

“Art” by Clive Bell

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Clive Bell, 1908, adapted from Henry Lamb

About the author ...

Clive Bell (1881-1964) studied history at Trinity College, Cambridge where he and many other undergraduates were influenced by G.E. Moore’s method of analysis exemplified in *Principia Ethica*. Bell writes that the students who met as a “reading group” in his rooms at Cambridge, together with the artist Vanessa Stephen (later his wife) and her sister, the writer and future Virginia Woolf, initiated the circle of friends known as the “Bloomsberries.” The Bloomsbury Group, as it came to be known, was a literary and cultural circle including, among others, the critic and historian Lytton Strachey, the novelist E. M. Forster, the artist Roger Fry, and the economist John Maynard Keynes. Bell’s shaping of a formalistic aesthetic theory along the lines of Moore’s analysis of good strongly influenced early twentieth century art criticism. Quentin Bell writes that his father’s *Art*, although “more quoted

than read . . . is one of the seminal books of its time.”¹

About the work . . .

In *Art*,² Bell outlines a formalist theory based on his definition of art as “significant form.” True art, he believes, exhibits combinations of lines and colors which engender intellectual recognition and æsthetic experience in persons of taste. The resultant æsthetic emotion, he believes, is unique, morally transcendent, and independent of other kinds of human emotion. Æsthetic value in art, he argues, is based solely on the forms and relations which evoke an ecstatic artistic response. Since æsthetic response to significant form in art is a basic and distinct emotion, forms and relations in art are intuited as a pure, simple quality intuitively known by individuals with the “rare gift of artistic appreciation.” Significant form itself is a quality of the artistic work and not of the resultant emotion or perception, even though the form initiates æsthetic experience.

Ideas of Interest from *Art*

1. According to Bell, what qualities should an æsthetic theorist possess in order to write well about art? Why are there so few good art critics? What qualities does Bell believe most valuable?
2. What does Bell think is the starting point for theories of æsthetics? Why is this so? How does Bell characterize the central problem of æsthetics? What is it that defines the essential characteristic of artistic works?
3. Summarize the argument Bell offers against æsthetic subjectivism. Is Bell a subjectivist? How important is “intellectual rightness,” the recognition of form independent of emotional significance for Bell?
4. How does Bell distinguish “significant form” from beauty? Why does Bell wish to avoid use of the term “beauty” when discussing art?
5. Why does Bell believe descriptive painting is not, in general, genuine art? What quality, according to Bell, is necessary for descriptive painting to have in order for it to be a work of art? How does he maintain the distinction between “æsthetic emotion” and “the emotions of life” as support for his thesis of “the autonomy of art”?

1. Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury Recalled* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914): 30.
2. Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914).

6. Explain Bell’s argument relating art to morality. In what sense are works of art “beyond morality”? If, as Bell says, art is moral, then how does Bell explain why art is beyond the reach of the moralist?
7. Characterize clearly Bell’s explanation of “significant form” in art. Why does Bell think so highly of primitive art?
8. How does Bell characterize the value of representative form in a work or art? What is representative form and how does it relate to significant form?
9. “Great art,” according to Bell, is independent of time and place. Explain whether or not Bell commits himself to a kind of aesthetic absolutism or idealism based upon the objective recognition of “significant form” by the aesthetically competent.
10. What is the one kind of representation Bell sees as essential to many works of art? Why is this so?

The Reading Selection from *Art*

[Qualities of an Art Critic]

It is improbable that more nonsense has been written about aesthetics than about anything else: the literature of the subject is not large enough for that. It is certain, however, that about no subject with which I am acquainted has so little been said that is at all to the purpose. The explanation is discoverable. He who would elaborate a plausible theory of aesthetics must possess two qualities—artistic sensibility and a turn for clear thinking. Without sensibility a man can have no aesthetic experience, and, obviously, theories not based on broad and deep aesthetic experience are worthless. Only those for whom art is a constant source of passionate emotion can possess the data from which profitable theories may be deduced; but to deduce profitable theories even from accurate data involves a certain amount of brain-work, and, unfortunately, robust intellects and delicate sensibilities are not inseparable. As often as not, the hardest thinkers have had no aesthetic experience whatever. I have a friend blessed with an intellect as keen as a drill, who, though he takes an interest in aesthetics, has never during a life of almost forty years been guilty of an aesthetic emotion. So, having no faculty for distinguishing a work of art from a handsaw, he is apt to rear up a pyramid of irrefragable argument on the hypothesis that a handsaw is a work of art. This defect robs his perspicuous and subtle reasoning of much of its value; for it has ever been a maxim that faultless logic can win but little credit for conclusions that are based on premises notoriously false. Every cloud, however, has its silver

lining, and this insensibility, though unlucky in that it makes my friend incapable of choosing a sound basis for his argument, mercifully blinds him to the absurdity of his conclusions while leaving him in full enjoyment of his masterly dialectic. People who set out from the hypothesis that Sir Edwin Landseer was the finest painter that ever lived will feel no uneasiness about an æsthetic which proves that Giotto was the worst. So, my friend, when he arrives very logically at the conclusion that a work of art should be small or round or smooth, or that to appreciate fully a picture you should pace smartly before it or set it spinning like a top, cannot guess why I ask him whether he has lately been to Cambridge, a place he sometimes visits.

