

## Purpose & Function of Art

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### Denis Dutton's *The Art Instinct* (2009)

#### A Definition of Art

Source: <http://www.aristos.org/aris-10/dutton.htm>

Here is a brief summary of Dutton's annotated cluster-criteria definition of art.

1. *Direct pleasure*. Art is "a source of immediate experiential pleasure in itself." (Such pleasure is also found in other areas of daily life, "such as . . . sport and play, . . . quaffing a cold drink on a hot day, or . . . watching larks soar or storm clouds thicken . . . [and] sex.")
2. *Skill and virtuosity*. The making of art requires and demonstrates "specialized" *skill* (which is also "a source of pleasure and admiration in every area of human activity beyond art, perhaps most notably today in sports").
3. *Style*. "Objects and performances in all art forms are made in recognizable styles, according to rules of form, composition, or expression. . . . Styles . . . allow for the exercise of artistic freedom, liberating as much as they constrain. Styles can oppress artists; more often styles set them free. (Virtually all meaningful human activity . . . is carried out within [a] stylistic framework: [for example,] gestures . . . [and] social courtesies such as norms of laughter. . . .)"
4. *Novelty and creativity*. These qualities, as well as "the capacity to surprise," are integral to art in Dutton's view. ("Creativity is [also] called for and admired in countless other areas of life. We admire creative solutions . . . in dentistry and plumbing as well as [in] the arts. . . .")
5. *Criticism*. "Wherever artistic forms are found, they exist alongside some kind of critical judgment and appreciation, simple or, more likely, elaborate." [Even in prehistory?]
6. *Representation*. "Art objects . . . represent or imitate real and imagined experiences of the world." ("Blueprints, . . . passport photographs, and road maps are equally imitations or representations. The importance of representation extends to every area of life.")
7. *Special focus*. All art is "bracketed off from ordinary life, made a separate and dramatic focus of experience" (as are other areas of life, from "religious rites . . . [and] political rallies" to "advertising [and] sporting events," in which special focus and "a sense of occasion" are found).

8. *Expressive individuality*. A work of art possesses this trait (but so does "[a]ny ordinary activity with a creative component--everyday speech, lecturing, home hospitality" and so on).

9. *Emotional saturation*. Art is "shot through with emotion" (as are "many ordinary, non-art life experiences--falling in love, watching a child take its first steps, . . . seeing an athlete break a world record, [and] having a heated row with a close friend. . . .")

10. *Intellectual challenge*. Art "tends to be designed to utilize the combined variety of human perceptual and intellectual capacities to the full extent." Aspects of art that are not so easily grasped include complex plot in fiction and recapitulation in music. (But life presents intellectual challenges as well: "Games such as chess or Trivial Pursuit, cooking from complicated recipes, home handyman tasks, . . . or even working out tax returns can offer challenges of exercise and mastery that result in achieved pleasure."

11. *Art traditions and institutions*. Works of art "gain their identity by the ways they are found in historical traditions, in lines of historical precedents." [Dutton is here referring, albeit opaquely, to the "institutional theory" of art that has governed the artworld in one form or another in recent decades--more on which below.]

12. *Imaginative experience*. The chief defining characteristic of art may be that its objects "provide an imaginative experience for both producers and audiences." (While imagination is "virtually coextensive with normal human conscious life"--in activities ranging from problem-solving to daydreaming--the experience of art is different. It is "marked by the manner in which it decouples imagination from practical concern, freeing it, as Kant instructed, from the constraints of logic and rational understanding.")