stop there? How does a work of art, sculpture, painting, architecture or music involve us? I believe that we can only understand art's value by analyzing our relation with art objects. One of the most telling explanations of how music is heard and understood can be found in Marcel Proust's 'Swann's Love', when Swann is captivated by the sounds of a violin:

But suddenly it was as though she had entered the room, and this caused him such intense pain that he could not help clutching at his heart. What had happened was that the violin had risen to a series of high notes on which it lingered as though waiting for something, holding them in a prolonged state of expectancy, in the exaltation of already seeing the object of its expectation approaching, and with a desperate effort to try to last until its arrival, to welcome it before expiring, to keep the way open for it a moment longer, with its last remaining strength, so that it could come through, as one holds open a door that would otherwise close. (Proust 2018, 147)

Proust's descriptions seem congenial for anyone reading his novels. Yet, do the same sounds of music, and as well the same words and sentences evoke similar images and imaginaries for every individual? In short, does a work of art or an object created and formed to please cause the same feelings and impressions in every individual? We can ask the same questions for the creators or producers of objects that are called artworks. Are the intentions in producing such objects always the same for each creator or producer? According to Bourdieu (1996), "two persons possessing each a different habitus, not being exposed to the same situation and to the same stimulations, do not hear the same music and do not see the same paintings since they construe them differently, and so they are bound to bring forth different value judgements" (298-299). Baxandall (1972, 29-34) explains how light that is thrown on the retina is received by millions of cones which carry information to the brain where the interpretation of what has been perceived changes with each person.

When the word art is pronounced is the image or the meaning that it causes in the mind is the same for everyone? As we read Joseph Margolis on art, we see that he never ventures to give definitions or general claims about what he believes a work of art to be. Margolis' explanations regarding the art object are always open to be articulated and interpreted. The work of art is emergent, meaning that it assumes its identity contingently through time; as an object created by a human agent with intention and care which assumes different meanings and values through time as its identity and meaning change historically; it takes on meaning and identity as it is interpreted and interpretations are basically relativist. This means that the nature of the art object is not stable and is open to interpretations and varying uses.

The differences in evaluation and judgment of the experience of an art object, or rather of an object that we can define as an object of art because of the aesthetic pleasure it gives, changes not only according to the habitus of the spectator but also historically. This change is not only due to the social context but rather to the 'l'air du temps'. 'L'air du temps', as when we talk of the Baroque or the Renaissance, does not belong to one specific culture, but is rather an intercultural spatial and temporal quality that cannot be fixed in time zones.

Since the enlightenment art has meant mostly sculpture, painting and sometimes architecture, although in Diderot and d'Alembert (2022) painting and poetry were placed under the heading 'Imagination' and philosophy under reason. According to enlightenment philosophers, beginning with Kant, the aesthetic belonged to the realm of the mind and the arts were inductive to thought and contemplation. Kant's transcendentalism and Hegel's phenomenology of the spirit aimed at a notion of art that was considered to be common for every cultured person, in fact art offered the means of cultural education where the pure aesthetic approach also implied an ethical conduct although the realms of ethics,

aesthetics and reason were deemed separate. In spite of postmodernist and contemporary claims of diversity and the emergence of many inclusive thoughts from non-western philosophies, discourses on art generally favor universalist claims, often meaning painting and sculpture by the word 'art' and projecting philosophers' habitual cultural preferences and abstract concepts on art. The differences in what epochs may consider as works of art also reflect on the weakness of established universalist notions which build their theories often on examples of their own preferences.

Since the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of Feminism and Naïve and Primitive art, as well as the ground breaking exhibition in Paris, 'Magiciens de La Terre' (1989), artisanship, craft, needle and textile works began to be exhibited in galleries and museums. The value of handwork and craft began to take on new value although it never, even today, equaled that of the arts that supposedly calls for contemplation. The value of contemplation, even if seriously contested by contemporary pragmatist philosophers as Berleant (1991) or Margolis (1999), still holds true for rationalists and for those who believe in an uncontestable universalism for art.

But, is there really a common ground in the experience of works that are labeled art? If it is aesthetic, then what is the common factor of this aesthetic experience? According to Pierre Bourdieu, every individual finds a different value in the art object, according to her habitus which can never be common even within similar social classes. The individual who claims to have a special access to the world of art is often the one who has been educated to look for certain attributes in art objects. This means that the art object itself can never through its own qualities and contents dictate a common value and meaning for everyone. The world of art, with all its institutional gear and its historical diversity can never offer a unified aesthetic; even its most widely and deeply educated spokesmen cannot always agree on their evaluations, beyond few established judgements.

