How Art Can Be Good

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I grew up believing that taste is just a matter of personal preference. Each person has things they like, but no one's preferences are any better than anyone else's. There is no such thing as *good* taste.

Like a lot of things I grew up believing, this turns out to be false, and I'm going to try to explain why.

One problem with saying there's no such thing as good taste is that it also means there's no such thing as good art. If there were good art, then people who liked it would have better taste than people who didn't. So if you discard taste, you also have to discard the idea of art being good, and artists being good at making it.

It was pulling on that thread that unravelled my childhood faith in relativism. When you're trying to make things, taste becomes a practical matter. You have to decide what to do next. Would it make the painting better if I changed that part? If there's no such thing as better, it doesn't matter what you do. In fact, it doesn't matter if you paint at all. You could just go out and buy a ready-made blank canvas. If there's no such thing as good, that would be just as great an achievement as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Less laborious, certainly, but if you can achieve the same level of performance with less effort, surely that's more impressive, not less.

Yet that doesn't seem quite right, does it?

Audience

I think the key to this puzzle is to remember that art has an audience. Art has a purpose, which is to interest its audience. Good art (like good anything) is art that achieves its purpose particularly well. The meaning of "interest" can vary. Some works of art are meant to shock, and others to please; some are meant to jump out at you, and others to sit quietly in the background. But all art has to work on an audience, and—here's the critical point—members of the audience share things in common.

For example, nearly all humans find human faces engaging. It

seems to be wired into us. Babies can recognize faces practically from birth. In fact, faces seem to have co-evolved with our interest in them; the face is the body's billboard. So all other things being equal, a painting with faces in it will interest people more than one without. [1]

One reason it's easy to believe that taste is merely personal preference is that, if it isn't, how do you pick out the people with better taste? There are billions of people, each with their own opinion; on what grounds can you prefer one to another? [2]

But if audiences have a lot in common, you're not in a position of having to choose one out of a random set of individual biases, because the set isn't random. All humans find faces engaging—practically by definition: face recognition is in our DNA. And so having a notion of good art, in the sense of art that does its job well, doesn't require you to pick out a few individuals and label their opinions as correct. No matter who you pick, they'll find faces engaging.

Of course, space aliens probably wouldn't find human faces engaging. But there might be other things they shared in common with us. The most likely source of examples is math. I expect space aliens would agree with us most of the time about which of two proofs was better. Erdos thought so. He called a maximally elegant proof one out of God's book, and presumably God's book is universal. [3]

Once you start talking about audiences, you don't have to argue simply that there are or aren't standards of taste. Instead tastes are a series of concentric rings, like ripples in a pond. There are some things that will appeal to you and your friends, others that will appeal to most people your age, others that will appeal to most humans, and perhaps others that would appeal to most sentient beings (whatever that means).

The picture is slightly more complicated than that, because in the middle of the pond there are overlapping sets of ripples. For example, there might be things that appealed particularly to men, or to people from a certain culture.

If good art is art that interests its audience, then when you talk about art being good, you also have to say for what audience. So is it meaningless to talk about art simply being good or bad? No, because one audience is the set of all possible humans. I think that's the audience people are implicitly talking about when they say a work of art is good: they mean it would engage any human. [4]

And that is a meaningful test, because although, like any everyday concept, "human" is fuzzy around the edges, there are a lot of things practically all humans have in common. In addition to our interest in faces, there's something special about primary colors for nearly all of us, because it's an artifact of the way our eyes work. Most humans will also find images of 3D objects engaging, because that also seems to be built into our visual perception. [5] And beneath that there's edge-finding, which

makes images with definite shapes more engaging than mere blur.

Humans have a lot more in common than this, of course. My goal is not to compile a complete list, just to show that there's some solid ground here. People's preferences aren't random. So an artist working on a painting and trying to decide whether to change some part of it doesn't have to think "Why bother? I might as well flip a coin." Instead he can ask "What would make the painting more interesting to people?" And the reason you can't equal Michelangelo by going out and buying a blank canvas is that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is more interesting to people.

A lot of philosophers have had a hard time believing it was possible for there to be objective standards for art. It seemed obvious that beauty, for example, was something that happened in the head of the observer, not something that was a property of objects. It was thus "subjective" rather than "objective." But in fact if you narrow the definition of beauty to something that works a certain way on humans, and you observe how much humans have in common, it turns out to be a property of objects after all. You don't have to choose between something being a property of the subject or the object if subjects all react similarly. Being good art is thus a property of objects as much as, say, being toxic to humans is: it's good art if it consistently affects humans in a certain way.

Error

So could we figure out what the best art is by taking a vote? After all, if appealing to humans is the test, we should be able to just ask them, right?

Well, not quite. For products of nature that might work. I'd be willing to eat the apple the world's population had voted most delicious, and I'd probably be willing to visit the beach they voted most beautiful, but having to look at the painting they voted the best would be a crapshoot.