From the reading ...

Why should [persons of artistic sensibility] stop to think when they are not very good at thinking?

On the other hand, people who respond immediately and surely to works of art, though, in my judgment, more enviable than men of massive intellect but slight sensibility, are often quite as incapable of talking sense about æsthetics. Their heads are not always very clear. They possess the data on which any system must be based; but, generally, they want the power that draws correct inferences from true data. Having received æsthetic emotions from works of art, they are in a position to seek out the quality common to all that have moved them, but, in fact, they do nothing of the sort. I do not blame them. Why should they bother to examine their feelings when for them to feel is enough? Why should they stop to think when they are not very good at thinking? Why should they hunt for a common quality in all objects that move them in a particular way when they can linger over the many delicious and peculiar charms of each as it comes? So, if they write criticism and call it æsthetics, if they imagine that they are talking about Art when they are talking about particular works of art or even about the technique of painting, if, loving particular works they find tedious the consideration of art in general, perhaps they have chosen the better part. If they are not curious about the nature of their emotion, nor about the quality common to all objects that provoke it, they have my sympathy, and, as what they say is often charming and suggestive, my admiration too. Only let no one support that what they write and talk is æsthetics; it is criticism, or just “shop.”

The starting-point for all systems of æsthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. All sensitive people agree that there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art. I do not mean, of course, that all works provoke the same emotion. On the contrary, every work produces a different emotion. But all these emotions are recognisably the same in kind; so far, at any rate, the best opinion is on my side. That there is a particular kind of emotion pro-

voked by works of visual art, and that this emotion is provoked by every kind of visual art, by pictures, sculptures, buildings, pots, carvings, textiles, etc., etc., is not disputed, I think, by anyone capable of feeling it. This emotion is called the æsthetic emotion; and if we can discover some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke it, we shall have solved what I take to be the central problem of æsthetics. We shall have discovered the essential quality in a work of art, the quality that distinguishes works of art from all other classes of objects.

[Significant Form]

For either all works of visual art have some common quality, or when we speak of “works of art” we gibber. Everyone speaks of “art,” making a mental classification by which he distinguishes the class “works of art” from all other classes. What is the justification of this classification? What is the quality common and peculiar to all members of this class? Whatever it be, no doubt it is often found in company with other qualities; but they are adventitious—it is essential. There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our æsthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto’s frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cezanne? Only one answer seems possible—significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our æsthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these æsthetically moving forms, I call “Significant Form”; and “Significant Form” is the one quality common to all works of visual art.

From the reading ...

These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these æsthetically moving forms, I call “Significant Form”; and “Significant Form” is the one quality common to all works of visual art.

At this point it may be objected that I am making æsthetics a purely subjective business, since my only data are personal experiences of a particular emotion. It will be said that the objects that provoke this emotion vary with each individual, and that therefore a system of æsthetics can have no objective validity. It must be replied that any system of æsthetics which pretends to be based on some objective truth is so palpably ridiculous as not to be worth discussing. We have no other means of recognising a work of art than our

feeling for it. The objects that provoke æsthetic emotion vary with each individual. judgments are, as the saying goes, matters of taste; and about tastes, as everyone is proud to admit, there is no disputing. A good critic may be able to make me see in a picture that had left me cold things that I had overlooked, till at last, receiving the æsthetic emotion, I recognise it as a work of art. To be continually pointing out those parts, the sum, or rather the combination, of which unite to produce significant form, is the function of criticism. But it is useless for a critic to tell me that something is a work of art; he must make me feel it for myself. This he can do only by making me see; he must get at my emotions through my eyes. Unless he can make me see something that moves me, he cannot force my emotions. I have no right to consider anything a work of art to which I cannot react emotionally; and I have no right to look for the essential quality in anything that I have not felt to be a work of art. The critic can affect my æsthetic theories only by affecting my æsthetic experience. All systems of æsthetics must be based on personal experience—that is to say, they must be subjective.

From the reading ...

I have no right to consider anything a work of art to which I cannot react emotionally; and I have no right to look for the essential quality in anything that I have not felt to be a work of art.

Yet, though all æsthetic theories must be based on æsthetic judgments, and ultimately all æsthetic judgments must be matters of personal taste, it would be rash to assert that no theory of æsthetics can have general validity. For, though *A, B, C, D* are the works that move me, and *A, D, E, F* the works that move you, it may well be that *x* is the only quality believed by either of us to be common to all the works in his list. We may all agree about æsthetics, and yet differ about particular works of art. We may differ as to the presence or absence of the quality *x*. My immediate object will be to show that significant form is the only quality common and peculiar to all the works of visual art that move me; and I will ask those whose æsthetic experience does not tally with mine to see whether this quality is not also, in their judgment, common to all works that move them, and whether they can discover any other quality of which the same can be said.

