

# THE ART INSTINCT

*a review*

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Humans all over the world have made visual art, told stories, played music, danced, and left evidence that they have been doing these things for a very long time. Art-making began with our hunter-gather ancestors who lived in the Pleistocene geological era, (1.8 million to 11,700 years ago), which ended with the last Ice Age. The Lascaux cave paintings are thought to be about 17,000 years old; the Venus sculptures, stone carvings of rotund, probably pregnant women, are as many as 35,000 years old. It seems that we had some instinct toward the arts. Does that instinct make evolutionary sense? Might it have helped some of our ancestors to survive and reproduce, assuring that artistic tendencies, to the extent that they were genetically encoded, were preserved through natural selection? These are questions that the late Denis Dutton, founder of *Arts & Letters Daily* and professor at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, asked in his 2009 book, *The Art Instinct*.

Art instincts can come in many forms. There's the instinct to like and appreciate art as an



*Denis Dutton. Photo by Jurvetson (flickr).*

audience member, reader, or observer. There's the instinct to make art oneself. Then there are the instincts governing what we find attractive, pleasing, or beautiful.

Dutton opens with the idea that we like art that portrays conditions favorable for human life. A 1993 survey by artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid found that people worldwide prefer paintings that include water, humans, and animals. Dutton cites psychological studies supporting the idea that people have innate landscape preferences and that people prefer savanna-like landscapes resembling those that early humans would have occupied. When it comes to defining beauty in the human form, Dutton explains, people are attracted to features that signify health (symmetry), and fertility (curviness in women). That people would be attracted to conditions of health and well being, in art or otherwise, makes evolutionary sense.

Dutton points out that these kinds of landscape scenes are found in calendars every year

because they are popular. I would add that people also like romantic movies in which everything works out happily for the couple in question. But calendar landscapes and ‘rom coms’ and elevator music are not our most celebrated works of art.

We also like our angular, asymmetrical, striking Picassos and Modiglianis. We also like tragedy. We are captivated not only by impressionistic paintings of wealthy children but also by scenes of war and depression.

Citing Aristotle, Dutton explains our attraction to the artistic representations of unpleasantness in part by saying that we admire artists’ skills of representation, whether or not we are attracted to the thing represented. “Thus a person afraid of snakes or spiders can be captivated by a marble carving of a snake,” Dutton writes, “or a gold brooch in the intricate form of a spider.” This artistic skill may also have served as a ‘fitness signal’ throughout human evolution, Dutton argues, a signal that the person who could create these works of art probably had good genes in general and would be a wise mate choice. The genes for the art instinct would therefore be preserved through sexual selection, the perpetuation of traits that mates find attractive.

Here, in discussing sexual selection as an evolutionary explanation for the art instinct, Dutton makes an analogy between art and the colorful, flashy tail of the peacock. Rather than aiding the peacock’s survival, the tail takes energy resources to grow and may make the bird more visible to predators. Evolution preserves the tail not because it aids survival directly—it’s actually a handicap—but because the tail attracts mates and assures that the genes for producing it will be passed on. The tail does aid survival indirectly, however, as the tail is a signal for the peacock’s overall health and genetic fitness (studies of peacocks have shown this to be the case).

Let’s consider a few aspects of the analogy between the peacock’s tail and art: both take resources of energy, time, or both to produce. Since art-making is notoriously difficult to make money at (though few do succeed), it is like the peacock’s tail in that it, while not necessarily

‘endangering’ survival, makes life a bit more difficult.

Another aspect of the analogy is that both art and the peacock’s tail involve putting energy into something that does not directly promote survival. This supposedly indicates that the peacock or artist has resources to spare. In the chapter “Art and Human Self-Domestication,” Dutton elaborates on the idea of art as a potential fitness signal. As with the peacock’s tail or the gift of diamonds, the idea is that if an individual can squander resources—on a tail, a loved one, a work of art—that individual is probably wealthy and, therefore, a good provider. An artwork that sends this sort of signal will probably have some of the following characteristics, Dutton writes: be made of rare or expensive materials, take a long time to make, require advanced skill, be practically useless, require intellectual effort. Many artworks have these characteristics. I can see the argument that these aspects of art might attract people, or mates, to artists.