According to Thierry de Duve, who accepts Kant's judgements on beauty, since the early twentieth century the word beauty has to be changed with the word art (Duve 1996). If that is so, then for most people art would mean whatever is perceived or considered as beautiful; this could be a table well laid out with crystal and porcelain, a rug hung by the door to block the cold, someone's well coiffured hair, a poodle with a pink ribbon, or anything else. Therefore, not only judgements on one piece of art can have multiple interpretations from the negative to the ultimately beautiful, but even the same kind of definition can have many different meanings. According to Pierre Bourdieu, philosophical explanations of art generally do not mean anything specifically clear or objective (Bourdieu 1996).

Yet, when most people talk about 'art' the reference as to what kind of thing, with what kind of qualities people talk about as art is always vague. According to

Danto (1964) what gives an object the status of art is its inclusion in the art world. Danto gives the example of Warhol's Brillo Box made of wood, but otherwise looking exactly like one that could be found in a supermarket, the only difference being that Warhol's belongs to the artworld, it is exhibited in a gallery or a museum, and is conferred the status by the authorities of the artworld. For most lay people art is what exists in museums or galleries and what is chosen by 'experts'. The lay person accepts those objects as art if she sees some kind of similarity with what she thinks exist in museums. This general opinion is developed through literature, small talk, ideas of people one considers as 'knowledgeable' and with taste. Such general notions are historical developments fed by universalist philosophies that become common opinions.

According to Danto, the various types of art, e.g. 'expressionist non-representational', or 'representational non-expressionist', are never conclusive, that there will always be engendered new types defined according to existing types. Therefore, Danto claims that existing art types engender always new ones. This complies with the historicist claim that art is always engendering new art; art theories engender new theories. According to Bourdieu the historical change that art continually undergoes is also true for theories that are fed with new social conditions. Thus, the multiple meanings and values that objects considered as art are constantly changing through new social conditions, historical changes, new objects engendered as art, and art theories.

## **Art Experience**

With all these diverse understandings, there must be something that relates different people, not through the objects that we call art, but rather through the experiences all these diverse objects and activities arouse. What is that? To listen to what different people think art or the aesthetic experience to be may suggest a common definition. I have chosen people of different backgrounds, a young architectural doctorate student, a house maid, a north European diplomat, a retired person who had been working in numeric science, and a secretary, an artist and a curator

Let's see how their different explanations converge: 1. It is to do something with joy and care, to do something you enjoy, that is art. 2. To work in the field, to plant, to read a book, whatever you value and take pleasure in is art, said the house maid. 3. The doctorate student in architecture said: "Art is visual philosophy, or auditory thinking as with music." 4. The retired numerical expert said that there can be three explanations: "One is that art is something that resonates an interest; It creates a totally different way of seeing, something magical; it makes a difference in your life when you contact art." 5. The diplomat said: "Only human beings have this capacity, they have enjoyed art since prehistoric times, al-

though we do not know the purpose of their art we think they are beautiful, they are art; even when you do not recognize the content and meaning it touches you, like the painting in Krakow of Leonardo, 'the Lady with a Hermine' holds you captive; music relates to other forms of imagination, brings forth other images. Most people, even if they are bureaucrats want to do art if they have the possibility, most people if they do things that are artless dream of doing art one day, even as a hobby." 6. A retired teacher said that most children want to choose their profession because they think of it as something exciting and elevating, in a way this relates to what they think of as art. In all these statements the common idea is that art is something that gives pleasure, that opens up new possibilities, that creates an extension to one's life, and that enchants. This explanation puts the artistic or aesthetic experience in the realm of the everyday, in the core of the most human and thus elevates it to a level far above any universalist and rationalist claims.

Leo Steinberg whose writings have philosophical depth and a contagious excitement about works of art has used enlightening sentences about art: "the aura of an artwork is born in enchantment and nourished by reverence" (Steinberg 2020, 4). For Leo Steinberg perceiving art played a role in self-definition and was a living encounter which accentuated consciousness. In these definitions, the words 'living encounter', 'accentuated consciousness', 'enchantment' and 'reverence' are words that could also be used for experiences that people I interviewed talked about. Enchantment is a state of being joyful and elevated in the act of doing or perceiving something. Such an attribution of aesthetic quality to actions or objects is similar to modern and contemporary understandings of art and aesthetics that try to bring life and art closer. They make one realize that life itself, a happy and joyful existence or experience is an artistic one, and often induces the person to further artistic expressions. People who often feel this way may eventually write poetry, dance, make music or art.