Also at this point a query arises, irrelevant indeed, but hardly to be suppressed: “Why are we so profoundly moved by forms related in a particular way?” The question is extremely interesting, but irrelevant to æsthetics. In pure æsthetics we have only to consider our emotion and its object: for the purposes of æsthetics we have no right, neither is there any necessity, to pry behind the object into the state of mind of him who made it. Later, I shall attempt to answer the question; for by so doing I may be able to develop my theory of the relation of art to life. I shall not, however, be under the delusion

that I am rounding off my theory of æsthetics. For a discussion of æsthetics, it need be agreed only that forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular way, and that it is the business of an artist so to combine and arrange them that they shall move us. These moving combinations and arrangements I have called, for the sake of convenience and for a reason that will appear later, “Significant Form.”

A third interpretation has to be met. “Are you forgetting about colour?” someone inquires. Certainly not; my term “significant form” included combinations of lines and of colours. The distinction between form and colour is an unreal one; you cannot conceive a colourless line or a colourless space; neither can you conceive a formless relation of colours. In a black and white drawing the spaces are all white and all are bounded by black lines; in most oil paintings the spaces are multi-coloured and so are the boundaries; you cannot imagine a boundary line without any content, or a content without a boundary lines. Therefore, when I speak of significant form, I mean a combination of lines and colours (counting white and black as colours) that moves me æsthetically.

From the reading ...

But most of us, however strict we may be, are apt to apply the epithet “beautiful” to objects that do not provoke that peculiar emotion produced by works of art.

Some people may be surprised at my not having called this “beauty.” Of course, to those who define beauty as “combinations of lines and colours that provoke æsthetic emotion,” I willingly conceded the right of substituting their word for mine. But most of us, however strict we may be, are apt to apply the epithet “beautiful” to objects that do not provoke that peculiar emotion produced by works of art. Everyone, I suspect, has called a butterfly or a flower beautiful. Does anyone feel the same kind of emotion for a butterfly or a flower that he feels for a cathedral or a picture? Surely, it is not what I call an æsthetic emotion that most of us feel, generally, for natural beauty. I shall suggest, later, that some people may, occasionally, see in nature what we see in art, and feel for her an æsthetic emotion; but I am satisfied that, as a rule, most people feel a very different kind of emotion for birds and flowers and the wings of butterflies from that which they feel for pictures, pots, temples and statues. Why these beautiful things do not move us as works of art move us is another, and not an æsthetic, question. For our immediate purpose we have to discover only what quality is common to objects that do move us as works of art. In the last part of this chapter, when I try to answer the question—“Why are we so profoundly moved by some combinations of lines and colours?” I shall hope to offer an acceptable explanation of why we are less profoundly moved by others.

[Æsthetic and Nonæsthetic Beauty]

Since we call a quality that does not raise the characteristic æsthetic emotion “Beauty,” it would be misleading to call by the same name the quality that does. To make “beauty” the object of the æsthetic emotion, we must give to the word an over-strict and unfamiliar definition. Everyone sometimes uses “beauty” in an unæsthetic sense; most people habitually do so. To everyone, except perhaps here and there an occasional æsthete, the commonest sense of the word is unæsthetic. Of its grosser abuse, patent in our chatter about “beautiful huntin’” and “beautiful shootin’,” I need not take account; it would be open to the precious to reply that they never do so abuse it. Besides, here there is no danger of confusion between the æsthetic and the non-æsthetic use; but when we speak of a beautiful woman there is. When an ordinary man speaks of a beautiful woman he certainly does not mean only that she moves him æsthetically; but when an artist calls a withered old hag beautiful he may sometimes mean what he means when he calls a battered torso beautiful. The ordinary man, if he be also a man of taste, will call the battered torso beautiful, but he will not call a withered hag beautiful because, in the matter of women, it is not to the æsthetic quality that the hag may possess, but to some other quality that he assigns the epithet. Indeed, most of us never dream of going for æsthetic emotions to human beings, from whom we ask something very different. This “something,” when we find it in a young woman, we are apt to call “beauty.” We live in a nice age. With the man-in-the-street “beautiful” is more often than not synonymous with “desirable”: the word does not necessarily connote any æsthetic reaction whatever, and I am tempted to believe that in the minds of many the sexual flavour of the word is stronger than the æsthetic. I have noticed a consistency in those to whom the most beautiful thing in the world is a beautiful woman, and the next most beautiful thing a picture of one. The confusion between æsthetic and sensual beauty is not in their case so great as might be supposed. Perhaps there is none; for perhaps they have never had an æsthetic emotion to confuse with their other emotions. The art that they call “beautiful” is generally closely related to the women. A beautiful picture is a photograph of a pretty girl; beautiful music, the music that provokes emotions similar to those provoked by young ladies in musical farces; and beautiful poetry, the poetry that recalls the same emotions felt, twenty years earlier, for the rector’s daughter. Clearly the word “beauty” is used to connote the objects of quite distinguishable emotions, and that is a reason for not employing a term which would land me inevitably in confusions and misunderstandings with my readers.