But where I disagree with Dutton is in the idea that art-making is a proxy for evolutionary fitness. Anecdotally, I think art-making is associated with poverty and mental illness—and suicide—as often as it is connected with wealth and health. Think of William Styron, Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath. As for poverty, take Patti Smith before she made it or any artist who hasn’t made it and is trying to live in New York.

Dutton follows his discussion of these ‘fitness signals’ by an exploration of the ways in which people can send false signals—buying fake diamonds, for example. I think that art sometimes serves as a false fitness signal, indicating that an artist has time and money to spare when, in fact, they may be putting everything they have, plus a little more, into their artwork. Yes, artists must have the resources they use to make their art; however, whether they have resources to spare is doubtful. My experience is that artists make art whether or not they can afford it, pay for ballet classes while skimping on food, and so on. I think of the story of how poet E.E. Cummings, having fallen on hard times, went to a fancy party all dressed up with no idea how he would pay for the cab fare home. He pretended everything was fine. Then he did a (charming, of course) trick involving a hat in exchange for cash and his problem was solved, temporarily,

without him ever admitting he was broke. I also think of writers who receive a lot of critical acclaim but not a lot of payment for their work. In those cases, the art is sending a bit of a false fitness signal. It's not that the artist is trying to fake anything, necessarily but that artistic success is simply not as tightly correlated with evolutionary fitness as we might think it is. Today, evolutionary fitness includes the means to support oneself and a family and I just don't see the link between art and those things. I say this as someone who cares about art and believes it to be worth certain sacrifices.

One way in which art-making could boost fitness, however, is that societies reward artists for their skills. "The admiration accorded to highly skilled men and women," Dutton writes in his 2010 afterword, "along with consequent higher status (entailing higher differential reproductive rates) would give any Pleistocene hunter-gatherer group a long-term survival advantage over groups that did not publicly respect or reward skills." While this might have been true 30,000 years ago, I doubt that the rewards artists receive today—such as, say, MacArthur Fellowships—make up for the fact that hour by hour, day by day, or even piece by piece, making art really doesn't pay. I don't think that the fact that a few artists strike it rich provides enough evolutionary oomph to make up for all the artists who don't.

Yet somehow, the art instinct, whether to enjoy art or to make it oneself, has been passed down, genetically. Furthermore, art has been transmitted not only through instincts but through culture. There's certainly a cultural selection for the artworks that will endure and be imitated. Our cultural interest in art must help us somehow.

Aside from the aforementioned doubts about how art-making would give artists an evolutionary boost, I agree with many of Dutton's hypotheses about how the art instinct—including the impulse to appreciate art—could be auspicious.

Reading and writing narratives helps us empathize with other people, which helps society to function. Considering fictional situations and possible outcomes could aid our decision-making, which certainly affects our survival and

success. Rather than having to try something in order to find out that it's a bad idea, we can read about such scenarios, imagine various outcomes, and hopefully choose, for ourselves, the ones that seem most favorable.

Through art, history, and all of our representations of life, we can pass down knowledge from generation to generation, knowledge that, otherwise, would have to be encoded through instinct or learned from experience. And it's not just representation, per se; aspects of art and culture that are or were at one time passed down directly from person to person, such as dance and music before those things had notations, are also culturally, rather than genetically, transmitted.

But art also goes way beyond this concept of instruction and information. Stories do much more than tell people about the potential consequences of their actions (skating on Farmer Giles' pond is probably not a good idea; having an affair might cause complicated problems;) or transmit information. Beyond knowledge, beyond art objects, beyond stories, the art instinct, for both artist and audience, is one toward imagination. The ability to imagine helps us think and plan and is something, like our preference for savanna landscapes, that is universal and instinctive. "It appears as if humans have evolved specialized cognitive machinery that allows us to enter and participate in imagined worlds," Dutton quotes John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, co-directors of the Center for Evolutionary Psychology at University of California Santa Barbara, as writing on this subject. I think it's the ability to imagine that gives us an evolutionary advantage.

Which came first, art or imagination? Or as Dutton puts the question in his chapter about "Art and Natural Selection," is art a by-product of our big brains, as evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker before him had suggested, or does the art instinct itself, separate from other cognitive abilities, provide some specific advantage? I don't know whether art helps us think or whether we make art because we're thoughtful. I can imagine it going either way.