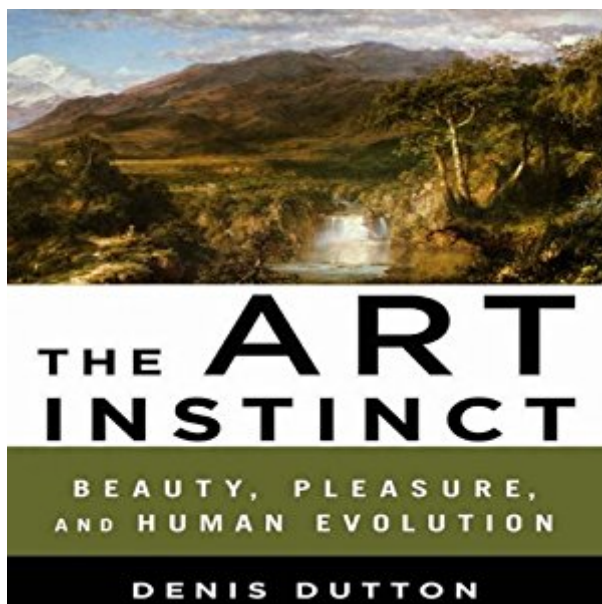


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The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, And Human Evolution



Synopsis

The Art Instinct combines two of the most fascinating and contentious disciplines, art and evolutionary science, in a provocative new work that will revolutionize the way art itself is perceived. Aesthetic taste, argues Denis Dutton, is an evolutionary trait, and is shaped by natural selection. It's not, as almost all contemporary art criticism and academic theory would have it, "socially constructed". The human appreciation for art is innate, and certain artistic values are universal across cultures, such as a preference for landscapes that, like the ancient savannah, feature water and distant trees. If people from Africa to Alaska prefer images that would have appealed to our hominid ancestors, what does that mean for the entire discipline of art history? Dutton argues, with forceful logic and hard evidence, that art criticism needs to be premised on an understanding of evolution, not on abstract "theory". Sure to provoke discussion in scientific circles and an uproar in the art world, The Art Instinct offers radical new insights into both the nature of art and the workings of the human mind.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I comment not as one knowledgeable in the evolutionary sciences or the philosophy or art, but as an artist curious of the opinions of those who attempt to explain what art is and what role it plays in our lives. As others have posted, I felt that a good portion of the book was an argument for the importance of considering Darwin's evolutionary views, sexual selection included, as they apply to our Art instinct (an intellectually overwhelming argument for me). Slowly at first, but eventually, Dutton moves into what I most enjoyed about the book, theorizing as to what great art is and why

we create and make art so important in our lives and in our world. I especially appreciated comments such as this: "The greatest works of art unite every aspect of human experience; intellect and the will, but also emotions and human values of every kind. Psychologically, some of the most staggering moments in aesthetic experience, the ones we may remember all of our lives, are those instants where the events that make up the whole of a vast novel, an opera, or a poem, sonata, or a painting fall meaningfully into place....Artistic masterpieces fuse myriad disparate elements, layer upon layer of meaning, into a single, unified self-enhancing whole". Beautifully, although dangerously stated, for such comments evoke the importance of "belief", which the scientist finds troublesome. I think this is the essence of the duality that any author faces when attempting to reconcile science with belief, cognitive with intuitive, mind with heart. I believe most would say that the art experience is heavily a non-scientific experience, difficult to analyze. For those who, like me, find the book initially overwhelming, hang in there, as one nears the end, things come together, centering on what I think most would consider the truth of the question, what is art? Primarily a matter of the heart.

Art and the philosophy of art have locked themselves up in a self-referential hidey-hole from which Denis Dutton attempts to pry them. He makes a persuasive case that not only is art not culturally specific ("they don't have our concept of art"), it's not exclusively cultural. There is an evolutionary basis to what we find aesthetically pleasing. The list of criteria by which something can be judged to be art or not art is fascinating by its very existence, and worth writing the book around. Nevertheless, I particularly perked up at the chapter on the adaptive uses of fiction, and again at the chapter on forgeries. I think that the topics Dutton brings up here are pivotal -- they have changed my opinion completely about what I do and why I do it. Furthermore, and I wish he'd expanded on it, there is a connection between what is aesthetic and what is moral. An example given in the appendix seems to bear this out. Bullfighting, he says, despite Hemingway's opinion, is not an art, because the bull is killed. Otherwise, it meets enough of his criteria to constitute an art. But why does he think that the bull dying relieves it of artfulness? There are at least two possibilities: first, that he has an aesthetic objection, that the death of the bull pulls the entire display down into an unartful literalness. Or, more simplistically, because it's morally wrong to kill animals needlessly. And are these the same argument? that is, is not the simple (presumably moral) assumption that it's wrong to kill animals needlessly a compacted statement of the first? I wish Dutton had spelled that out. (Philosophers seldom have the familiarity with animals that would be required if the subject were anything else. This is a cultural (I think!) misconception -- as though having a set of teeth made you a dentist.) The

book breezily assumes at least a passing familiarity with a wide range of art, and doesn't talk down to its readers. This is a feat. Read this book, and Steven Pinker, Brian Boyd and Ellen Dissanayake as well.

Dutton offers no real thesis to follow. His critical view of other's work illustrates a weakness in his own argument. His over use of the colon and dash do little to promote flow in his writing.

As an artist working almost exclusively in landscapes, with an avid appreciation for the influence of natural selection on human perception, (e.g., the subliminal effects of complimentary colors in the natural environment) I was eager to receive this offering. Though well written, and intriguing, it is ultimately rather dry and academic. It really didn't inform my art as I had hoped. When I recently returned to *The Art Instinct*, I realized that my lukewarm initial appraisal was premature, and based more on my preconceived expectations of content and topic, and how these might be introduced. The first two chapters provide, as it turns out, a well constructed and highly relevant foundation for fully embracing and appreciating the real value of the book for the artist. The final sentence in chapter 2 reads, ..."And along the way in developing all of this ("evolved life"), the arts were born". I should have held my judgement until I had actually read this remarkable book.

This is a remarkable book, tightly argued and clearly written. For too long the philosophy of art has tried to remain apart from science. *The Art Instinct* finally brings the two together. Its central thesis is that the reasons we like what we like and produce what we produce in the realm of art are rooted in human nature understood in terms of evolution. While readers may find some points to quibble with, the case is persuasive and the span of sub-topics is impressive. *The Art Instinct* is a landmark that will influence the philosophy of art for many years to come.

This is an extraordinary look at how humans became artists and wanted to look at art from our earliest origins. The famous 15,000 year old cave paintings, the Egyptian tomb paintings, tribal face painting - according to Denis Dutton, they all come from the same evolutionary urges. He covers lots of ground, including forgeries, to make his very convincing case.

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