From the reading ...

To make “beauty” the objects of the æsthetic emotion, we must give to the word an over-strict and unfamiliar definition.

On the other hand, with those who judge it more exact to call these combinations and arrangements of form that provoke our æsthetic emotions, not “significant form,” but “significant relations of form,” and then try to make the best of two worlds, the æsthetic and the metaphysical, by calling these relations “rhythm,” I have no quarrel whatever. Having made it clear that by “significant form” I mean arrangements and combinations that move us in a particular way, I willingly join hands with those who prefer to give a different name to the same thing.

[Art and Nonart]

The hypothesis that significant form is the essential quality in a work of art has at least one merit denied to many more famous and more striking—it does help to explain things. We are all familiar with pictures that interest us and excite our admiration, but do not move us as works of art. To this class belongs what I call “Descriptive Painting” that is, painting in which forms are used not as objects of emotion, but as means of suggesting emotion or conveying information. Portraits of psychological and historical value, topographical works, pictures that tell stories and suggest situations, illustrations of all sorts, belong to this class. That we all recognise the distinction is clear, for who has not said that such and such a drawing was excellent as illustration, but as a work of art worthless? Of course many descriptive pictures possess, amongst other qualities, formal significance, and are therefore works of art; but many more do not. They interest us; they may move us too in a hundred different ways, but they do not move us æsthetically. According to my hypothesis they are not works of art. They leave untouched our æsthetic emotions because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by their forms that affect us.



Paddington Station, 1862, William Powell Frith

Few pictures are better known or liked than Frith’s “Paddington Station”; certainly I should be the last to grudge it its popularity. Many a weary forty minutes have I whiled away disentangling its fascinating incidents and forging for each an imaginary past and an improbable future. But certain though it is that Frith’s masterpiece, or engravings of it, have provided thousands with half-hours of curious and fanciful pleasure, it is not less certain that no one has experienced before it one half-second of æsthetic rapture—and this although the picture contains several pretty passages of colour, and is by no means badly painted. “Paddington Station” is not a work of art; it is an interesting and amusing document. In it line and colour are used to recount anecdotes, suggest ideas, and indicate the manners and customs of an age; they are not used to provoke æsthetic emotion. Forms and the relations of forms were for Frith not objects of emotion, but means of suggesting emotion and conveying ideas.

[Art and Morality]

The ideas and information conveyed by “Paddington Station” are so amusing and so well presented that the picture has considerable value and is well worth preserving. But, with the perfection of photographic processes and of the cinematograph, pictures of this sort are becoming otiose. Who doubts that one of those daily *Mirror* photographers in collaboration with a Daily mail reporter can tell us far more about “London day by day” than any royal Academician? For an account of manners and fashions we shall go, in future, to photographs, supported by a little bright journalism, rather than to descriptive painting. Had the imperial academicians of Nero, instead of manufacturing incredibly loathsome imitations of the antique, recorded in fresco and mosaic the manners and fashions of their day, their stuff, though artistic rubbish, would now be an historical gold-mine. If only they had been Friths instead of being Alma Tademans! But photography has made impossible any such transmutation of modern rubbish. Therefore it must be confessed that pictures in the Frith tradition are grown superfluous; they merely waste the hours of able men who might be more profitably employed in works of a wider beneficence. Still, they are not unpleasant, which is more than can be said for that kind of descriptive painting of which “The Doctor” is the most flagrant example. Of course “The Doctor” is not a work of art. In it form is not used as an object of emotion, but as a means of suggesting emotions. This alone suffices to make it nugatory; it is worse than nugatory because the emotion it suggests is false. What it suggests is not pity and admiration but a sense of complacency in our own pitifulness and generosity. It is sentimental. Art is above morals, or, rather, all art is moral because, as I hope to show presently, works of art are immediate means to good. Once we have judged a thing a work of art, we have judged it ethically of the first importance and put it beyond the reach of the moralist. But descriptive pictures which are

not works of art, and, therefore, are not necessarily means to good states of mind, are proper objects of the ethical philosopher’s attention. Not being a work of art, “The Doctor” has none of the immense ethical value possessed by all objects that provoke æsthetic ecstasy; and the state of mind to which it is a means, as illustration, appears to me undesirable.



The Doctor, 1891, Sir Samuel Luke Fildes

From the reading ...

Once we have judged a thing a work of art, we have judged it ethically of the first importance and put it beyond the reach of the moralist.

