1
Evolution and Culture

One way of working our way into the kinds of questions that are central in the philosophy of art – What is art? What is the significance of art? How is art to be understood? – is by asking about art's origins. In this chapter, we will explore the contrasts between two divergent stories, one biological and the other cultural, about art's foundations.

According to the first, the activities involved in making and appreciating art are products of human evolution. As such, they are universal and old. The second view sees art as the product of a particular time and culture, that of eighteenth-century Europe. It maintains that the concept familiar to us today first emerged then and there. In terms of this account, the appearance of art was comparatively recent and initially localized.

1 A Biological Basis for Art

Here is a story that might be told about the biological basis of art's creation and appreciation by an evolutionary theorist:

> Art is universal. All over the world, mothers sing and hum their babies to sleep. Storytelling, rhyming, and dramatized enactments are present in all cultures. The same is true of music and dance, as well as of depictions of people and animals, along with designs and patterns, which are drawn in pigment or charcoal, molded from clay, and carved or whittled from wood,

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bone, or stone. Humans everywhere decorate and beautify their environments, possessions, and bodies.

Art also is ancient in its origins. European cave paintings date back more than 35,000 years. Others in Sumatra are of similar antiquity and some rock paintings of the Australian aborigines are at least 20,000 years old. Carvings and molded figurines appeared some 35,000 years ago, and from 20,000 years ago artifacts were regularly decorated with patterns and motifs. While much art is perishable or non-material, its former existence can be deduced from traces that survive. For example, musical instruments made from bones date to at least 35,000 years ago.

As well, art is a source of pleasure and value. Even if artworks serve practical functions, such as appeasing the gods in ritual ceremonies, their production, use, and contemplation usually provide enjoyment to those involved. Though the pleasure art engenders can come as a momentary thrill or chill, much art is a source of abiding satisfaction and deep fulfillment. It warms and adds meaning to our lives.

Indeed, we often regard it as helping to define our very identities: a man might be the kind of person who has a passion for rhythm and blues and who despises country and western; a woman might regard Sylvia Plath's poetry as central to her existence, so that she could become indifferent to it only if she underwent some dramatic change in personality or circumstances.

These three features – universality, historical age, and intrinsic pleasure or value – are indicative of the biological adaptiveness of the behaviors with which they are associated. In other words, these characteristics are symptomatic of underlying genetic dispositions passed from generation to generation because they enhance the reproductive success of the people who have them. The behaviors in question are universal because they reflect a genetic inheritance that is common to humankind. They are old in that traces of art-like behaviors go back 70,000 or more years. And they are a source of pleasure (like food, sex, and healthy exercise) in order to motivate people to pursue them and thereby to pass on their genes to future generations who will be successful breeders in their turn.

It's plausible, then, that the impulse to make and consume art is a product of biological evolution. It is important to be clear about what this means. The thought isn't that there is some single gene for art, or that art production and appreciation are inflexible and reflexive. The genetic bases of the production of art are undoubtedly complicated. They require the realization of complex systems and circumstances, both personal and social, for their activation. The behaviors to which they give rise are plastic, being subject to learning, influence, development, refinement, and the like. There can be no denying that art includes a huge, conventionalized, socio-historical component.

The idea, then, isn't that the making and consumption of art can be analyzed reductively as mechanical reactions blindly programmed by our

genetic inheritance. Rather, it is that they stem from and are channeled by biologically rooted inclinations that are then actively and intelligently taken up in ways depending on each person's individual, cultural, and historical environment. In other words, artists, performers, and their audiences all draw on biological agendas and energies, but how these are then expressed depends mainly on their cultural setting. The view with which this one is to be contrasted maintains that the behaviors associated with art are purely cultural and entirely conventional.

The evolutionary biologist faces a choice between two positions about the relation between human biological endowments and art. The first maintains that the making and consumption of art are directly adaptive; that is, they contribute to reproductive success (or, at least, did so in the past). According to the second, these propensities were not directly targeted by evolution, but they are a happy and inevitable byproduct of other behaviors that were.

A common version of the first approach notes that reproductive success depends on our attracting mates, which we do by advertising our fitness as a potential partner and parent. One way of doing this is by demonstrating that we have the particular skills and talents that will be involved. Alternatively, we might display in a general way that we have intelligence, originality, creativity, flexibility, and virtuosity in thought and action. And we can dramatize and emphasize our fitness by showing that we can afford the luxury of "wasting" our talents on activities that have no survival value.

Art-making and artistic performance, which so often require extraordinary skill and dedication in their conception, planning, and execution, while not being directed to survival in an obvious way, are among the ultimate tools for sexual advertisement and seduction. In this view, art behaviors, like the peacock's tail, have evolved through the process of sexual selection.

A different account takes a broader and perhaps more plausible view of art's evolutionary significance. Art plays a crucial role in intensifying and enriching our lives in general, both as individuals and communities. It brings us together as producers or performers and consumers or audiences and thereby engenders cooperation, mutuality, and a shared identity. When coupled with other socially important events, such as rituals and ceremonies, it heightens their already special powers. As such, it plays a vital role in transmitting and affirming the community's knowledge, lore, history, and values.

It enhances the reproductive success of the members of communities not by making sex more likely, but instead by contributing vitally to the creation of an environment in which individuals and their children can flourish. It generates mutual support and respect, a shared sense of belonging and caring, stability, self-confirmation, a feeling of control of or accommodation with nature, and so on.

It could be objected that the first of these accounts seems to undervalue the far-reaching significance of art within human affairs, and that the second does not distinguish a role specific to art as such. Meanwhile, both may make the tie between art and reproductive success closer than is believable.

