

Can Good Art Make One a Better Person?

Art is a core part of human understanding. From the Chauvet cave to Banksy's Balloon Girl, art has been used to influence individuals. Aristotle, one of the founding fathers of western philosophy, argued that anything that allows us to discover universal truths is art. Though art is subjective, any artwork that fulfills this definition can be understood as good art. Given this definition we must understand that art plays a crucial role in moving individuals in society from "vicious to virtuous". Aristotle believed that this transition was the core role of society in order to help individuals become better people. Therefore, the question of whether good art can make one a better person is best assessed by three factors: the effect the art has on the audience, the relationship art has with the society and the intentions and influence of the artist along with the piece itself. This allows us to examine the intentions, effect and influence that a piece of artwork can have on individuals' morality. I will contrast and explore the responses of fundamental classical philosophers, comparing them to existentialists (Sartre and Kierkegaard), the enlightenment philosopher Kant as well as more modern philosophers, such as John Hospers, to show the developing attitudes of philosophers to artwork.

Art can have a profound effect on an individual. Plato, a teacher of Aristotle, believed that those who had an input on the soul had to be controlled. Equally, Sartre in his *Situations* (1949) wrote that, 'there can be no art except for and through others'.¹ Here both Plato and Sartre are highlighting the moral dimension that art carries. Sartre agrees with Plato by arguing that art is not art without an audience and without an impact. Sartre's view is typical of existentialist school of thought as Søren Kierkegaard, known as the father of existentialism reiterates this view, 'Life can only be understood backwards but must be lived forwards.'² This is important to acknowledge the moral impact a piece of artwork can have on an individual, for example, the emotive civil rights painting, "The Problem We All Live With" (1964). This seminal painting by Norman Rockwell is a prime example of the Platonic and existentialist view of art's moral dimension as it depicts a black girl 'shielded' by

¹ Sartre, JP. (1949) "There can be no art except for and through others." *Situations II*. Philosophical Library, New York City. p.93.

² YouTube, School of Life video – Søren Kierkegaard

four security men as she walks down the road to attend a white school. We can understand Kierkegaard's invitation to look at life and to desire change as Rockwell highlights the racial slurs and rotten tomatoes that punctuate the wall behind her. Here Rockwell picks up on Sartre's insistence on the importance of the impact. This emotive painting consequentially became a key influencer in the civil rights movement in America. Not only must this painting be considered as art because of its form but also because it directly correlates Aristotle's definition in revealing the universal truth of racism. Therefore, we can see that impact, as Sartre states, heavily affects the power and exposure this painting now carries. We can also see that there is a direct link to Plato's warning of the impact such painting can have on the soul.

Art has been used for centuries to influence and teach individuals whether through curricula in schools such as the 'Museums and Schools Program' in the UK (established 2012) or subsidized art galleries. Here we can see how valued 'good' art has become and the acknowledgement it carries in making individuals better people. Art influences and teaches individuals not only about important events or individuals of history, with paintings such as Eugene Delacroix's 'Liberty leading the people' painting (1830) conveying the strength of the French people in the French revolution, but also how to feel in different circumstances and how to view and live life.

Religious artwork has significantly influenced this for centuries. In the Christian artistic tradition both the stained glass windows depicting the stories of Saints in small parish churches and the imposing long naves of cathedrals (notably the Notre Dame with its vaulted ceiling) would provide solace and teaching for worshippers. These pieces of Christian artwork are telling the stories of the Bible with one main function other than aesthetic beauty; to teach the illiterate peasants the message of God. However, this is present not just in Christian art but also in arts of many other faiths with same goal, to reach out to all members of society. This pictorial storytelling practice is also shown in Buddhism particularly with sculptures into walls such as "The Great Departure" or "Indira's visit to Indrasala cave" (both 100AD – 200AD). The investment religion was able to give to artwork aided its exposure and therefore its ability to help individuals become better people.

Art has its roots in critiquing and promoting aspects of society. The relationship between art and the society it was created in has a clear influence on the affect on the audience. The varying attitudes and acceptance of artwork has changed over the centuries. Vincent Van Gogh only ever sold one painting in his lifetime ('The Red Vineyard' for only 400 francs) yet his "Portrait of Doctor Gachet" was sold in 1990 for \$82.5 million. This varying relationship between centuries is best illustrated by the Ancient Greek mythology of Prometheus who created little clay sculptures of men. He stole fire and brought them to life. In ancient Greece he was viewed as transgressive and defiant to the Gods, whereas in the Romantic era he became a figure of a creative artist.³ Furthermore, from this we can also see how its setting also affects the way a piece of artwork can affect an individual, as its popularity or position in its society will affect its coverage for the populace and the way individuals naturally view it. If a piece of artwork has been seen by society as controversial, for example, "Fountain" By Marcel Duchamp (1917), then this naturally affects the light in which an individual views it. The political or social statement that the artist has emphasized through making it a focal point of the painting even now raises questions for society.