Man-made stuff is different. For one thing, artists, unlike apple trees, often deliberately try to trick us. Some tricks are quite subtle. For example, any work of art sets expectations by its level of finish. You don't expect photographic accuracy in something that looks like a quick sketch. So one widely used trick, especially among illustrators, is to intentionally make a painting or drawing look like it was done faster than it was. The average person looks at it and thinks: how amazingly skillful. It's like saying something clever in a conversation as if you'd thought of it on the spur of the moment, when in fact you'd worked it out the day before.

Another much less subtle influence is brand. If you go to see the Mona Lisa, you'll probably be disappointed, because it's hidden behind a thick glass wall and surrounded by a frenzied crowd taking pictures of themselves in front of it. At best you can see it the way you see a friend across the room at a crowded party. The Louvre might as well replace it with copy; no one would be able

to tell. And yet the Mona Lisa is a small, dark painting. If you found people who'd never seen an image of it and sent them to a museum in which it was hanging among other paintings with a tag labelling it as a portrait by an unknown fifteenth century artist, most would walk by without giving it a second look.

For the average person, brand dominates all other factors in the judgement of art. Seeing a painting they recognize from reproductions is so overwhelming that their response to it as a painting is drowned out.

And then of course there are the tricks people play on themselves. Most adults looking at art worry that if they don't like what they're supposed to, they'll be thought uncultured. This doesn't just affect what they claim to like; they actually make themselves like things they're supposed to.

That's why you can't just take a vote. Though appeal to people is a meaningful test, in practice you can't measure it, just as you can't find north using a compass with a magnet sitting next to it. There are sources of error so powerful that if you take a vote, all you're measuring is the error.

We can, however, approach our goal from another direction, by using ourselves as guinea pigs. You're human. If you want to know what the basic human reaction to a piece of art would be, you can at least approach that by getting rid of the sources of error in your own judgements.

For example, while anyone's reaction to a famous painting will be warped at first by its fame, there are ways to decrease its effects. One is to come back to the painting over and over. After a few days the fame wears off, and you can start to see it as a painting. Another is to stand close. A painting familiar from reproductions looks more familiar from ten feet away; close in you see details that get lost in reproductions, and which you're therefore seeing for the first time.

There are two main kinds of error that get in the way of seeing a work of art: biases you bring from your own circumstances, and tricks played by the artist. Tricks are straightforward to correct for. Merely being aware of them usually prevents them from working. For example, when I was ten I used to be very impressed by airbrushed lettering that looked like shiny metal. But once you study how it's done, you see that it's a pretty cheesy trick—one of the sort that relies on pushing a few visual buttons really hard to temporarily overwhelm the viewer. It's like trying to convince someone by shouting at them.

The way not to be vulnerable to tricks is to explicitly seek out and catalog them. When you notice a whiff of dishonesty coming from some kind of art, stop and figure out what's going on. When someone is obviously pandering to an audience that's easily fooled, whether it's someone making shiny stuff to impress ten year olds, or someone making conspicuously avant-garde stuff to impress would-be intellectuals, learn how they do it. Once you've seen enough examples of specific types of tricks, you start to

become a connoisseur of trickery in general, just as professional magicians are.

What counts as a trick? Roughly, it's something done with contempt for the audience. For example, the guys designing Ferraris in the 1950s were probably designing cars that they themselves admired. Whereas I suspect over at General Motors the marketing people are telling the designers, "Most people who buy SUVs do it to seem manly, not to drive off-road. So don't worry about the suspension; just make that sucker as big and tough-looking as you can." [6]

I think with some effort you can make yourself nearly immune to tricks. It's harder to escape the influence of your own circumstances, but you can at least move in that direction. The way to do it is to travel widely, in both time and space. If you go and see all the different kinds of things people like in other cultures, and learn about all the different things people have liked in the past, you'll probably find it changes what you like. I doubt you could ever make yourself into a completely universal person, if only because you can only travel in one direction in time. But if you find a work of art that would appeal equally to your friends, to people in Nepal, and to the ancient Greeks, you're probably onto something.

My main point here is not how to have good taste, but that there can even be such a thing. And I think I've shown that. There is such a thing as good art. It's art that interests its human audience, and since humans have a lot in common, what interests them is not random. Since there's such a thing as good art, there's also such a thing as good taste, which is the ability to recognize it.

If we were talking about the taste of apples, I'd agree that taste is just personal preference. Some people like certain kinds of apples and others like other kinds, but how can you say that one is right and the other wrong? [7]

The thing is, art isn't apples. Art is man-made. It comes with a lot of cultural baggage, and in addition the people who make it often try to trick us. Most people's judgement of art is dominated by these extraneous factors; they're like someone trying to judge the taste of apples in a dish made of equal parts apples and jalapeno peppers. All they're tasting is the peppers. So it turns out you can pick out some people and say that they have better taste than others: they're the ones who actually taste art like apples.

