On Valuing The Arts

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The presence and value of arts in human life continues to be a source of inquiry. Writers and researchers have focused on aesthetic sensibilities, the physiology of the brain, and socioeconomic and political explanations. The RAND Corporation report, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts* (McCarthy et al. 2004), criticizes recent studies for overemphasizing the distinction between the instrumental and the intrinsic value of the arts. The distinction, however, is a false dichotomy—an incorrect, culture-bound concept of art that muddies the discussion of its value to society. It is precisely the intrinsic nature of art that makes it so valuable instrumentally.

Art is as universal to our species as food gathering, procreation, community, and warfare. Recorded history has shown us that art—in various forms—is found in every tribe, society, and civilization known to mankind. So omnipresent is art to human life, that anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake claims mankind could rightly be called homo aestheticus. She notes that paleontologists have found evidence of art—drawings and carvings—in societies dating back a quarter of a million years ago and far longer than the well-known drawings of bulls or horses in the caves of Lascaux (Dissanayake 2006).

According to Dissanayake, art comes into being when something ordinary is turned into something special—our innate capacity for movement is made into dance, sound into songs, poetry from ordinary language, the transformation of simple materials such as wood, clay, fiber, and stone into special objects.
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Dissanayake notes that although the English language does not have a verb for art, humans continually “artify” their lives.

- We do not merely clothe ourselves, we adorn our bodies with garments, trinkets, and markings.
- We use art to identify our social positions in society—rings noting marital status, jewelry showing religious preferences, clothing with group insignias, body markings, uniforms denoting specific occupations.
- We mark important personal events such as birthdays and weddings with ritual songs, dances, and decorations.
- We individualize our homes with décor.
- Our free time is frequently spent involved with art—going to movies, taking photographs, attending arts events, and social dancing.
- Societies use art to symbolize their distinctiveness and solidarity—our tricolored flag, the White House, the presidential monuments on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and our national anthem.
- Nations use art to highlight important historical moments—war memorials, parades on national holidays, and presidential libraries.
- Our theologies, concepts of higher order, are infused with artistic expressions that lend credibility, awe, and beautification to belief—elaborately adorned places of worship, reverential songs, and icons.

We are indeed an “arty species.” Art is part of our biological heritage, our DNA, our species’ nature. It has contributed to the manifest needs of human social life from the beginning of time and continues to do so today—to healing, play, entertainment, wonder, celebration, security, catharsis, transcendence, belonging, and social placement.

The universal existence of art should not be confused with the elevation of select artistic forms and expressions into something rarified. Each society places different values on its assorted artistic products. Yet, the high school student’s original poem and that of a poet laureate are both art. Watching a community theater or going to a Broadway play are both an art experience. The Sunday potter and Dale Chihuly are both making art.

Artistic expressions and policies that are determined to be of public importance—heritage monuments, cultural diplomacy, select literature/paintings/theater, arts education in the schools—must have their spokespersons. Nothing good can be taken for granted. Even clean air needs its advocates, and art is no exception.

Because empiricism is the holy grail of our times, we measure the arts to show various stakeholders the manifest ways art is important to individuals and society. It is our contemporary way of showing the contours of something, its validity, its impact, its utility, and its worth.
• We count the number of persons attending a ballet, concert, or museum to document interest.
• We advocate for the inclusion of arts in the K–12 education program believing in its centrality to an integrative education and knowing its importance as a learning tool.
• We document the extraordinary curative and palliative value the arts provide for the sick and infirm—how a depressed community can be rejuvenated by a cultural center; how youth in trouble are often refocused due to an after school arts program; how the arts aid a stricken nation in finding solace, and the importance of creative workers and arts-based firms to national and local economies.

One can always find holes in empirical studies. Yet these efforts, however in need of retooling or effective their results, attempt to show how art sustains our connectedness to place, to others, to nature, to spirit—to life. They remind various persons entrusted with our well-being that art is not frosting on the cake; it is the batter. That art is not separate from everyday life nor does it live in a rarified sphere open only to the aesthete or the highly educated. Rather, art is inextricably and necessarily entwined in our lives and must be continually protected and nourished.

REFERENCES