If such criticisms prove strong, evolutionary theorists could fall back to the more modest alternative, according to which art is an indirect but important spin-off from other behaviors for which there has been evolutionary selection. It isn't difficult to imagine what these behaviors are. Curiosity, adaptability, intelligence, the ability to plan and reason, imagination, improvisatory facility, and patience are all characteristics that promote the survival of people and their heirs. And what is likely to pay off is that these capacities are general and rewarding for their own sakes, not tied in their application only to addressing a limited set of short-term problems.

But once such a being has evolved and finds itself with some spare time, it continues to employ its talents. It can busy itself with inventing new weapons or a more effective mousetrap, but it's as likely to make up stories, paint evocative pictures of the animals it hunts, decorate its hair with pretty flowers, test what interesting sounds it can make by blowing into a pipe, and so on.

No less important to it will be emotions and their expression, the communication of thoughts, and the development of manipulative and other technical skills. These, too, can find expression in the production of art; for example, in musical invocations by instruments of the tones of the human voice, in the versification of utterance along with the use of metaphor, assonance, irony, and the like, and in developing pictorial and other forms of representation.

2 The Cultural Invention of Art

Here is a second story about art's origins, as it might be told by a cultural historian.

> We think of the arts as a loose but natural collection – literature, drama, painting, poetry, sculpture, music, dance – unified by the fact that their products are to be contemplated for their own sake. As such, the arts are to be contrasted with the crafts, such as saddle-making, boat-building, and plumbing. The crafts are directed at the useful functions that their products can serve. By contrast, works of art are not mere means to ends but are ends in themselves. Their value lies within them, not in benefits and applications that come with their effects.
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> Other distinctions between the artist and the crafts-person indicate differences in their respective activities and products The crafts-person isn't expected to be original and he is good at his job to the extent that he can

> successfully follow the relevant rules, models, or recipes. A work of craft is good if it matches the appropriate template and performs its desired function. By contrast, the artist must be creative and original. Good art can't be produced by slavish rule-following and imitation. In fact, artists are often rebellious or eccentric in their personalities and their methods of production. Great artists are geniuses whose works transcend the rules and conventions of their time.
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> Meanwhile, the best art is often unique in its value and, in any case, all art is to be judged and appreciated only for the experience its features produce in a suitably placed observer. This spectator must distance herself from "interested" concerns – that is, from practical uses the artwork could be given, either for her personally or more generally – in order to make herself available to the appropriate experience. That experience involves the pleasurable contemplation of the work's beauty and its other aesthetic attributes, which are considered only for the sake of their contribution to its overall aesthetic effect.

If our conception of art is the one just described, then art is a product of a specific culture and history, not of biology. This conception is local and comparatively recent, not universal and old. It emerged in Europe over the Enlightenment and the modern age – that is, from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth – under the influence of specific socio-economic conditions that did not obtain elsewhere or in earlier times.

Historians of ideas dispute when particular elements of this way of thinking emerged. They also argue about whether nineteenth- and early twentieth-century developments in aesthetic theorizing misrepresent the views that first appeared in the eighteenth century. These scholarly debates will not detain us here. Despite significant differences between the view's variants, and despite the long period over which it emerged, by the early twentieth century the doctrines associated with this conception of art had become dominant in Anglo-American philosophy of art.

The story continues:

> Because art can be such only when made and appreciated as falling under the concept that identifies it, it follows that non-Western cultures do not have art in our sense, and that art as we now understand the notion was not produced in the West prior to, say, the early eighteenth century. Pieces from outside the ambit of recent Western cultures can become art through appropriation to the Western artworld, which is the constellation of traditions, practices, institutions, roles, and theories relevant to making and appreciating the repository of accepted artworks. And to the extent that Western culture has become thoroughly globalized, people from other societies can make art now. But those who have never shared the modern-age Western concept have not been creators of art, though they may have had their own, similar practices.

(As a concession to her opponent, our story-teller might allow that biologically based urges and interests would tend to encourage the flowering of some correlate to the Western notion of art in other, sufficiently stable, cultures.)

In ancient times, the various art forms were not recognized as comprising a unified group. Music, for example, was classed with mathematics and astronomy, while poetry was grouped with grammar and rhetoric. The first to link the art forms together explicitly and to separate them from other disciplines and activities were the authors of encyclopedias and books in the 1740s and 1750s. Also, when the term art (*ars* in Latin, *techne* in Greek) was used in earlier times, this was in order to distinguish works of art from works of nature. In other words, all humanly made things were works of art.

The term gained its current usage, in which it marks a special subset of humanly created items and opposes these to the products of human crafts, only in the late Enlightenment and modern age. As this implies, artists were not previously differentiated from crafts-persons, which was appropriate in earlier times given that almost everyone then worked by copying or borrowing, that individuality was not expected or highly valued, and that many members of a workshop might cooperate on the production of any given work. The job of an artist was that of a servant, usually either of the church or court. He – most were men – was often directed in what to do and when to do it. J.S. Bach, for example, was a church composer who had to produce new music on a weekly basis. Between 1704 and 1744 he composed 300 church cantatas, only one of which was published in his lifetime. Similarly, Domenico Scarlatti wrote more than 600 harpsichord sonatas for Maria Barbara, who became the Queen of Spain. Only 30 were published during his lifetime. Such composers had to produce a constant supply of music to fill the needs of the church, state, or court.

Though the individuality and skill of supreme creators like Shakespeare, Michelangelo, or Dante was acknowledged in earlier times, it was not until the nineteenth century in Europe that large numbers of artists established their independence. With this came the cult of authorship, signed as opposed to anonymous works, emphasis on originality, and the idea that the artist is inspired and creative in ways that mere crafts-persons are not.

Changes in the social status of artists of the time were a consequence of far wider alterations within society. There was a gradual swing of economic power toward the emerging merchant middle class. As a group, they had the wealth to patronize the arts and the desire to confirm themselves as equal in discernment to serious and refined members of the upper classes. This new market for art made it possible for an exceptional few "freelance" artists to survive precariously at the close of the eighteenth century.