The works of those enterprising young men, the Italian futurists, are notable examples of descriptive painting. Like the Royal Academicians, they use form, not to provoke æsthetic emotions, but to convey information and ideas. Indeed the published theories of the Futurists prove that their pictures ought to have nothing whatever to do with art. Their social and political theories are respectable, but I would suggest to young Italian painters that it is possible to become a Futurist in thought and action and yet remain an artist, if one has the luck to be born one. To associate art with politics is always a mistake. Futurist pictures are descriptive because they aim at presenting in line and colour the chaos of the mind at a particular moment; their forms are not intended to promote æsthetic emotion but to convey information. These forms, by the way, whatever may be the nature of the ideas they suggest, are themselves anything but revolutionary. In such futurist pictures as I have seen—perhaps I should except some by Severine—the drawing, whenever it

becomes representative as it frequently does, is found to be in that soft and common convention brought into fashion by Besnard some thirty years ago, and much affected by Beaux-Art students ever since. As works of art, the Futurist pictures are negligible; but they are not to be judged as works of art. A good Futurist picture would succeed as a good piece of psychology succeeds; it would reveal, through line and colour, the complexities of an interesting state of mind. If futurist pictures seem to fail, we must seek an explanation, not in a lack of artistic qualities that they never were intended to possess, but rather in the minds the states of which they are intended to reveal.

[Primitive Art]

Most people who care much about art find that of the work that moves them most the greater part is what scholars call “Primitive.” Of course there are bad primitives. For instance, I remember going, full of enthusiasm, to see one of the earliest Romanesque churches in Poitiers (Notre-Dame-la-Grande), and finding it as ill-proportioned, over-decorated, coarse, fat and heavy as any better class building by one of those highly civilised architects who flourished a thousand years earlier or eight hundred later. But such exceptions are rare. As a rule primitive art is good—and here again my hypothesis is helpful—for, as a rule, it is also free from descriptive qualities. In primitive art you will find no accurate representation; you will find only significant form. Yet no other art moves us so profoundly. Whether we consider Sumerian sculpture or pre-dynastic Egyptian art, or archaic Greek, or the Wei and T’ang masterpieces, or those early Japanese works of which I had the luck to see a few superb examples (especially two wooden Bodhisattvas) at the Shepherd’s Bush Exhibition in 1910, or whether, coming nearer home, we consider the primitive Byzantine art of the sixth century and its primitive developments amongst the Western barbarians, or, turning far afield, we consider that mysterious and majestic art that flourished in Central and South America before the coming of the white men, in every case we observe three common characteristics—absence of representation, absence of technical swagger, sublimely impressive form. Nor is it hard to discover the connection between these three. Formal significance loses itself in preoccupation with exact representation and ostentatious cunning.

From the reading ...

In primitive art you will find no accurate representation: you will find only significant form. Yet no other art moves us so profoundly.

Naturally, it is said that if there is little representation and less saltimbancery

in primitive art, that is because the primitives were unable to catch a likeness or cut intellectual capers. The contention is beside the point. There is truth in it, no doubt, though, were I a critic whose reputation depended on a power of impressing the public with a semblance of knowledge, I should be more cautious about urging it than such people generally are. For to support that the Byzantine masters wanted skill, or could not have created an illusion had they wished to do so, seems to imply ignorance of the amazingly dexterous realism of the notoriously bad works of that age. Very often, I fear, the misrepresentation of the primitives must be attributed to what the critics call, “wilful distortion.” Be that as it may, the point is that, either from what of skill or want of will, primitives neither create illusions, nor make display of extravagant accomplishment, but concentrate their energies on the one thing needful—the creation of form. Thus have they created the finest works of art that we possess.

[Rightness of Form]

Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man’s activity to a world of æsthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life. The pure mathematician rapt in his studies knows a state of mind which I take to be similar, if not identical. He feels an emotion for his speculations which arises from no perceived relation between them and the lives of men, but springs, inhuman or super-human, from the heart of an abstract science. I wonder, sometimes, whether the appreciators of art and of mathematical solutions are not even more closely allied. Before we feel an æsthetic emotion for a combination of forms, do we not perceive intellectually the rightness and necessity of the combination? If we do, it would explain the fact that passing rapidly through a room we recognise a picture to be good, although we cannot say that it has provoked much emotion. We seem to have recognised intellectually the rightness of its forms without staying to fix our attention, and collect, as it were, their emotional significance. If this were so, it would be permissible to inquire whether it was the forms themselves or our perception of their rightness and necessity that caused æsthetic emotion. But I do not think I need linger to discuss the matter here. I have been inquiring why certain combinations of forms move us; I should not have traveled by other roads had I enquired, instead, why certain combinations are perceived to be right and necessary, and why our perception of their rightness and ne-

cessity is moving. What I have to say is this: the rapt philosopher, and he who contemplates a work of art, inhabit a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own; that significance is unrelated to the significance of life. In this world the emotions of life find no place. It is a world with emotions of its own.

[Artistic Representation]

To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space. That bit of knowledge, I admit, is essential to the appreciation of many great works, since many of the more moving forms ever created are in three dimensions. To see a cube or rhomboid as a flat pattern is to lower its significance, and a sense of three-dimensional space is essential to the full appreciation of most architectural forms. Pictures which would be insignificant if we saw them as flat patterns are profoundly moving because, in fact, we see them as related planes. If the representation of three-dimensional space is to be called “representation,” then I agree that there is one kind of representation which is not irrelevant. Also, I agree that along with our feeling for line and colour we must bring with us our knowledge of space if we are to make the most of every kind of form. Nevertheless, there are magnificent designs to an appreciation of which this knowledge is not necessary: so, though it is not irrelevant to the appreciation of some works of art it is not essential to the appreciation of all. What we must say is that the representation of three-dimensional space is neither irrelevant nor essential to all art, and that every other sort of representation is irrelevant...