Or to put it more prosaically, they're the people who (a) are hard to trick, and (b) don't just like whatever they grew up with. If you could find people who'd eliminated all such influences on their judgement, you'd probably still see variation in what they liked. But because humans have so much in common, you'd also find they agreed on a lot. They'd nearly all prefer the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to a blank canvas.

Making It

I wrote this essay because I was tired of hearing "taste is subjective" and wanted to kill it once and for all. Anyone who makes things knows intuitively that's not true. When you're trying to make art, the temptation to be lazy is as great as in any other kind of work. Of course it matters to do a good job. And yet you can see how great a hold "taste is subjective" has even in the art world by how nervous it makes people to talk about art being good or bad. Those whose jobs require them to judge art, like curators, mostly resort to euphemisms like "significant" or "important" or (getting dangerously close) "realized." [8]

I don't have any illusions that being able to talk about art being good or bad will cause the people who talk about it to have anything more useful to say. Indeed, one of the reasons "taste is subjective" found such a receptive audience is that, historically, the things people have said about good taste have generally been such nonsense.

It's not for the people who talk about art that I want to free the idea of good art, but for those who make it. Right now, ambitious kids going to art school run smack into a brick wall. They arrive hoping one day to be as good as the famous artists they've seen in books, and the first thing they learn is that the concept of good has been retired. Instead everyone is just supposed to explore their own personal vision. [9]

When I was in art school, we were looking one day at a slide of some great fifteenth century painting, and one of the students asked "Why don't artists paint like that now?" The room suddenly got quiet. Though rarely asked out loud, this question lurks uncomfortably in the back of every art student's mind. It was as if someone had brought up the topic of lung cancer in a meeting within Philip Morris.

"Well," the professor replied, "we're interested in different questions now." He was a pretty nice guy, but at the time I couldn't help wishing I could send him back to fifteenth century Florence to explain in person to Leonardo & Co. how we had moved beyond their early, limited concept of art. Just imagine that conversation.

In fact, one of the reasons artists in fifteenth century Florence made such great things was that they believed you could make great things. [10] They were intensely competitive and were always trying to outdo one another, like mathematicians or physicists today—maybe like anyone who has ever done anything really well.

The idea that you could make great things was not just a useful illusion. They were actually right. So the most important consequence of realizing there can be good art is that it frees artists to try to make it. To the ambitious kids arriving at art school this year hoping one day to make great things, I say: don't believe it when they tell you this is a naive and outdated ambition. There is such a thing as good art, and if you try to make it, there are people who will notice.

Notes

[1] This is not to say, of course, that good paintings must have faces in them, just that everyone's visual piano has that key on it. There are situations in which you want to avoid faces, precisely because they attract so much attention. But you can see how universally faces work by their prevalence in advertising.

[2] The other reason it's easy to believe is that it makes people feel good. To a kid, this idea is crack. In every other respect they're constantly being told that they have a lot to learn. But in this they're perfect. Their opinion carries the same weight as any adult's. You should probably question anything you believed as a kid that you'd want to believe this much.

[3] It's conceivable that the elegance of proofs is quantifiable, in the sense that there may be some formal measure that turns out to coincide with mathematicians' judgements. Perhaps it would be worth trying to make a formal language for proofs in which those considered more elegant consistently came out shorter (perhaps after being macroexpanded or compiled).

[4] Maybe it would be possible to make art that would appeal to space aliens, but I'm not going to get into that because (a) it's too hard to answer, and (b) I'm satisfied if I can establish that good art is a meaningful idea for human audiences.

[5] If early abstract paintings seem more interesting than later ones, it may be because the first abstract painters were trained to paint from life, and their hands thus tended to make the kind of gestures you use in representing physical things. In effect they were saying "scaramara" instead of "uebfgbsb."

[6] It's a bit more complicated, because sometimes artists unconsciously use tricks by imitating art that does.

[7] I phrased this in terms of the taste of apples because if people can see the apples, they can be fooled. When I was a kid most apples were a variety called Red Delicious that had been bred to look appealing in stores, but which didn't taste very good.

[8] To be fair, curators are in a difficult position. If they're dealing with recent art, they have to include things in shows that they think are bad. That's because the test for what gets included in shows is basically the market price, and for recent art that is largely determined by successful businessmen and their wives. So it's not always intellectual dishonesty that makes curators and dealers use neutral-sounding language.

[9] What happens in practice is that everyone gets really good at *talking* about art. As the art itself gets more random, the effort that would have gone into the work goes instead into the

intellectual sounding theory behind it. "My work represents an exploration of gender and sexuality in an urban context," etc. Different people win at that game.

[10] There were several other reasons, including that Florence was then the richest and most sophisticated city in the world, and that they lived in a time before photography had (a) killed portraiture as a source of income and (b) made brand the dominant factor in the sale of art.

Incidentally, I'm not saying that good art = fifteenth century European art. I'm not saying we should make what they made, but that we should work like they worked. There are fields now in which many people work with the same energy and honesty that fifteenth century artists did, but art is not one of them.

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- Japanese Translation
- Simplified Chinese Translation