This shift of art from the private to the public sphere coincided with the arrival of institutions and practices that are now considered fundamental to

the artworld. The late eighteenth century saw the appearance of public concert halls (along with the introduction of subscriptions for series of performances of new works), the art gallery and public exhibitions, the art academy and salon, art criticism and reviews, art history and biography, art theory, and a transfer of copyright for literary works from publishers to authors. In previously established theaters and opera houses, rearrangement of the seating and lighting focused the audience's attention on the stage, not on the rest of the audience.

Meanwhile, philosophers of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, including giants such as Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, set down the foundational principles of the new science of aesthetics. They argued that art is concerned with the beautiful and the sublime, these being the cardinal aesthetic properties. (Later philosophers list a greater variety of properties – balance, harshness, serenity, power, elegance, clumsiness, and so on – but these can be regarded as instances of beauty and sublimity or of their opposites.)

Beauty is a source of immediate delight, as when we find a rose attractive. An example of the sublime is the vastness of the night sky, with its countless number of stars. The experience of the sublime includes negative feelings of awe and insignificance in the face of nature's indifference, power, and magnitude, but it has a positive aspect also, to the extent that we become aware of ourselves as capable of grasping and comprehending such matters.

Where the beauty of a thing isn't judged in terms of its kind or function, but instead, in terms of its formal and perceptible properties as given directly to the senses, that judgment concerns what Kant calls free beauty. Some later philosophers offer such judgments as their primary examples of the truly aesthetic reaction. A concern with something's kind, function, or practical usefulness can interfere with a proper aesthetic response, it was thought, because this approach selectively structures what is perceived in the object, rather than allowing the object's features to announce their own significance, as it were.

To explain why not everyone who is prepared to encounter a thing's aesthetic properties can recognize them, even when their ordinary perceptual faculties are in order, eighteenth-century theorists posited the existence of a special faculty of aesthetic perception, that of taste. Only those with taste can truly experience an item's aesthetic properties and arrive at an objective judgment of their worth.

It was suggested that aesthetic experience of an item's formal beauty or sublimity is often not expressible in language. And aesthetic experience isn't solely perceptual. It's infused by a cognitive but non-conceptual process described by Kant as involving the free play of the imagination and the understanding.

It was not part of the agenda of these philosophers to disenfranchise art made prior to the eighteenth century or in sophisticated non-Western cultures. Indeed, they took their paradigms of art from ancient Greece and Rome, from the works of Homer and Sophocles. For example, the nineteenth-century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel argued that Western art had been in decline from the early Christian era. Others made reference to art from Egypt, India, and China. Schopenhauer, for instance, discussed Islamic and Indian art.

Nevertheless, the story, according to which art is an invention of eighteenth-century, Western culture, proposes that the conception of art that these philosophers were the first to articulate and analyze does not pre-date the eighteenth century. Their theories captured and described this new concept, even if they went on, anachronistically and inappropriately, to apply it more widely.

In summary, the second tale argues that the modern concept of the arts – which is our current concept and the one we are trying to analyze – crystallized out of the changing ideas and practices of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. People who do not distinguish art from craft do not share the same concept and do not make art in terms of that concept. The concept was not possessed prior to the eighteenth century, nor was it possessed outside the West before the globalization of Western culture. So, art isn't ancient and universal. It's a comparatively recent and originally localized socio-philosophical creation.

3 The Big and the Small Picture

The previous presentations were referred to as stories and were not attributed to particular authors. This is because each is a simplified composite assembled from a family of related positions. Individual theorists sometimes develop distinctive variants and often disagree with others who fall roughly in the same camp, as well as with those who do not share their basic premises. (See the readings section at this chapter's close for more information about who holds what view.) A more careful and sophisticated analysis would explore the detail of these differences.

Notice also that the stories have been presented uncritically. If they were to be cross-examined, we might raise issues such as the following: Can we reliably infer the biological origins and significance of complex cultural practices from their modern manifestations, as the biological theory seems to suppose? Or, can people make and appreciate art only if they possess and self-consciously apply the relevant concepts, terms, and theories, as is perhaps implied by the view that art is a recent cultural invention? Meanwhile, the plausibility of each of the competing strands within the broader theories should also be tested.

Instead of taking those directions, we will consider the apparent tension between the two theories and the attitude appropriate to that.

Both the biological and cultural views tap into important assumptions underlying our intuitive understanding of art. We're inclined to think art is grounded in and reflects our common humanity. The evolutionary story starts from there and proposes that there is a biological underpinning to the art-related interests and predilections we share. We also tend to think that art's local expressions are largely shaped by historical and social contingencies. The view that art is a cultural invention begins there and argues that art-related behaviors are not constrained by biology or evolution (except insofar as these fix our basic structure and physiology).

There is a genuine opposition between the positions. The one concludes that the making and appreciation of art has a universal, biological basis, even if these behaviors are directed and refined by the local cultural setting. The other, by contrast, describes the same practices as purely cultural in a way that escapes or transcends the influence of biology. Yet there is the prospect of reconciling them, since the widely held intuitions from which each begins are not strictly opposed.

There are two frequent responses to conflicts such as this.

The first proposes that the truth lies somewhere in the middle and that we should reconcile the two views by seeking their common ground. That isn't an easy option in this case, as it might be if the difference were one about the extent to which nature and nurture each contributes to how we behave in society. The disagreement in this case isn't about the relative strengths of these two inputs, but about whether our biology constrains or directs the nature of art at all once it has shaped our most basic physical and mental endowments. Moreover, there is no obvious middle ground between the proposal that art is very old and universal and the counterclaim that art is recent and local in its origins.

The second way of responding to such disputes is by suggesting the disagreement between the positions is more apparent than real. This would be the case, for example, if it turned out that they are not talking about the same thing. In what follows we will consider arguments against this option.

