**from *What Is Art?*** by Leo Tolstoy (1897)

| **CHAPTER 4 EXCERPT**  If we say that the aim of any activity is merely our pleasure, and define it solely by that pleasure, our definition will evidently be a false one. But this is precisely what has occurred in the efforts to define art. Now, if we consider the food question it will not occur to anyone to affirm that the importance of food consists in the pleasure we receive when eating it. Everyone understands that the satisfaction of our taste cannot serve as a basis for our definition of the merits of food, and that we have therefore no right to presuppose that the dinners with cayenne pepper, Limburg cheese, alcohol, etc., to which we are accustomed and which please us, form the very best human food.  **And in the same way, beauty, or that which pleases us, can in no sense serve as the basis for the definition of art; nor can a series of objects which afford us pleasure serve as the model of what art should be.**  To see the aim and purpose of art in the pleasure we get from it is like assuming (as is done by people of the lowest moral development, e.g., by savages) that the purpose and aim of food is the pleasure derived when consuming it.  —-------------------  Just as people who conceive the aim and purpose of food to be pleasure cannot recognize the real meaning of eating, so people who consider the aim of art to be pleasure cannot realize its true meaning and purpose because they attribute to an activity the meaning of which lies in its connection with other phenomena of life, the false and exceptional aim of pleasure. People come to understand that the meaning of eating lies in the nourishment of the body only when they cease to consider that the object of that activity is pleasure. And it is the same with regard to art. People will come to understand the meaning of art only when they cease to consider that the aim of that activity is beauty, i.e., pleasure. **The acknowledgment of beauty (i.e., of a certain kind of pleasure received from art) as being the aim of art not only fails to assist us in finding a definition of what art is, but, on the contrary, by transferring the question into a region quite foreign to art (into metaphysical, psychological, physiological, and even historical discussions as to why such a production pleases one person, and such another displeases or pleases someone else), it renders such definition impossible.** And since discussions as to why one man likes pears and another prefers meat do not help toward finding a definition of what is essential in nourishment, so the solution of questions of taste in art (to which the discussions on art involuntarily come) not only does not help to make clear in what this particular human activity which we call art really consists, but renders such elucidation quite impossible until we rid ourselves of a conception which justifies every kind of art at the cost of confusing the whole matter.  **—-----------------**  **CHAPTER 5 EXCERPT**  In order correctly to define art, it is necessary, first of all, to cease to consider it as a means to pleasure and to consider it as one of the conditions of human life. Viewing it in this way we cannot fail to observe that art is one of the means of intercourse between man and man.  **Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression.**  Speech, transmitting the thoughts and experiences of men, serves as a means of union among them, and art acts in a similar manner. The peculiarity of this latter means of intercourse, distinguishing it from intercourse by means of words, consists in this, that whereas by words a man transmits his thoughts to another, by means of art he transmits his feelings.  —-------------------------------------  The activity of art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man's expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it. To take the simplest example; one man laughs, and another who hears becomes merry; or a man weeps, and another who hears feels sorrow. [...]  And it is upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based. [...]  Art begins when one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications. To take the simplest example: a boy, having experienced, let us say, fear on encountering a wolf, relates that encounter; and, in order to evoke in others the feeling he has experienced, describes himself, his condition before the encounter, the surroundings, the woods, his own lightheartedness, and then the wolf's appearance, its movements, the distance between himself and the wolf, etc. All this, if only the boy, when telling the story, again experiences the feelings he had lived through and infects the hearers and compels them to feel what the narrator had experienced is art. If even the boy had not seen a wolf but had frequently been afraid of one, and if, wishing to evoke in others the fear he had felt, he invented an encounter with a wolf and recounted it so as to make his hearers share the feelings he experienced when he feared the world, that also would be art. **And just in the same way it is art if a man, having experienced either the fear of suffering or the attraction of enjoyment (whether in reality or in imagination) expresses these feelings on canvas or in marble so that others are infected by them. And it is also art if a man feels or imagines to himself feelings of delight, gladness, sorrow, despair, courage, or despondency and the transition from one to another of these feelings, and expresses these feelings by sounds so that the hearers are infected by them and experience them as they were experienced by the composer.**  —-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------  The feelings with which the artist infects others may be most various - very strong or very weak, very important or very insignificant, very bad or very good: feelings of love for one's own country, self-devotion and submission to fate or to God expressed in a drama, raptures of lovers described in a novel, feelings of voluptuousness expressed in a picture, courage expressed in a triumphal march, merriment evoked by a dance, humor evoked by a funny story, the feeling of quietness transmitted by an evening landscape or by a lullaby, or the feeling of admiration evoked by a beautiful arabesque - it is all art. If only the spectators or auditors are infected by the feelings which the author has felt, it is art.  **To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art.**  Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them  **—-----------------------------------------------------------------------**  **CHAPTER 15 EXCERPT**  Art, in our society, has been so perverted that not only has bad art come to be considered good, but even the very perception of what art really is has been lost. In order to be able to speak about the art of our society, it is, therefore, first of all necessary to distinguish art from counterfeit art.  There is one indubitable indication distinguishing real art from its counterfeit, namely, the infectiousness of art. If a man, without exercising effort and without altering his standpoint on reading, hearing, or seeing another man's work, experiences a mental condition which unites him with that man and with other people who also partake of that work of art, then the object evoking that condition is a work of art. And however poetical, realistic, effectful, or interesting a work may be, it is not a work of art if it does not evoke that feeling (quite distinct from all other feelings) of joy and of spiritual union with another (the author) and with others (those who are also infected by it). [...]  The stronger the infection, the better is the art as art, speaking now apart from its subject matter, i.e., not considering the quality of the feelings it transmits.  And the degree of the infectiousness of art depends on three conditions:   1. On the greater or lesser individuality of the feeling transmitted; 2. on the greater or lesser clearness with which the feeling is transmitted; 3. on the sincerity of the artist, i.e., on the greater or lesser force with which the artist himself feels the emotion he transmits.   **The more individual the feeling transmitted the more strongly does it act on the receiver; the more individual the state of soul into which he is transferred, the more pleasure does the receiver obtain, and therefore the more readily and strongly does he join in it.**  The clearness of expression assists infection because the receiver, who mingles in consciousness with the author, is the better satisfied the more clearly the feeling is transmitted, which, as it seems to him, he has long known and felt, and for which he has only now found expression.  —-------------------------------------------------------------  But most of all is the degree of infectiousness of art increased by the degree of sincerity in the artist. **As soon as the spectator, hearer, or reader feels that the artist is infected by his own production, and writes, sings, or plays for himself, and not merely to act on others, this mental condition of the artist infects the receiver; and contrariwise, as soon as the spectator, reader, or hearer feels that the author is not writing, singing, or playing for his own satisfaction - does not himself feel what he wishes to express - but is doing it for him, the receiver, a resistance immediately springs up, and the most individual and the newest feelings and the cleverest technique not only fail to produce any infection but actually repel.**  I have mentioned three conditions of contagiousness in art, but they may be all summed up into one, the last, sincerity, i.e., that the artist should be impelled by an inner need to express his feeling. That condition includes the first; for if the artist is sincere he will express the feeling as he experienced it. And as each man is different from everyone else, his feeling will be individual for everyone else; and the more individual it is - the more the artist has drawn it from the depths of his nature - the more sympathetic and sincere will it be. And this same sincerity will impel the artist to find a clear expression of the feeling which he wishes to transmit.  Therefore this third condition - sincerity - is the most important of the three. It is always complied with in peasant art, and this explains why such art always acts so powerfully; but it is a condition almost entirely absent from our upper-class art, which is continually produced by artists actuated by personal aims of covetousness or vanity.  Such are the three conditions which divide art from its counterfeits, and which also decide the quality of every work of art apart from its subject matter.  The absence of any one of these conditions excludes a work form the category of art and relegates it to that of art's counterfeits. If the work does not transmit the artist's peculiarity of feeling and is therefore not individual, if it is unintelligibly expressed, or if it has not proceeded from the author's inner need for expression - it is not a work of art. If all these conditions are present, even in the smallest degree, then the work, even if a weak one, is yet a work of art. | **NOTES:**   * **We cannot use our personal tastes & pleasures to judge the merits of something**   **Example of food defines that**  **Art can’t be defined by pleasure, but should be defined by its purpose**   * **Defining anything as that which pleases us makes defining subjective & out of the arena of art** * **Art can initiate a relationship between the artist and receiver** * **The feelings of the artist are transmitted to the receiver through art, but it is up to the receiver to assess that message** * **Art is a way of expressing one’s feelings to someone else using lines, shapes, and colors** * **The intensity of the feeling that the receiver receives is always less than or equal to the intensity of the feeling that the artist sends** * **Everyone will have a different feeling due to the differences between individuals** * **Sincerity is the most important of the 3.** * **These 3 conditions differentiate an art piece from counterfeit artpieces.** |
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**MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:**

