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# What is art?

## (an anthropological and linguistic perspective on art)

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“Man is a metaphysical animal”  
Arthur Schopenhauer<sup>1</sup>.

### Introduction<sup>2</sup>

An aesthetic education is certainly indispensable to any curriculum, but what should it consist of? The answer to this question will necessarily depend on the answer to another far more fundamental one: “What is art?”. Yet this age-old ontological question has a disturbing quality to it. In his 1988 novel *Roger's version*, John Updike remarks that “there are so few things which, contemplated, do not like flimsy trapdoors open under the weight of our attention into the bottomless pit below”<sup>3</sup>. The concept of art is certainly one of those bottomless pits capable of engulfing thought in confusion and obscurity as we try to fathom it in its complexity. We then tend to look for salvation by resorting to the well-established Platonic notions of Beauty, Truth and Good in relationship to Art. But this only shifts the question further to another unfathomable level. What is Beauty? What is Truth? What is the Good? And even granted we manage to define Beauty, not all beauty is art (take for instance a landscape) and not all art is beautiful.

This chapter will (bravely) attempt to define art by linking it to our amazement at the sheer mystery of the existence of the universe and of mankind in it. Aristotle thought that “It is astonishment which drove the first thinkers to philosophical speculations”<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, bewilderment may generate curiosity and ensuing quests for answers and explanations. What is life? What happens after death? Where does the universe come from? How does nature work? How should we behave towards our fellow human beings? And so on.

Mankind has followed four principle paths in the attempt to answer these fundamental questions. The oldest are probably religion and art, followed by philosophy and science. This chapter will first examine some commonly-held notions about art before exploring the four avenues mankind has used to try to fathom our condition. The following section will put the onus on art and try to identify its unique and defining features. The last section will deal with art in education.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sur le besoin métaphysique de l'humanité*, traduit de l'allemand par Auguste Burdeau, Mille et une nuits, 2010, page 8 (our translation).

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Laura Gallagher and Jocelyn Dunphy-Blomfield for their patient reviewing.

<sup>3</sup> John Updike, *Roger's version*, Penguin Classics, 1986, page 74.

<sup>4</sup> Aristote, *Métaphysique*, A, 2 (quoted by Schopenhauer p. 8, our translation).

## 1. Some remarks about art

This section will look at art through the dichotomies Michèle Valentin (2016) put forward to categorise culture in general, adapting them to art. They should not be seen as *either/or* oppositions but rather as *more-or-less* continua. They include art of the past v. contemporary art; high art v. popular art; art as expression v. art as merchandise. Some questions raised by these remarks will be dealt with in section 3.

### 1.1 Art of the past v. contemporary art

The status of works of art from the past is generally not a matter for discussion. Once they have been accepted into the canon, their artistic value is unquestioned even if at the time of production the makers did not consider themselves as artists. Most of the sculptors and carvers who decorated cathedrals and palaces are unknown: they considered their craft as a way to make a living and usually applied the precise requirements of the architects. The same goes for Italian and Dutch renaissance painters: their patrons would most of the time impose the subject and its rendering, quite often including colour and structure. Similarly, it is very doubtful that the Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers who painted those marvellous scenes in the Lascaux caves considered themselves as artists, if there was such a notion in their language.

The status of contemporary art, on the other hand, is perpetually in question. Are dodecaphonic and serial music on a par with classical music? What is the value of experimental literature? Is installation art really art? When visiting the *Tate Britain* in London, a museum with a section dedicated to modern art, I<sup>5</sup> noticed that all the pieces were signed and that many came with a biography of the artist and comments by critics explaining what the work was about. I also noticed a board where visitors could stick up post-its with their comments: most were very negative, regretting the absence of intelligible meaning.

Readily understandable anonymous art has been replaced by puzzling, sometimes mystifying, expression of the self. As an exception one might cite Banksy, a famous street artist who makes a point of not disclosing his identity. Yet this confirms the argument, for his pose can only draw meaning against the backdrop of the prevailing individualism in art. The onus has moved from the work of art to the artist himself, something which will be discussed later in this chapter.