4 "It all depends what you mean by the word 'art'"

As was just observed, it might be thought that it is easy to resolve the appearance of conflict between the claim that there is a biological basis to art and the alternative that treats art as a cultural invention by noting that proponents of the two stories obviously do not mean the same by the term

"art." Since they are not discussing the same thing, differences in what they say do not indicate a disagreement.

If various people say of a mole that it's a burrowing mammal of the family *Talpidae*, a spy who remains dormant for a time before becoming active, a concentration of melanin on the skin, a pier or breakwater, and a unit of chemistry, they do not disagree because each is referring to a different meaning of the English word "mole." And if one person says a mole has dark velvety fur and another apparently denies this, saying that a mole is typically constructed of stone, wood, metal, or concrete, their disagreement is more apparent than real, because they have different meanings of the word "mole" in mind. According to this view, something similar is true of art when one theorist says it's universal and ancient and the other appears to deny this.

This seemingly simple solution needs to be carefully considered, however. It can't amount to the claim that each theorist can give the term any meaning she chooses. Both aim to provide a true tale about what "art" refers to in its ordinary, common use, so their accounts must be answerable to the term's ordinary meaning or meanings. The proposed solution could work only if the English word "art" has various publicly accepted but different meanings, including ones assumed by the two stories.

So far so good, but the proposed solution requires more: there must be no basis for regarding the one meaning as more conceptually foundational than, and thereby as covering and explaining, the other. Because, even if it were true that the word *art* has both meanings, the competing theorists might disagree about which is more conceptually central. In fact, this seems to be what is happening. So, the task of reconciling their theories may not be simple after all.

Here is a more sophisticated approach allowing that the two theorists differ in what they mean by "art" but acknowledging that a disagreement of substance remains. The person who argues that art is universal because it reflects behaviors and tastes conditioned in part by our biological inheritance might see the disagreement in these terms:

> The term *art* can be applied in a restricted way to Western "high" art, as it was developed in Enlightenment Europe and later. Equally, it can be applied in a restricted way to the aesthetically pleasing ritual artifacts of small-scale, pre-industrial societies, or to ancient Greek tragedies, and so on. But these specific, narrow applications of the term identify species falling under the umbrella of a single genus. Other species within this genus include folk, popular, domestic, and religious art. These differ while falling under the same genus, just as domestic cats differ from tigers though both share membership in the genus *Felix*. The theory describing art's biological basis aims to characterize the evolutionary forces shaping the behaviors that produced the genus, not the local concerns that led to its differentiation into species. It therefore

> can claim conceptual priority because it provides the most general and overarching account if our concern is to understand what art – all art, in its various species – is.

The person who argues that art is comparatively recent and local, being restricted to post-seventeenth-century Europe (until Western culture went on to colonize and overcome all others), conceives of the conflict differently:

> The term *art* or its equivalent has a history of use dating back millennia in which it identified anything that was made by humans, as opposed to works of God or nature. Gradually, it came to acquire a more specific application in Europe, in which it refers to works of art as opposed to works of craft. There is a historical thread between these different uses – the later one arose over time from the former. No conceptual or meaning tie was preserved, however. In its post-seventeenth-century use, the term took on meanings and associations quite distinct from its earlier ones. (Compare it with a word like "plumber," which has a modern meaning historically continuous but otherwise quite distinct from its ancient one, in which it designated someone who worked in the metal lead.)
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> Because the task at hand is to analyze our current idea of art, which cut its ties with past meanings when it was forged in the philosophical and social upheavals of the Enlightenment, the concept that must take priority is the comparatively recent, Western one, since that has superseded all others and there is no broader category under which art can be subsumed.

Our two imaginary theorists do mean different things when they talk about art, but that does not mean their disagreement is empty or merely "semantic." Each can acknowledge the meaning emphasized by the other, but they differ about which of these is central to the analysis.

Can their dispute be settled without begging the question in favor of one side or the other? We would prejudge the question, for instance, if we simply assumed that there is non-Western, pre-Enlightenment art in the relevantly current sense of that term, or if we assumed that Leonardo could not have produced art just because he probably did not distinguish his painting from the practical products of crafts-persons as sharply as we do. I am not sure that I know the answer to this question, though I feel that art is old and universal in ways that suggest no single culture or period can claim exclusive ownership of the concept.

What will become clear in following chapters is that how we approach many of the puzzles that arise when we think about art's nature and its place in human affairs is likely be affected by whether we lean to the view that assigns a biological role for human nature in art or, instead, to the idea that

art as we understand it is purely and arbitrarily cultural. That means also that we may be able to look back with new insight on this opening puzzle after we consider these further issues, taking them on their own terms.

Applications and Connections — the Museum, Tourist Art, Popular Art, and Ancient Art

As promised in the Preface, the first four chapters close with sections in which we briefly review some concrete applications of ideas presented earlier in each chapter. Here, we will apply the debate about the origin and function of art first to consideration of the status of the art museum. We will then go on to think about cultural tourism, the art-like practices of non-Western cultures, and prehistoric cave art.

One perspective regards the art museum negatively. It maintains that, when art is separated from the context of its creation and from its role in the life of the community, it is bled of its relevance and power. The job of art is to intensify and add significance to people's lives through its immediate involvement in things that affect them directly, such as religion and rites, courtship and domestic life, work, and entertainment.

When altarpieces are ripped from churches and displayed together in a museum, or when J.S. Bach's cantatas are performed apart from the eighteenth-century Lutheran church services to which they were integral, they can no longer engage with the daily existence of the community. To fill that void, something else, usually of lesser quality, replaces it. To display art in a warehouse, where it is pinned and labeled, is to kill it, to alienate it from the setting in which it matters to ordinary folk, thereby impoverishing their lives.