From the reading ...

A good work of visual art carries a person who is capable of appreciating it out of life into ecstasy.

Before a work of art people who feel little or no emotion for pure form find themselves at a loss. They are deaf men at a concert. They know that they are in the presence of something great, but they lack the power of apprehending it. They know that they ought to feel for it a tremendous emotion, but it happens that the particular kind of emotion it can raise is one that they can feel hardly or not at all. And so they read into the forms of the work those facts and ideas for which they are capable of feeling emotion, and feel for them the emotions that they can feel—the ordinary emotions of life. When confronted by a picture, instinctively they refer back its forms to the world from which they came. They treat created form as though it were imitated form, a picture as though it were a photograph. Instead of going out on the

stream of art into a new world of æsthetic experience, they turn a sharp corner and come straight home to the world of human interests. For them the significance of a work of art depends on what they bring to it; no new thing is added to their lives, only the old material is stirred. A good work of visual art carries a person who is capable of appreciating it out of life into ecstasy: to use art as a means to the emotions of life is to use a telescope of reading the news. You will notice that people who cannot feel pure æsthetic emotions remember pictures by their subjects; whereas people who can, as often as not, have no idea what the subject of a picture is. They have never noticed the representative element, and so when they discuss pictures they talk about the shapes of forms and the relations and quantities of colours. Often they can tell by the quality of a single line whether or not a man is a good artist. They are concerned only with lines and colours, their relations and quantities and qualities; but from these they win an emotion more profound and far more sublime than any that can be given by the description of facts and ideas...

From the reading ...

In this world [of art] the emotions of life find no place.

Yet, though the echoes and shadows of art enrich the life of the plains, her spirit dwells on the mountains. To him who woos, but woos impurely, she returns enriched what is brought. Like the sun, she warms the good seed in good soil and causes it to bring forth good fruit. But only to the perfect lover does she give a new strange gift—a gift beyond all price. Imperfect lovers bring to art and take away the ideas and emotions of their own age and civilisation. In twelfth-century Europe a man might have been greatly moved by a Romanesque church and found nothing in a T'ang picture. To a man of a later age, Greek sculpture meant much and Mexican nothing, for only to the former could he bring a crowd of associated ideas to be the objects of familiar emotions. But the perfect lover, he who can feel the profound significance of form, is raised above the accidents of time and place. To him the problems of archaeology, history, and hagiography are impertinent. If the forms of a work are significant its provenance is irrelevant. Before the grandeur of those Sumerian figures in the Louvre he is carried on the same flood of emotion to the same æsthetic ecstasy as, more than four thousand years ago, the Chaldean lover was carried. It is the mark of great art that its appeal is universal and eternal. Significant form stands charged with the power to provoke æsthetic emotion in anyone capable of feeling it. The ideas of men go buzz and die like gnats; men change their institutions and their customs as they change their coats; the intellectual triumphs of one age are the follies of another; only great art remains stable and unobscure. Great art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place, because its kingdom is not of this world. To those who have

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and hold a sense of the significance of form what does it matter whether the forms that move them were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago? The forms of art are inexhaustible; but all lead by the same road of æsthetic emotion to the same world of æsthetic ecstasy.

From the reading ...

[T]he rapt philosopher, and he who contemplates a work of art, inhabit a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own; that significance is unrelated to the significance of life.



Sumerian Oannes, 8th century B.C., adapted from Louvre

Related Ideas

Clive Bell. *Art*.³ (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1913). *Project Gutenberg*. An e-text prepared by Suzanne Shell, Janet Blenkinship, and the Project Gutenberg Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

3. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16917>.

Clive Bell. *Since Cézanne*,⁴ Project Gutenberg’s e-texts include Clive Bell’s *Since Cézanne*. Essays from *The New Republic*, *The Athenæum*, and *The New Statesman*.

Iredell Jenkins, “Art for Art’s Sake,”⁵ *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. A discussion from a historical point of view of meaning and significance of the movement, together with brief bibliography.

Lee Sorensen, “Bell, Clive,”⁶ . This short entry from the *Dictionary of Art Historians* discusses Bell’s life, works, and further sources.

Stephen Grant, “Formalism in the Philosophy of Art,”⁷ . The discussion of Bell’s significant form as the common property of art and criticisms of that theory is analyzed here in *The Richmond Journal fo Philosophy* by Stephen Grant of Richmond-upon-Thames College.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Clive Bell writes in our reading from *Art*:

Yet, though all æsthetic theories must be based on æsthetic judgments, and ultimately all æsthetic judgments must be matters of personal taste, it would be rash to assert that no theory of æsthetics can have general validity.

