



WHAT DOES IT MEAN, WHAT MAKES GOOD ART?

These statements constantly bounce back and forth – everyone wants to know what does ‘it’ mean and what is the value. Many philosophers and critics have spent their lives looking at these questions.

Taste is subjective and everyone has an independent and valid point of view and level of appreciation. Without discussion or research, if we engage with a painting or artwork on a purely aesthetic level, this is our ‘taste’. Often we need to look and re-look, maybe even go away and come back. Our own response will reflect back at us and is based on personal associations and history, these drive our likes and dislikes.

When we consider a landscape, we identify with it, even if there is only a horizon line, we associate that line with the land – it anchors us. If then we look at a canvas loaded with yellow paint and brushstrokes, how do we identify, where is our anchor? In his essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch” Greenberg stated that “subject matter and content should be avoided like the plague”, he felt that symbols and subject were the desire of the masses and that art should be valid on its own terms, he founded this writing on the philosophical writings of Kant. Certainly if we look beyond the narrative element, we see the base materials, colour, scale, the fundamentals of the image then we can analyse what it is we ‘like’.

Simply put it seems we should trust our eye, this leads to our hearts. We should train ourselves to look - and look again. Consider what it is we like, what it is we don’t like. Then, and only then, we should look into what is said by others about the artist and their work. Of course in order to extend our art vocabulary we must read. Writer Laurence Simmons addresses the relationship between art writing and art making in his book “The Image Always Has the Last Word”, do they drive each other symbiotically, or exist independently of each other? Simmons quotes Roland Barthes who states that “the image is peremptory, it always has the last word, and that no knowledge can contradict it”.

Italian philosopher Croce feels that intuition and expression begin in the artist's mind, and once this happens then the work of art exists. Of course this has to be visualized and communicated to the viewer, this occurs when the painting is made. When we the viewer physically stand in front of the painting, the process reverses; we view it, attempt to understand it, and take it back into the artists mind in an attempt to understand the motivation of the maker. John Reynolds has been known to say, “an artwork is successful if the viewer stops to look at. They might not like it, but if they stop to assess and analyse it then that’s successful”. The painting has demanded we stop; it has received a reaction from us.

Meaning then is very much in the hands of the maker who may choose to discuss this or not, but ‘meaning’ is also the responsibility of the viewer whose personal interpretation and response, is equally valid.

What makes good art then is based largely on the artworks ability to communicate with the viewer, what it communicates may and will vary. There are a many ways to gauge a ‘good’ artwork; here we have looked at judging by aesthetics as opposed to finance. It is always pleasing when we choose a work for its ability to visually please us and then discover that the work has been judged successful in monetary terms as well!