A different point of view is more positive. Art museums provide, as other settings do not, for the undisturbed contemplation of art, which is how it should be approached. Contextualizing artworks by presenting them together and ordering them by artist, period, and style is the way to optimize their appreciation. (By contrast, sitting through long sermons and Bible readings in order to hear Bach's music would be a boring distraction, and the gloomy interiors of churches offer conditions for viewing carvings and paintings that are far from ideal.)

Besides, Western high art over the past several hundred years was created for contemplation under the special conditions art museums and concert halls make available. The museum and concert hall are its natural home.

The argument continues: rather than removing art from the wider community, art museums and concert venues are publicly accessible institutions integrated into and catering for the societies in which they are housed. They bring art to people who otherwise might lack the opportunity to see

and hear it. (Previously, much art was the preserve of private wealth and not for public display.)

In addition, museums play important curatorial, preservative, scholarly, and restorative functions. They guard and treasure art that otherwise would have been lost as the social contexts in which it was produced were overtaken by the advancing tide of modern life.

The first, negative view of the museum, with its emphasis on the functional role of art within the community, echoes many of the sentiments associated above with the evolutionary theory of art.

Ellen Dissanayake advocates some such position. She is an American who studies human behavior cross-culturally and who regards the making and consumption of art as an evolved behavior, with the function of creating a community within which individuals can flourish. She argues that humankind isn't adapted to the alienating conditions of modern, industrialized, urban life, and that Western high art has lost its way over the past century, becoming increasingly esoteric, unrewarding, and irrelevant. Her paradigms for healthy, artful societies are small-scale, pre-industrial, non-Western ones.

Meanwhile, the second account, which stresses the thought that art should be contemplated in a manner that extracts it from its social backdrop and which regards institutions like the art museum as admirably suited to serving this purpose, harmonizes with aspects of the art-as-cultural-invention position.

In fact, though, the links just proposed as holding between the two pairs of opposed positions are extremely weak. Whether a person adopts the biological or the cultural account of art need not determine whether she goes along with the positive or negative account of the museum. Explaining why this is the case can help us understand more about the two debates: art as nature versus art as culture, and museum-based art versus community-based art.

Not all advocates of the idea that art belongs in and serves the community and not all critics of the museum take their stances because they believe that art is an evolved behavior. For example, the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey was not committed to an evolutionary account of art's origins or universality. Nevertheless, he wrote early in the twentieth century that art should be organically integrated with life's more everyday aspects, and he criticized the estrangement of art from the community when it is housed in museums.

Also, even theorists who are prepared to affirm the special value of Western high art can be disparaging of some of the museum's activities and policies. For example, some reject the acquisitive imperialism that has seen the global harvest of statues and other pieces from cultures across the world.

To mention a notorious case, ancient marble statues were removed from the Parthenon in Athens in the early eighteenth century by the seventh Earl

of Elgin. Despite repeated requests from the Greek government, the statues have not yet been returned from the British Museum. These critics of the museum desire the repatriation of works such as the "Elgin marbles," so that other societies can reclaim and more effectively preserve the integrity of their cultural heritage.

Similarly, advocates for the museum do not always suppose that art is a recent invention of Western culture, which is why museums usually include statues from Greek and Roman antiquity, medieval religious carvings and paintings, and so on. Nor do they necessarily reject the idea of non-Western and domestic art. In recent decades, materials originating in other cultures have been transferred from natural history to art museums, along with displays of the products of domestic skills such as weaving, quilting, and sewing. The spirit of this trend, seemingly, is one of belated recognition and acknowledgment.

As well, the practices of the museum are more embracing and community-directed than formerly. For example, there is a move to new styles of display, including theme rooms that bring together paintings, sculptures, rugs, screens, furniture, and the rest, as they might have coexisted outside the museum. These show how art is or was integrated with its social context.

Turning now to evolutionary accounts, it is clear that their proponents need not be automatically committed to denigrating the museum and praising community-based art practices. Not all such theorists regard art's evolutionary function as shoring up and affirming the community's beliefs, or value the celebration of cultural difference. Those who hold that art should have a universal appeal that transcends local, cultural differences could welcome the way in which museums insulate artworks from the particular social environments in which they happen to be created.

A yet more interesting observation draws attention to the fact that not all advocates of the theory of art as a cultural invention take a positive attitude to what was allegedly created. Some see the European creation of art as motivated by unacknowledged desires to insidiously promote elitist ideologies, often with patriarchal overtones. Accordingly, they condemn the art museum as an institutional embodiment of reactionary forces for cultural suppression. When the art museum takes in folk and non-Western artifacts, this is decried as appropriation and cultural colonization. And when it updates its styles of display, the new forms are challenged for being no less artificial and contrived than were the earlier fashions in presentation that are replaced.

Theorists of this persuasion argue that, if art can be invented, it can also be reinvented or replaced, and this is what is needed. They decry the art museum for serving as a tool of an artworld regime that should be overhauled or overthrown.

Ideologies of elitism are not the only dogmas to be wary of, though. Those who despise them sometimes seem guilty of their own distortions when it comes to the discussion of community-based art, especially that of small-scale, pre-industrial societies. It's widely assumed by Westerners that "primitive" cultures have art traditions that are old, simple, and stable. Because they have these features, it is reasoned, these traditions tap deep into the spiritual ethos and fundamental values of their home societies and of humanity more widely.

Cultural tourists seek out such communities, expecting to find special nourishment through contact with what are identified by the tourists as these cultures' arts. In doing so, they apply standards for authenticity they would never dream of imposing on Western art. No one would criticize an American composer for having been influenced by the music of foreign (European or Asian) cultures, or for challenging the conventions used by her predecessors. Neither would they condemn the performer for playing an instrument that was manufactured in Japan, or the performance because it's staged for a fee-paying audience many of whom are tourists. Yet performances of non-Western music in indigenous contexts are liable to be dismissed as inauthentic if there is any taint of Western influence or commercialism about what is done.