### 1.2 High art v. popular art

High art is art that enjoys social recognition. It consists of art of the past and some contemporary work on which consensus is established or sought. It can be found in museums and it is the subject of learned academic and critical work by specialists. It is considered as an essential component of a person's culture and is therefore a social marker with a Bourdieusian distinguishing quality to it: extended artistic knowledge is considered evidence of a high social status specific to the rich and the educated.

It is opposed to popular art, the art of ordinary people, many of whom create their own art practically without knowing they do so when they engage in various creative hobbies such as painting, carving, music, poetry and literature, also crafts such as embroidery, crochet, patchwork, book-binding, pottery and so on. Popular art does not generate much learned comment and the identity of the artist is not essential. It is more like craftsmanship. When people play music, tell stories, make pots or knit jumpers, they try to create something beautiful. And indeed both high and popular art share the notion that beauty is essential. What also matters to both is difficulty of achievement, which is why much of a work of art's value is linked to the unique skills of the artist.

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<sup>5</sup> We use "I" when the passage is based on the personal experience of one of the authors.

Popular art is sometimes integrated into high art. Ferdinand Cheval was a postman who spent 33 years building his « Palais Idéal » from stones he picked up on his daily 32 kilometre round. Henri Rousseau was a clerk at an excise office in Paris and an amateur painter. Facteur Cheval was finally recognized as a master of naïve architecture and Douanier Rousseau as an arch-naïve painter. Both were “discovered” by high art artists and collectors and had their professions joined to their surnames: *facteur* means “postman”, and *douanier*, “customs officer”; both were recognised within a genre, naïve art, emphasising their humble origins. Popular art may enter high art if it becomes the subject of learned discourse.

Other examples of integration include jazz, long considered Black lower-class music, and some pop music: the Beatles achieved high art stardom, and Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016. Egyptian popular singers like Oum Kalthoum and Farid el Atrache have become classics, even outside Arab music.

Some works belongs to a genre known as decorative art, which may be thought of as an intermediary stage between high and popular art. Often made by anonymous professionals, it is sold to other professionals for illustrative purposes (catalogues, magazines, posters, commercials, ...) and to the general public to adorn their homes. It may be endowed with the same expressive quality as high art but expression is not an explicit aim. Marcel Proust explicitly intended to write a masterpiece, and he succeeded. Georges Simenon’s detective stories were only meant to be entertainment but are now considered literary achievements.

The boundary between high and popular art is permeable and the difference between them will be outlined later in this investigation of what art is about.

### **1.3 Art as expression v. art as merchandise**

Works of art, whether of the past or contemporary, whether belonging to other cultures or to our own, are usually considered as tokens of expression, either cultural or personal. It is thought that, when producing art, artists consciously or unconsciously mean to express either their culture and their time or their personal thoughts and dispositions. Yet the production of art is necessarily integrated in the economical environment of the artists. Palaeolithic rock painters had to be fed by their fellow hunter-gatherers while they spent their time painting in the caves; the raw material of Roman and Greek marble statues had first to be extracted and transported at great cost to the sculptors’ workshop; Johann Sebastian Bach held an official position in Weimar which gave him enough time to compose his music; Louis XIV sponsored a large number of artists and many were invited to stay at his palace in Versailles.

Nowadays art has entered the capitalist system. The cost of high art is sky high whereas popular art is being mass produced and made available at a reasonable price for consumers. This sometimes means a shift in emphasis from expression to satisfaction of market demands. Some claim that money is corrupting art, that the artist’s quest for expressive beauty has been replaced by submission to the trite cravings of the masses. Perhaps. But Rembrandt and Rubens certainly had to satisfy their customers’ tastes and they did so for money. Contemporary critics often oppose commercial to art-house cinema, yet many popular movies are undoubtedly excellent while some less commercial ones might be considered vacuous and pretentious.

There is a contemporary tendency to abstruse art which draws attention to itself or to the artist rather than to a recognizable theme. Its main function is then to serve as a social marker for those who like to believe that appreciating such art is evidence of unusual refinement, culture and intelligence. The pitfalls of snobbery are easily stumbled into.

## **2. Four pathways to understanding the human condition**

Anthropological discussions such as the above help clarify the role and function of art in society but they do not answer the ontological question asked in the title or this chapter:

“What is art?”. The next sections will now endeavour to do so within the general descriptive picture outlined above.