My explanation, which has to be taken in its widest sense, is that art is similar to loving something, being enchanted by it, finding joy in relating to it. It creates a poetic consciousness that brings one close to an awareness of the fullness and finitude of life. In the 'Las Meninas' painting of Velazquez, or the Caravaggio paintings, as well as the abstractions of Rothko and the music of Mozart, the excitement they create through an awareness of the meaningful content, brings one close to feeling with great emotion the intensity of life albeit with the knowledge of its end. This awareness is filled both with joy and pathos.

I'd like to end this personal investigation on what art is, with a quote from Leo Steinberg where he ends his final resolution about contemporary art, remembering the Manna in Exodus: "... there lay a small round thing ... And when the children of Israel saw it ... they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat ... Gather of it every man according to his eating" (Steinberg 1962, 39). The text continues: "When I

had read this much I stopped and thought how like contemporary art this manna was: not only in that it was a God-send ... or in that no one could quite understand it—for 'they wist not what it was' ... whence the legend that manna tasted to every man as he wished; though it came from without, its taste in the mouth was his own making" (Steinberg 1962, 39).

## **Concluding with Margolis on the Arts**

Since his early education Joseph Margolis immersed himself in Medieval poetry, in painting and sculpture and in the culture of the old world. His philosophical interests and their development, in the resolution to upgrade Pragmatism, grew into an inclusive aesthetic thought that was nourished by his deep interest in the all too human. As a philosopher of the arts Margolis' aesthetic approach has, before all, the intention to clear aesthetic thought of logical and epistemological misjudgments. As a conclusion to my investigation about art, its meaning and experience, I will try to show how Margolis' conception of the arts reflects pragmatist values and leads us to an awareness of the multiplicity of art's meanings and experiences. His several discussions clarify art's role and importance pointing to logically erroneous arguments that he uses to clear aesthetics from universalist and binary claims; examples from his specific texts on the arts summarize his aesthetic philosophy and how his idea of the arts elucidates his concept of humanity. Using these arguments as a background to understand the many aspects of art in society and for the individual, I will venture on to investigate the way aesthetic perception and contemplation become important means for epistemology and consciousness. In my interpretation art can primarily be known not from the object but rather from how the spectator perceives its values and qualities. Also, using the background of Margolis' arguments, we can understand how perception and aesthetic experience lead to civilizing processes.

Margolis's (1999, 68) definition of the art object is stated as: "... physically embodied, culturally emergent entity." Each word here opens up deep meanings indicating the special status of the art object. This definition is a succinct summary of what I have been trying to demonstrate as the multiplicity of interpretations and experiences afforded by the art work. Margolis explains entity as an 'individuated, reidentifiable denotatum in the world of existing things" (Margolis 1999, 69). Individuated means that the art object is unique and one of a kind. Reidentifiable points to the fact that every time we turn to the art object we do again identify it as a 'one of a kind object'. Margolis (1999) claims that the nature of such entities is open: "Their interpretable content or Intentional history are open" (85). These entities have intentional properties, and are incarnate in non-intentional properties. Art objects have content that are intentional and can be interpreted but they find physicality in proper matter, in what Heidegger (2008)

calls 'mere things'. What concerns my argument here and what will in a way elucidate the above discussions is the fact that Margolis thinks this interpretative call of the art object is related also to its being a historical entity, and having an intentionality that is historically transformable. According to Margolis (1999) "We must forever adjust our theories to the evolving work of fresh artists and fresh critics" (93). This condition naturally creates both the openness of the art work and the relativism of its interpretation, being transformable in historical time.

Margolis's arguments, like mathematical equations, are naturally convincing because any claim he makes confirms his other pronouncements. For example, if the work of art's intentionality is bound with its historicity, it is natural that interpretation can only be relativist. When Margolis (1999) claims that works of art are "intrinsically interpretable" and that "interpretive objectivity is served by relativistic logic" (98), it follows naturally that there can be no binary conditions for the interpretation of works of art.

Margolis has always used his convictions about what it is to be human to endorse his claims about art and creativity. According to him human beings are singular in their capacity for language and their adaptability to diverse geographical conditions, without having an exclusively biological nature and without being bound to any habitat (Margolis 2009; 2001). The creative act that is open to inventions and to new uses, like language, produces works that are incarnated with spiritual qualities. One can never consider a work of art to be merely a 'thing' made of matter, as has been the case with several philosophers of the post-modern age. The work of art, as a painting, a piece of music or sculpture, architecture or literature is endowed with human qualities which cannot be interpreted only from one point of view; as any human being it cannot be reduced to a single understanding. As in some way being mimetic of the human, it is through works of art that we can have a true reflexivity of our realities through works of art.

In this comprehensive understanding of both the human and the work of art, Margolis has built a humanist philosophy which can help us approach art with infinite openness.

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