This double standard perhaps indicates that a Romantic ideology is responsible for shaping an inappropriate image in Western thought of what art is and how it functions within small-scale communities.

As Larry Shiner, a contemporary American philosopher, has objected, there is no basis for supposing that the so-called art of small-scale, pre-industrial societies is less eclectic, innovative, fusion-oriented, or financially motivated than our own varieties. (The evidence usually suggests that it is and always was like this.) In that case, there is also no ground for believing that community-based art is more real, rich, or "authentic" than the sophisticated, complex, recent, quickly evolving art movements of modern, industrial Western societies. Shiner takes this line not in order to validate Western high art but for the sake of debunking the mythologies Westerners weave around the products of other cultures, which he thinks are best not regarded as art.

Let's turn now to another strand in the debate between advocates of the biological account of art's basis and the art-as-cultural-invention theory. This subplot concerns the products of popular culture. Defenders of the view that art is old and universal are inclined to be inclusive, regarding modern, popular entertainments as art, if not always of the best kind. Some of those who claim that art is an invention of eighteenth-century Europe are more conservative. They put art on a higher pedestal than ordinary occupations and functional artifacts.

But as before, there isn't a neat match between these various stances. The evolutionary theorist can be conservative and elitist about what is to count as art, especially if she thinks that only a few people at any given time are able to derive selective advantage from their skills in making or appreciating art. Meanwhile, those who argue that art practices are arbitrarily cultural as a step to advocating the reform or rejection of those practices often include on the agenda a more liberal, democratic franchise for the "art" of the future. They would have us reinvent art to make it more encompassing and broad-based, less ideologically driven and politically slanted, and so on.

Modern-day cultural theorists tend to be critics of the art establishment and its practices, as was indicated above. Nevertheless, there is a long history of conservatism that equates art with the highest achievements of Western civilization and distinguishes art from works of popular entertainment, which are despised along with the crafts. A common charge holds that entertainments, because they aim to be accessible, inevitably target the lowest common level of taste by relying on stereotypes and formulas that inhibit the audience's imaginative and critical engagement with the ideas and values they promote.

The truth of these various allegations should be questioned, of course. When tested against actual examples, they often appear to be false, as the contemporary American philosopher Noël Carroll has shown. For example, much popular fiction is replete with distinctive characters, while genres like the thriller demand from their audience imaginative engagement and critical analysis.

Not all critics of the products of popular culture embrace the position that art belongs exclusively to post-Enlightenment Western culture, though. Some oppose, not folk or popular art as such, but what might be called "mass" art, which is the product of technologies of mass dissemination. Handcrafted works and others bearing the mark of individuality and authorship might be accepted as art, even if they come from outside the European high art tradition of recent centuries.

Though the approaches just described do not attempt to confine art to post-eighteenth-century high European culture, neither do they lend support to the theory that art is universal and old. The art establishment often accepts as art the outstanding examples of photography, popular music, movies, and the like. It does so, however, not in recognition of art's humble universality but, instead, to distinguish these particular pieces from the mainstream remainder of photographs, songs, and movies. In other words, a few works from popular and folk culture, from beyond the West, and from much earlier periods are promoted to the status of art because they are identified as exceptions that transcend their origins.

This isn't an attempt to democratize the concept of art. Instead, it represents an attempt to defend art's integrity by including within it what otherwise would qualify as plausible counterexamples.

It might be thought that the claims of the conservative can be defeated by drawing attention to facts testifying to art's wide existence. For instance, very old rock and cave paintings, such as those at Chauvet and Lascaux in France, are said to prove that humankind had art from its earliest beginnings. And the presence of indigenous forms of music and dancing in non-Western cultures is offered as showing that art occurs beyond the West.

The problem with these counterclaims is that the data can be interpreted in other ways. Here is the worry: we often have no idea of the intentions of the makers of these ancient pictures, or of how the pictures were regarded and used in their cultures of origin, yet we consider such matters crucial to the recognition and interpretation of contemporary art as art. Similarly, given familiar problems of language translation and of interpreting the practices of other cultures, when we believe art is found in them we might be arrogantly imposing our own conception where it has no place.

So, claiming that the rock paintings or non-Western dances are art simply begs, rather than answers, the question at issue. Where the available information fits more than one theory and the disagreement is about which theory, if any, can be proved, analysis of the issues, not more data of the same kind, is needed.

If the debate can't be settled by uncovering further evidence of the same sort, how can it be pursued? Here's how the defender of art's universality might continue the discussion:

> We share a common biology with the people of the late Pleistocene and of other cultures. As fellow humans, we have many desires, fears, emotions, and needs in common with them. Their worlds should not be completely impenetrable, therefore. After all, both anthropology and history are credible academic disciplines. There is no barrier of principle that separates their worlds from ours, so the enterprise of understanding what they do and of discovering concepts and practices they share in common with us is a legitimate and potentially successful one.

A second point concedes that, where we do not know the purposes for which the (possible) art of earlier times and other cultures was made, our understanding of that art is bound to be incomplete. In particular, we'll lack the knowledge necessary to appreciate its symbolic, metaphoric, and religious import, to name a few of the ways in which artworks can have significance. All that is necessary, however, is that we are able to identify such pieces as art, not that we are able also to appreciate the subtleties and

complexities they undoubtedly possessed for their makers. That we're not well placed to appreciate the art of other times and places does not entail that we can't correctly identify that art as such.

How do we make this initial recognition, though? Perhaps we do not need knowledge of a piece's origins or of its maker's intentions to detect within it properties of formal beauty, such as grace, elegance, and balance. (More will be said about aesthetic properties like these in chapter 3.) Perhaps it isn't difficult also to observe the centrality of such features to the design of the item in question. Where it's obvious that someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to create these effects, we can be sure they were regarded either as contributing to the thing's primary function or as of value in their own right. An item that satisfies these conditions has a strong claim to be art. If such features are absent or only marginal, either the piece isn't a work of art or, anyway, we can't tell that it was one.