## **2.1 The mystery of the universe and of our human condition**

“Except for man, Schopenhauer says, no being is astonished by its own existence; it is such a natural thing for all of them that they do not even notice it”<sup>6</sup>. And bewilderment may lead to curiosity. The birth of a child in the family or the death of a loved one will certainly prompt children to ask questions about the whereabouts of the baby before it was in the mother’s womb and about destination after death. A certain amount of anguish may then enter into the child’s consciousness, along with metaphysical questions. Why was I born here and now and in this family? Why is death inevitable? What is the meaning of all this? It is very likely that most children, sooner or later, also wonder about the reason for the existence of the universe and the changes that occur in it. Those children who retain their curiosity into adulthood sometimes engage in research, philosophy or the arts in search of answers.

How has mankind coped with bewilderment and how have humans tried to answer metaphysical questions? The next parts will examine three of the four avenues mankind has wandered down in an attempt to fathom the mysteries of the universe and the human condition, *i.e.* religion, philosophy, science. Art will be left to the following section.

## **2.2 The answer of religion**

Religions address believers from inside corpora which have often taken centuries to accumulate. They are made up of texts which tell stories about man, nature, the divinity and their complicated relations. Religions answer all questions, but not always in very credible and coherent ways, quite often with stories Schopenhauer described as “ridiculous fables and bad taste fairy tales”<sup>7</sup>. Take Christianity for instance: how can a virgin give birth to a child? How can a man be resurrected from the dead? How can he perform miracles? Religions exhort believers to simply accept the mystery as divine will incomprehensible to mortals (“God works in mysterious ways”). Incoherence then turns into a metaphor of mystery. Believing in something absolutely and utterly unbelievable such as Resurrection, or Reincarnation in some oriental religions, facilitates the quiet acceptance of more ordinary mysteries, of which death is certainly the most frightening. Faith can help achieve some sort of serenity.

Religions expose believers to their sacred corpora and unquestioned rituals from an early age and articles of faith are accepted despite their irrationality and their factual vacuity. Believers sometimes lose faith when they realise this, but religions structure the lives of whole populations, even of non believers, and people then feel as a closely knit community, with shared values and common aims and behaviours.

## **2.3 The answer of philosophy**

Philosophers, tend to construct theoretical systems purporting to produce comprehensive theories of the universe and of man’s place in it. Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, and all the great system builders have tried to do away with incoherence and fantasy in favour of logic and reason. Yet, at least in the Western tradition<sup>8</sup>, philosophical theories often consist of a sequence of cause and effect set between an origin and an end, between ontology and teleology. As such, they can be considered as lay versions of monotheist thinking.

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<sup>6</sup> A. Schopenhauer, page 1 (our translation).

<sup>7</sup> A. Schopenhauer, page 11 (our translation).

<sup>8</sup> Oriental philosophy and some Western philosophers deal with the situation of mankind *hic et nunc* and the means to achieve happiness and virtue, understanding and wisdom.

Unlike religion, philosophy is not widely disseminated nor is it inculcated from childhood: yet it trickles into people's minds through education and culture, ideology and values. While philosophy better satisfies intellectual needs for coherence and clarity and develops critical thinking, religion is better at approaching real life with its contingent and random aspects. The drawback is that religion curtails curiosity and original thinking because it claims to answer *all* questions. This then generates compliance to social expectations and ideology. When conformity is enforced by law, as in many countries, individual freedom and creativity are in jeopardy.

## 2.4 The answer of science

Science resembles philosophy in some aspects and religion in others. Just like philosophy, it is the product of a personal and intellectual quest. Science differs, however, in methodology. Where philosophers rely on ontological hypotheses and abstract theoretical constructions, scientists observe nature and formulate explanatory theories. Science produces large corpora of knowledge, some of which have practical application, *e.g.* in medicine, computing or geology. Science appears to be able to explain the world, yet scientific truth is only provisional: it can always be challenged by new observations.

Science, like philosophy, is unable to structure society the way religion does, and for the same reason: there is no general exposure of whole populations to their corpora. Like philosophy, science trickles down into the public at large and the general level of knowledge has certainly increased over the past decades, even if much is not really understood and many people are imbued with pseudo-scientific esoteric beliefs mixing scientific discourse and fantasy in domains such as health, psychology, knowledge of the self, etc.

