

## Why Bother With Great Art?

Why bother looking at a great painting, listening to a concert, or going to the theatre when there is so much else for our enjoyment which is easier? Television soaps, popular magazines, chat shows, computer games, and gossip columns all offer easily accessible, interesting and amusing entertainment. Not that great art is defined by its topic or genre. Pop songs and the art on advertising hoardings can be great although great art is, almost by definition, difficult and complex, whereas most popular culture is easy and simple. A great work of art holds a multitude of meanings. It demands effort, and sometimes considerable learning for us to make sense of it. Great art requires us to concentrate long and hard.

Aristotle believed that great art took as its subject matter those things which are of universal concern to all human beings, such as how we make sense of our lives; how we confront and accept our own mortality; and how we manage our relationships with others, especially when they wrong us.

By the criteria of being demanding of concentration and learning, and of being concerned with human universals, the vast bulk of what our culture produces is not great art. Most of it is ephemeral, inconsequential, and of the moment. In an age when most of us can acquire artists' materials, whether they be paints, clay, musical instruments, pen and paper, or even access to a performance space, we are producing more and more for a smaller and smaller audience. Very little of what we produce could be called great. What some people barely can find the time to make, the rest of us can barely find the time to read, watch, or listen to. Like so much else of our society, most of our art is popular, readily consumed, and readily disposed of. And thank goodness! Quick and easy access to information and enjoyment enriches our lives enormously. However that which is quick and easy is not often deep and meaningful. To make sense of great art we have to take time and effort. We have to bring something of ourselves to the experience. Great art shows rather than tells us about ourselves and our world. It requires us to use our hearts and our minds; our senses and our intellects. Because appreciating great art is an effort and a bother, it wakes us up and brings us to a fuller awareness of ourselves. A great work of art can change us so that we are never quite the same again.

Spending time reading great literature, visiting art galleries, going to concerts and attending the theatre requires effort. Sometimes it is nice to just curl up and watch the latest TV soap or read pulp fiction, but if your only exposure to art is light entertainment you are impoverishing yourself. Checklists of the factors which promote good mental health tend to include things such as good relationships with family, intimacy with a partner, job satisfaction, good physical health. I think they should include something about appreciating art as well. Great art feeds the senses, the intellect, and the soul. When was the last time that you brought your full attention to bear on a great work of art?

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Comments and feedback on this article are warmly welcomed.