Compare Clive Bell’s 1914 view on the unity of æsthetic judgements as expressed here with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s explication of language-games in his 1958 *Philosophical Investigations*:

[T]his the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in æsthetics or ethics... For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all* but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances.”⁸

Is there any common ground between Bell’s and Wittgenstein’s notions of a universal quality in artistic works? Why should we assume that art forms have a common essence?

2. Bell points out that all art evokes a kind of æsthetic emotion:

4. <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/13395>.

5. <http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=DicHist/uvaBook/tei/DicHist1.xml>.

6. <http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/bellc.htm>.

7. http://www.richmond-philosophy.net/rjp/rjp19_grant.php.

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958): ¶ 66-67 and ¶ 77.

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The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. All sensitive people agree that there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art.

Is Bell simply supporting his observation with an *ad populum* appeal or does he think aesthetic emotion is an intuitive ability of only some people? Why cannot the capacity to see “significant form” in art be taught?

3. Walter Pater argues that life’s significance inheres in the variety and intensity of everyday nonconceptual experience. Experiencing sensation and feeling is the meaning of art—not the product of art:

Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality of your moments as they pass, and simply for these moments’ sake.⁹

Why or why not is Pater’s notion of immediacy of experience essential to the foundation of Bell’s “significant form? How does Bell distinguish aesthetic emotion from other kinds of emotion?”

4. Is Bell’s notion of “significant form” a simple or complex quality? He writes about temporal combinations of line and color, “These moving combinations and arrangements I have called . . . ‘Significant Form.’” Bell notes that great art can be intellectually recognized prior to, and independently of, the distinctive aesthetic emotion produced by significant form. Does “significant form,” then, have one consistent essential meaning? If so, what is it? How is significant form distinguished from nonsignificant form?
5. Bell states specifically in our reading, “I have no right to consider anything a work of art to which I cannot react emotionally; and I have no right to look for the essential quality in anything that I have not felt to be a work of art.” Discuss whether Bell’s theory of art is viciously circular. If “significant form” produces “aesthetic response,” a peculiarly unique emotion arising directly only from “significant form” and only felt by the artistically competent, then how could it be meaningfully denied that some aesthetic responses are a result of some other quality? That is, Bell defines a work of art in terms having the quality of “significant form” producing an aesthetic response. Yet, he defines an aesthetic response as being essential to the recognition of the significant form of a work of art.
6. In our reading, Bell indicates that the intention of the artist is irrelevant to the work of art:

In pure aesthetics we have only to consider our emotion and its object: for the purposes of aesthetics we have no right, neither is there any necessity,

9. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (London, 1873): 238-239.

to pry behind the object into the state of mind of him who made it.

Certainly many persons react emotionally and exhibit an æsthetic response to the forms of nature. On the basis of Bell’s characterization of the essence of art as significant form, examine whether or not Bell could concede that various “works of nature” exhibit significant form and hence also qualify as artistic works.

7. Bell writes, “[A]ny system of æsthetics which pretends to be based on some objective truth is so palpably ridiculous as not to be worth discussing. We have no other means of recognising a work of art than our feeling for it.” Nevertheless, elsewhere he writes:

Art transports us from the world of man’s activity to a world of æsthetic exaltation. . . . The pure mathematician rapt in his studies knows a state of mind which I take to be similar, if not identical. He feels an emotion for his speculations which arises . . . from the heart of an abstract science. I wonder sometimes, whether the appreciators of art and of mathematical solution are not even more closely allied. Before we feel an æsthetic emotion for a combination of forms, do we not perceive intellectually the rightness and necessity of the combination?

Indeed, Bell writes further, “For a discussion of æsthetics, it need be agreed only that forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular way.” Examine the possibility that æsthetic feeling is based on the perception of the golden ratio as significant form in art; indeed, many artists have proportioned their works in accordance with the belief that this proportion is innately æsthetically pleasing.

8. While at Cambridge, Bell was well aware of G.E. Moore’s conclusion in *Principia Ethica* that the concept of good is a simple, indefinable, and unanalyzable quality. The confusion of “good” with a natural property such as “pleasure” is what Moore calls the “naturalistic fallacy”:

If indeed good were a feeling as some would have us believe, then it would exist in time. But that is why to call it so is to commit the naturalistic fallacy. It will always remain pertinent to ask, whether the feeling itself is good; and if so, then good cannot itself be identical with any feeling.¹⁰

Just as Moore asserts good is intuited, so also Bell asserts artistic value is intuited. Analyze from our reading to what extent Bell treats “significant form” as a non-natural, simple, and indefinable quality—not expressible as an emotion and not necessarily present in a judgment.

