

ART FOR LIFE'S SAKE

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Modernism: Art as Ideology

Included in the many new approaches and subjects that 18th century thinkers turned their attention to was a subject that came to be called "aesthetics"—a concern with elucidating principles such as taste and beauty that govern all the arts and indeed make them not simply paintings or statues but examples of (fine) "art."

As the subject developed over the next century, a startling and influential idea took hold that, like the concept of "art," was unprecedented. This was that there is a special frame of mind for appreciating works of art—a "disinterested" attitude that is separate from one's own personal interest in the object, its utility, or its social or religious ramifications. The work of art became a world-in-itself, made solely or primarily as an occasion for this kind of detached aesthetic experience, which was considered to be one of the highest forms of mentality.

"Disinterest" implied that viewers could appreciate any art, even the artwork of eras or cultures far removed from their own, whether or not they understood the meaning the works had for the people who made and used them. In this sense, art was "universal." Another corollary was that works of art in themselves, apart from their subject matter, gave a special kind of knowledge—a knowledge which, with the waning of religious belief, often took on the spiritual authority once restricted to the Church. Still another was the idea of art for art's sake (or even life for art's sake), suggesting that art had no purpose but to "be" and to provide opportunities for enjoying an aesthetic experience that was its own reward, and that one could have no higher calling than to open oneself to these heightened moments.

As paintings became less and less like mirrors held up to nature, so that viewers could no longer decipher or naively admire them, critics as mediators increasingly had to explain to the public what made an artwork good or bad and even what a work "meant." In England, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Clive Bell and Roger Fry were extremely influential as they invoked "formalist" criteria for appreciating the puzzling new work of Post-Impressionists such as Cézanne, or the Cubists—work that could not be understood with the serviceable old standards (that anyone could recognize) of beauty of conception, nobility of subject matter, representational accuracy, or communication of valued truths. Art had become if not a religion, an ideology whose principles were articulated by and for the few who had leisure and education enough to acquire them.

In the mid-twentieth century, more elaborate and abstract formalist standards were developed in America by critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg in order to justify abstract expressionism, a school of painting that affronted sensibilities and challenged what had previously been acceptable as art. "Flatness," "purity," and "picture plane" became the verbal tokens of the transcendent meanings viewers were told they could find in the skeins and blobs and washes of paint. Because these values were not easily apparent to the untutored observer, appreciating art became more than ever an elite activity, requiring an apprenticeship and dedication not unlike that of the artist. Never in question was the "high" art assumption that works of art—no matter how strange they looked or unskilled they seemed to be—were conduits of transcendent meaning, of truths from the unconscious, expressions or revelations of universal human concerns that the artist was uniquely endowed to apprehend and transmit.