One objection to the argument that we recognize cave painting and non-Western dancing as art on the basis of their humanly contrived beauty, denies that beauty is the hallmark in terms of which we recognize art as such. Much contemporary Western art could not be correctly identified as art on this basis. Here is the reply:

> The argument about cave art does not rely on the strong claim that all art displays formal beauty. The objection is right to reject this strong claim. Instead, the argument about cave art makes a weaker assumption: that the prominence of humanly created beauty in artifacts is sometimes a reliable indicator of the item's art-status. It proposes a thesis about art's history, not a definition for art: historically, the production of art was likely to start with and give prominence to the universal appeal of properties that will unreflectively strike the audience as beautiful.

This isn't to deny that complex semantic or semiotic properties, along with powerful emotional expression and skillful depiction, are not also significant in art, even at its outset. Neither is it to say that a focus on formal beauty had to remain central as art-making traditions unfolded. Indeed, such traditions could in time give rise to non-aesthetic and anti-aesthetic art. Anti-aesthetic art either sets out deliberately to eliminate aesthetic aspects in favor of other features, such as symbolic complexity. Or, alternatively, it aims to be ugly.

So, the argument claims only that some art, almost certainly including art's earliest forms, can be identified as such on the basis of the prominence it gives to beauty, where this result seems to be a consequence of deliberate human design.

There is a further, stronger objection to the argument that we can recognize old and non-Western art as such because of its humanly designed beauty. It denies that humans from different eras and cultures agree in their judgments

about the beauty of realistic depictions of animals and natural landscapes. In that case, the beauties we find in cave paintings and non-Western dancing reflect our own culture's tastes, and tell us nothing about how the paintings and dances were intended by their makers or perceived by their original audiences.

The denial that there are trans-cultural standards for aesthetic beauty is rejected by some evolutionary psychologists, who claim to have demonstrated a universal preference in children for savannah landscapes. In addition, surveys of people in many different countries by the Russian émigré artists Alexander Melamid and Vitaly Komar have revealed a surprisingly high level of homogeneity in aesthetic preferences for landscape features, content, balance, and color.

Such views, and the proper interpretation of the data, are disputed by cultural relativists, however. Either they deny that the aesthetic judgments of people from different eras and cultures truly agree, or they explain the agreement across contemporary cultures as due to the unconscious influence of the West and its values.

In this section we have considered applications and connections that reveal ways in which the division between the two theories discussed in this chapter could ramify into other areas. At the same time, the discussion serves as a warning. The debates that have been highlighted – about the role of the museum and the status of popular entertainments, for example – could be motivated by commitments unlike those involved in either of the two stories with which we began. Sometimes polar contrasts admit of intermediate and subtly graduated alternatives, and similar conclusions sometimes follow from divergent sets of premises.

So, even if the cases here might help us better understand and articulate what is at issue between the views with which we started, they should alert us also to other ways by which outwardly similar issues could come to the fore.

Questions

1 The inhabitants of a tropical island perform religious ceremonies in their temples each month at the full moon. To attract their gods to these rites and to entertain them there, they make elaborate floral and fruit offerings and perform exquisite dances and dramas.

Tourists who come to the island find these ceremonies fascinating, though they do not understand or do not care about their religious significance. So popular are the ceremonies with tourists that the natives begin to stage temple ceremonies also at the new moon, though they know none of their gods will attend at that time. Later still, they export

their dances and dramas to purpose-built performance venues where the tourists, who now pay a fee for entry, can watch them in comfort. The dances and dramas are shortened and simplified somewhat, to suit the tastes of the tourists.

Eventually, the natives are converted by missionaries and abandon their former religion. The temples stand derelict, but the dance and drama traditions are preserved for performance to tourists. The natives now view the dances and dramas not as religious in function but "for their own sake," which is how the tourists have always appreciated them.

Is this a story about the progressive degradation and ultimate loss of an indigenous art tradition or, instead, one about how a local practice evolved to produce art where there was none before? Are the tourist performances an authentic expression of the indigenous culture?

2 The people of all cultures and times sing to their babies, sketch animals and humans, decorate their pots, tell and enact stories, and so on. Can we accept this, yet deny they have music, painting, and drama? Can we allow they have music, painting, and drama, yet deny they have art?

3 Can a person make art if he or she does not have the concept of art?

4 Are there art forms found in other cultures that are not also found in the West? Do Asian shadow puppet plays and Japanese origami qualify as art forms, for example?

5 Could a facemask that is worn once for a religious ceremony and then discarded, be art? Could a ritual artifact that is used only in the dark, and can't therefore be seen, be art?

6 Suppose cups once used in the Japanese tea ceremony are put on display in cabinets in a museum. Does their separation from the ritual in which they have cultural significance and utility promote their status as art, or, instead, does it deprive them of artistic value?

7 Rhythmic songs have always been used to accompany repetitive labor. Sailors sang sea shanties, for example, as they hauled up the anchor. Modern devices can make such activities unnecessary. A powered winch raises the anchor; mills grind rice that was previously pounded by hand-held poles; woven materials are stretched by machines rather than between groups of weavers.

Imagine that someone tries to keep the old work songs of her community alive by forming a choral group. Are their performances authentic? Can the result count as art only if the performances are authentic? Would you argue the same way about songs in the same styles but newly composed by members of the group?

Readings

Among those who have argued that art is a practice evolved in the service of sexual selection are Geoffrey Miller, in *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), chapter 8, and Denis Dutton, in *The Art Instinct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

A more developed and appealing account is offered by the ethologist Ellen Dissanayake, in books published by the University of Washington Press in Seattle: *What Is Art For?* (1988), *Homo Aestheticus:Where Art Comes From andWhy* (1995), and *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (2000). She argues that art is a form of "making special" that enhances individuals' reproductive success by enriching and sustaining the kinds of cooperative communities in which they can flourish. Dissanayake is a critic of theories that see art as evolutionarily valuable merely as a tool for seduction.