9. Bell writes that individuals may differ as to the presence or absence of the quality of significant form in specific works of art, but whatever different works of art exist, those works must have the quality of significant

10. G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903): 41.

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form. Specifically, he writes, “. . . I will ask those whose æsthetic experience does not tally with mine to see whether of this quality is not also, in their judgment, common to all works that move them . . .” First, how would it be possible to be mistaken in one’s judgment of a work of art? Second, if I judge Frith’s “Paddington Station” to be a work of art and Bell does not, and if Bell judges a Sumerian sculpture to be a work of art and I do not, then how could we determine which artwork (or both or neither) has the quality of significant form? In our reading, Bell concludes, “We have no other means of recognizing a work of art than our feeling for it . . . [W]hen I speak of significant form, I mean a combination of lines and colours . . . that moves me æsthetically.” Third, if significant form is not felt by both persons for both works of art, yet both works have that quality, would it logically follow that the quality of significant form must somehow differ in the two works and consequently not be a common quality?

10. Bell writes, “Portraits of psychological and historical value, . . . pictures that tell stories and suggest situations . . . have no formal significance,” whereas Aristotle writes:

We have laid it down that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude . . . that which has a beginning, middle, and end. . . . Plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes. . . . Again: to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude. Beauty is a matter of size and order.¹¹

Moreover, Susanne Langer concludes that the artistic significance of music consists as kind of significant form of the sensuous percept itself, not what is represented:

Music, on the other hand, is preëminently non-representative. . . . It exhibits pure form not as an embellishment, but as its very essence. . . . If the meaning of art belong to the sensuous percept itself apart from what it ostensibly represents, then such purely artistic meaning should be most accessible through musical works.¹²

Explain to what extent Bell might agree that some æsthetic qualities are found in the significance of structural form in literature and music.

Yet Bell states:

Of course realistic forms may be æsthetically significant, and out of them an artist may create a superb work of art, but it is with their æsthetic and

11. Aristotle, *De Poetica* trans. Ingram Bywater. ¶ 1450^b. In Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941): 1462.

12. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976): 208.

not with their cognitive value that we shall then be concerned.¹³

Even so, some art historians have noted that Bell’s use of the concept “significant form” indirectly influenced the development of structuralism in literature in the twentieth century. Why do you think Bell limits this quality of art to visual art only?

11. Critics note Bell’s “significant form” thesis was first suggested by the formalism of Kantian aesthetics. Kant writes:

Susceptibility to pleasure arising from reflection on the forms of things (whether of nature or of art) betokens, however, not only a finality on the part of objects in their relation to the reflective judgement in the subject, in accordance with the concept of nature, but also, conversely, a finality on the part of the subject, answering to the concept of freedom, in respect of the form, or even formlessness of objects. The result is that the aesthetic judgement refers not merely, as a judgement of taste, to the beautiful, but also, as springing from a higher intellectual feeling, to the sublime.¹⁴

First, to what extent does Bell’s theory accord with Kant’s summary of the relations of the qualities of form, taste, nature, freedom, cognitive (intellectual) value, and beauty in art? Second, to what extent does Bell’s account differ from Kant’s summary of the relations of these qualities?

12. What does Bell mean when he states that art is “beyond morality”? Is there any common element for him between aesthetic emotion and the emotions of life? Is Bell suggesting here a transformation to artistic idealism? Why could not Bell’s view be extended to be consistent with Nietzsche’s doctrine that the greatest work of art is actually the form of discipline which not only transforms human life into a thing of beauty, but also transforms it into an aesthetic phenomenon *beyond morality*? For example, Nietzsche concludes:

We should really look upon ourselves as beautiful pictures and artistic projections of the true creator, and in that significance as works of art we have our highest value, for only as an aesthetic phenomenon are existence and the world eternally justified . . .¹⁵

Is there a significant form to the life of an individual of excellent character? Does this manner of life evoke aesthetic response? Why or why not?

13. Bell asserts that a central problem of aesthetics is to discover the essential quality in works of art that stirs aesthetic emotion. This quality he terms

13. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1913): 145.

14. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* trans. James Creed Meredith (Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2005): 22.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* trans. (Ian C. Johnston. Plain Label Books, 2000): 76.

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“significant form” and restricts the source of æsthetic emotion to the visual arts:

That there is a particular kind of emotion provoked by works of visual art, and that this emotion is provoked by every kind of visual art, by pictures, sculptures, building, pots, carvings, textile, etc., etc. . . . To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space.

Doesn't Bell overlook the fact that human beings learn to judge distance by association of the perceptions of sight *and touch*. Depth perception is based on a number of different visual cues which have been associated with the sense of touch when one first learned to see. Sensations of touch arise from different nerve endings in the epidermis and dermis—specialized receptors for cold, heat, pain, and pressure. Form in sculpture and architecture, then, is sensed in part haptically¹⁶ by touch with the kinesthesia arising from memory and sensory neurons in muscles, ligaments, and inner ear. Consequently, the significant form of sculpture, architecture, and pots could not be “provoked by” spatial geometric form alone. Might significant form not be limited, then, to the purely visual arts? Evaluate whether there is significant form common to all various art forms including, for example, painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, poetry, music, dance, film, and so forth. If so, might significant form be a form of beauty?

Revision History

Revision 0.5 05.05.12 Revised by: es, lca

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16. Haptic perception enables the recognition of three-dimensional objects kinesthetically over a period of time. *Eds.*

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