* **Art is a method of expressing someone’s feelings to someone else**
* **Art is mostly “infecting” rather than “expressing” because it can spread to multiple people who can different responses to it**
* **Counterfeit art describes art that isn’t individual, clear, or sincere**

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Tolstoy believe one must understand the aim or purpose of an activity as the key to defining it?

**Tolstoy believes that the aim or purpose of an activity comes from the necessity of it, not the pleasure of it. In addition, Tolstoy believes that understanding other concepts besides aim or purpose, such as the pleasure of it, can lead to subjective beliefs that could be considered irrational or irrelevant to others.**

1. If, as explained in the chapter 4 segment, Tolstoy believes that pleasure is not the true purpose of eating, what then is? How does this relate to art?

**The true purpose of eating is to nourish your body and provide it with the nutrients that it needs to function properly. This relates to art because the true purpose of art is not to seek the pleasure that one gains from art, but rather to sense the feelings and emotions that the artist displayed in their art.**

1. Why does Tolstoy compare speech with art? What does each communicate?

**Speech is similar to art because in the same way speech communicates thoughts and experiences verbally using words and sentences, art communicates emotions and feelings visually using geometric shapes and colors.** **In addition, speech and art both serve as means of union to many people.**

1. Why does Tolstoy describe the transmission of emotion as “infection”? How does it differ from “expression”?

**Tolstoy describes the transmission of emotion as “infection” because the emotion transmitted from art can spread to others and can stay with the individual for a long period of time. The clearness of expression assists infection because the receiver, who mingles in consciousness with the author, is the better satisfied the more clearly the feeling is transmitted, which, as it seems to him, he has long known and felt, and for which he has only now found expression.**

1. According to Tolstoy, but in your own words, what is art?

**Art is, according to Tolstoy, a “contagious” method of expressing someone's emotions to someone else. Art is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them.**

1. How is what Tolstoy is saying similar to what the authors of Cultures and Values are saying when they explain that art has a “surplus of meaning?”

**Tolstoy is saying that art can have an intensity of feeling towards the receiver greater than what is being sent out if it meets his 3 criteria (which mainly can be described as sincerity). This is similar to what the authors of Cultures and Values are saying when they explain that art has a surplus of meaning because in a similar way, more meaning is being expressed from the art than being expressed in the art.**

1. How does Tolstoy’s ideas support, challenge or complicate (both support and challenge) your ideas about art?

**Tolstoy’s ideas supported my idea that art needed to be sincere in some way to be considered non-counterfeit art, but challenged my idea that art was more about communicating feelings and emotions rather than drawing and painting in a way that seemed aesthetically pleasing.**