A more philosophical discussion of the issues is presented by Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz, in "A Cognitive Approach to the Earliest Art," *JAAC* 69 (2011), 379–89. For a critical overview of evolutionary accounts of art, see Stephen Davies's *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Some philosophers have suggested that the units of cultural evolution are "memes" – that is, ideas, along with the mechanisms by which they are replicated and propagated – rather than genes. For an example, see *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) by Susan Blackmore. Daniel C. Dennett is one philosopher who has applied this view to art in "Memes and the Exploitation of Imagination," *JAAC* 48 (1990), 127–35.

The claim that there are universal habitat and landscape preferences is defended by Gordon H. Orians and Judith H. Heerwagen in "Evolved Responses to Landscapes," in *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, edited by J.H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, and J. Tooby (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 555–79. Also relevant is *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, edited by J. Wypijewski (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), and for critical discussion, Ellen Dissanayake's "Komar and Melamid Discover Pleistocene Taste," *PL* 22 (1998), 486–96.

For a famous account of the emergence in the eighteenth century of taxonomies grouping the fine arts together for the first time, see Paul O. Kristeller's "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951), 496–527, and 13 (1952), 17–46. In *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), Larry Shiner develops the idea that art is an invention of eighteenth-century Europe and accepts the corollary that art isn't found in earlier times or other societies. Rather than defending the special value of Western fine art, Shiner is inclined to reject it as elitist and patriarchal. A similar theme is presented in Paul Mattick's *Art in its Time: Theories and Practices of Modern Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Of course, many histories of aesthetics take it for granted that art was created in Homer's Greece, Michelangelo's Italy, Shakespeare's England, and so on, though

they acknowledge changes in the concept and the way in which it came to be applied. For an example, see Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz's *History of Aesthetics*, edited by C. Barrett and D. Pesch and translated by A. and A. Czerniawski, and R.M. Montgomery, 3 vols (The Hague: Mouton, 1970–4). For a historian's account of appreciation, collecting, and connoisseurship of the kinds associated with art but occurring prior to the eighteenth century as well as afterwards, see Joseph Alsop's *The Rare Art Traditions: The History of Art Collecting and its Linked Phenomena Wherever These Have Appeared* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982). Alsop identifies five cultures additional to that of Enlightenment Europe – ancient Greece, ancient Rome, Islam, China, and Japan – that independently developed traditions of collecting fine art and what he calls art "byproducts," that is, museums, art historians, connoisseurs, forgers, dealers, etc.

Among the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers who were important in developing philosophical theses and concepts concerning the aesthetic in nature and art were the Earl of Shaftesbury, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, Joseph Addison, Francis Hutcheson, Edmund Burke, Charles Batteux, Alexander Baumgarten, David Hume, Denis Diderot, K.W.F. von Schlegel, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich von Schiller, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Of special importance are: Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, first published 1790, edited by P. Guyer, translated by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, first published 1819 and expanded 1844, translated by E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols (New York, Dover, 1969); and G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, first published 1835–8, translated by M. Knox, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). For an historical overview, see Monroe C. Beardsley's *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966), chapters 8–10, and, for a more polemical account, George Dickie's *The Century of Taste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Defenses of the view that non-Western cultures make art are offered by Richard L. Anderson in *Calliope's Sisters: A Comparative Study of Philosophies of Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), H. Gene Blocker in "Is Primitive Art Art?" *JAE* 25:4 (1991), 87–97, and Stephen Davies, in "Non-Western Art and Art's Definition," in *Theories of Art Today*, edited by N. Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 199–216. In "Why Philosophy of Art in Cross-Cultural Perspectives?" *JAAC* 51 (1993), 425–36, Julius M. Moravcsik argues that art can be made by people who do not share with us exactly the same word or concept.

Denis Dutton criticizes the assumption made by many anthropologists that cultural differences prohibit the judgment that art occurs in non-Western societies in "But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art," in *Theories of Art Today*, 217–38. But for a philosophically sophisticated critique of some of these arguments, see Larry Shiner's "Western and Non-Western Concepts of Art: Universality and Authenticity," in *Art and Essence*, edited by S. Davies and A.C. Sukla (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 143–56. Shiner's discussion of tourist art is in " 'Primitive Fakes', 'Tourist Art', and the Ideology of Authenticity," *JAAC* 52 (1994), 225–34.

Two useful books discussing the role and function of the museum are *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective*, by Hilde S. Hein (Washington, DC: Smithsonian

Institute Press, 2000) and *The Idea of the Museum: Philosophical, Artistic and Political Questions*, edited by Lars Aagaard-Mogensen (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988). See also Maurice Berger, "Are Art Museums Racist?" *Art in America* (September, 1990), 69–77.

John Dewey's defense of community-based art is in *Art as Experience*, first published 1934 (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), especially 1–13. Dewey's position is criticized by Albert William Levi, an American philosopher, who defends the museum in "The Art Museum as an Agency of Culture," *JAE* 19:2 (1985), 23–40.

The distinction between art and craft is emphasized by, among others, the English philosopher R.G. Collingwood in *The Principles of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), chapter 2.

Critics of the contemporary culture of their time go back to Plato and are too numerous to list. Two well-known twentieth-century attacks are by the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno in "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941), 17–48, and by the social commentator and educator Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

Critics of the application of technology and procedures for mass production to art include the twentieth-century German philosophers Martin Heidegger in the title essay of *The Question Concerning Technology*, translated by William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), 3–35, and Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by H. Arendt and translated by H. Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1970), 253–64. In the long first chapter of *Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Noël Carroll demonstrates that many criticisms leveled at the mass-produced art-cum-entertainment of today either misconceive its function or underestimate its artistic variety and interest.