This unique ability of the artist was identified by one of the most foremost thinkers of the enlightenment movement, Emmanuel Kant, as he describes, "Art not only distinguishes itself from other reality but also occupies itself within reality."⁴ This presence that artists can hold within society has also been recognized by the modern libertarian philosopher John Hospers as he states in an article on humanism and the visual arts, "It is that through the aesthetic process itself, in the very act of concentrating energy on an art object of great unity and complexities and depth, a kind of inner clarification is delivered that was not present before."⁵ Thus we can see how art cannot only praise society but also condemn it.

This has been shown in highly influential work such as the Guernica by Pablo Picasso, or Andy Warhol's' Campbell soup cans. Though both of these paintings are

³ BBC Sounds, BBC Radio 4: *In our time podcast, The Artist*, aired 28/03/02

⁴ Van Maanen, H (2009) *How to Study Art Words: On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values*, Amsterdam University Press. p.2.

⁵ Grudin, R. (20.03.20) *Humanism and the Visual Arts*. Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. Edinburgh.

diametrically different; they both critique and question the society they are living in. Warhol questions the throwaway, fickle and consumerist society of the 1960s through his reproduction of 32 Campbell soup cans that present themselves as a completely disposable source with no value. Whereas, Picasso's use of the monochrome palette absorbs the audience into a growling sea of anguish and despair where no body is whole- thus communicating his utter horror at the consequences of mechanized warfare. However, what both of these individual paintings have in common is the fact that they are critiquing the society they are living in and forcing their society to question how they can change their ways in order to become better people. They embody Kant by taking aspects or events in society and highlighting the fault in it through the alternative reality that they create.

Conveying how art holds a vital place in bettering society, governments have become more interested in investing in art and cultural facilities to make them more accessible. It is remarkable that the USA a country that is recorded as one of the highest for obesity and a founding nation for fast food has more museums than all the Starbucks and McDonald's combined. This corresponds with Aristotle's belief that governments should invest and make laws to help individuals move from vicious to virtuous. A key example of this important relationship between society and artwork was the decision to "Include culture and art in the US Cold War Arsenal"⁶, since the CIA was founded in 1947. It is remarkable that art played such a fundamental role here in influencing the way in which American society was to be portrayed, namely as creative and intellectual. Here, there are connotations to a paraphrased biblical statement, "By their arts shall we know them."⁷ Here we can see a correlation between religious art and art for political purposes. This statement identifies the importance of artwork for individuals within society and unifies both artists and society.

As we look at the relationship between art and society, we must also delve into the intentions and influences of the artwork along with the piece itself. It was the great Russian author, Leo Tolstoy who said, "Art is not a handicraft, it is a

⁶ Saunders, S F. (22.10.95). *Modern Art was CIA 'Weapon'*. The Independent. London.

⁷ Grudin, R. (20.03.20) *Humanism and the Visual Arts*. Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. Edinburgh.

transmission of the feeling the artist has experienced.”⁸ The lens in which society is viewed by the artist is key to the image and perspective that is given. An artist plays a fundamental role in analyzing society. Yet the artist can also serve the needs of the state. Propaganda has been used throughout history, to dehumanize, to justify and to embellish. A key example of this is one of the first female propaganda poster artists of the 20th Century, Valentina Kulangina, and her poster “To Defend the USSR”. As propaganda, she portrays Russian soldiers as giant robotic figures marching strongly to war. Kulangina is fueling the socialist state and image in trying to incite the feeling of an unstoppable strength that will defeat fascism in the 2nd World War. A classical example of this ‘fueling’ would be “Trajan’s column” in Rome which was built in AD 113, crucially amongst the 2,500 figures on the column Trajan makes an appearance 59 times in order to emphasize the emperor’s personal role in the campaign and thus heighten his power in Rome. Art necessarily is a reflection of society, as the artist is an agent of society, consciously (in the case of propaganda) or subconsciously (as a reaction to societal behaviors).

In early 2003 a mask was put over art and its influence. A blue curtain was hung over the replica of the Guernica at the security council of the UN. Officials thought that it would be inappropriate to be supporting the Iraq war with such a horrific anti-war backdrop. When lives were at stake, art had an influence. ‘Good’ art can make one a better person. However, there is no uniformed piece or type of artwork that can have such an affect. Therefore it is the role of the state and artists to produce and to show all forms of artwork in the most accessible way for individuals to develop themselves. Art has revealed failings of society and failings of individuals. Art conveys the truth and therefore can help every individual move from vicious to virtuous.

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