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| L’Art pour l’Art |
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| ‘L’art pour l’art’ is a French slogan generally translated as *art for art’s sake*. It refers to a rubric of ideologies and aesthetic paradigms with roots in eighteenth and nineteenth century Western European Romanticism, particularly indebted to Immanuel Kant’s *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790) and subsequent attempts to theorize and practice art as a non-utilitarian but crucially human endeavour, experience, and field of knowledge. |
| ‘L’art pour l’art’ is a French slogan generally translated as *art for art’s sake*. It refers to a rubric of ideologies and aesthetic paradigms with roots in eighteenth and nineteenth century Western European Romanticism, particularly indebted to Immanuel Kant’s *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790) and subsequent attempts to theorize and practice art as a non-utilitarian but crucially human endeavour, experience, and field of knowledge.  Swiss-French litterateur Benjamin Constant, an intimate of Mme de Staël, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Karl Wilhelm Schlegel, and Friedrich Schiller, first used the phrase in 1804. But the slogan gathered momentum with Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), his preface, arguing that ‘nothing beautiful is dispensable to life,’ marked a milestone in European literary history. ‘Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien,’ he wrote, ‘tout ce qui est utile est laid.’ (Nothing truly beautiful can be used for anything: everything useful is ugly.) Reacting thus to Victor Hugo and other advocates of an ‘art social,’ Gautier is credited with first courting, even cultivating, controversy around it through his subsequent, widely-read, polemical essays (1835-1861) on the independence and integrity of art unencumbered by didactic or moral responsibility.  In England, William Makepeace Thackeray first used *art for art’s sake* in 1839; Walter Pater and the American-born James A. McNeill Whistler developed influential discourses of Aestheticism around it through the late 1800s. Across the English Channel, ‘l’art pour l’art’ made another appearance through several legal trials concerned with the impact of literature on social mores after 1848, and particularly through the 1860s: cases were brought against Gustave Flaubert, for instance, as well as Edmond de Goncourt and Charles Baudelaire, charging them with ‘outrages against public morality.’ In this judicial context, the slogan was used as an argument against moral censorship, and to prioritize a writer’s freedom of expression. It is interesting to note that Oscar WIlde, a leading proponent of the Decadent movement likewise charged (and imprisoned) for ‘gross indecency’ in Britain, also played a key role in popularizing *art for art’s sake* through his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891): ‘There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book,’ he declared. ‘Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.’  The second half of the nineteenth century saw the inheritors of Romanticism (George Sand, for instance) and the *Parnassians* (a literary movement deriving its name from the journal *Le Parnasse contemporain*, including poets as Leconte de Lisle), engaged in intense literary and critical debates regarding the potential for art to serve a social function. Similarly, by the *fin de siècle* and during the interwar years, Impressionist painters and politically committed writers opposed the notion of *art for art’s sake* while the Post-impressionists and experimentally minded or avant-garde artists and writers such as Henri Bremond and Paul Valéry celebrated it as some variant of a ‘poésie pure’: through much of the politically volatile twentieth century, *l’art pour l’art* became the locus of variously revolutionary and reactionary movements and debates. The phrase came to signify or symbolize a wide range of frequently divergent perspectives on the nature and value of ostensibly disinterested, apolitical, autotelic artistic production, and remains an exhilarating, powerful conceit in the twenty-first-century popular, artistic, literary, critical imagination. |
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