Unknown to many, science is intrinsically metaphysical. Schopenhauer argues that science tends to reduce observations to natural forces such as “gravity, solidity, elasticity, heat, chemical forces”<sup>9</sup>, “for which there is no explanation whatsoever”<sup>10</sup>. “Natural forces” such as gravity have indeed been named and described, but what are they? The mystery remains. Schopenhauer is right: “... physically everything is explainable and nothing is”<sup>11</sup>.

Why is this so? Language teaches us our common experience, made up of real objects (man-made and natural) and anthropological ones such as love, intelligence and courage, which have no physical existence. Names are endowed with a demiurgic power: they give objects a separate existence, not necessarily the same in all languages. For example, French speakers may discuss the difference between “fleuves”, large rivers flowing into the sea, and “rivières”, other rivers. English speakers will not because there is no equivalent for “fleuve”. People tend to think that whatever is named must have some sort of existence. Evolutionary biologists have been searching the genome for the genes of homosexuality and selfishness; neuroscientists have been looking for zones in the brain responsible for altruism. This means they have been trying to give those Platonic anthropological objects a real-world existence without giving thought to their linguistic nature. Altruism and homosexuality are words used in language to qualify a large array of behaviors: they have no existence *per se*. It is doubtful that scientists whose language separates sexuality and human relationships differently would have been prompted to search for those objects in the body<sup>12</sup>.

Thought, even scientific thought, is essentially determined by language, and many scientists are aware of it<sup>13</sup>. As Wittgenstein says “The borders of my language mean the

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<sup>9</sup> A. Schopenhauer, page 34-35.

<sup>10</sup> A. Schopenhauer, page 42.

<sup>11</sup> A. Schopenhauer, page 43.

<sup>12</sup> Readers interested in the views developed in this section may refer to Frath 2016, 2015, 2014, 2008, etc.

<sup>13</sup> See for example physicist Jean-marc Lévy-Leblond's views (2016, 2006).

borders of my world”<sup>14</sup>. Creativity can certainly develop within these linguistic borders; sometimes someone sees something *over* the border, for example scientists when they make a discovery. Once these new objects are named, they are integrated into language and gain existence for *us*.

### 3. The answer of art

These three pathways humanity has taken to explore the mystery of the universe and of our human condition all rely heavily on corpora of discourse. Some knowledge, clarity and understanding have been produced but the mystery remains. Will mankind one day reach a level where all questions are answered? What would it be like to live in a world of wisdom and virtue, without astonishment, without curiosity, without quests? We would probably feel like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. We would live in communion with nature and one another but our lives would ultimately be passive and meaningless. Mystery is the salt of life. What pushed Eve to taste the fruit of the tree of Good and Evil was not female deviousness and folly, as misogynist thought would have it, it was her intellectual curiosity. We owe her our humanity.

There remains a fourth path to be examined, namely art. This section will examine visual art and literature and try to delineate the nature of art by analysing a handful of works: a painting by Salvador Dali, the Lascaux caves, Marcel Proust’s *In search of lost time*, and Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*.

#### 3.1 Salvador Dali’s “Muchacha en la ventana”

Many years ago, when visiting the *Salvador Dali Museum* in Figueiras, Spain, I acquired a reproduction of a 1925 painting called “Muchacha a la ventana”, *Girl at the window*, which features a girl wearing an ordinary dress, seen from behind and standing at an open window looking out on a bay, the bay of Cadaquès, where young Salvador Dali used to go on holiday. The model was his sister, Ana Maria (see below). I was surprised many years later when I saw an 1822 painting by Caspar David Friedrich showing a mature woman in almost the same position (see below). Afterwards, I noticed that the *Woman at a window* theme was recurrent, from Vermeer, to Edward Hopper, to Balthus’s last painting, “Jeune fille à la mandoline” (2001), *Girl with a mandolin*, which shows a young woman lying naked in front of a window holding a mandolin (see below).

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<sup>14</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, § 5.6



“Muchacha en la ventana”, Salvador Dali



“Frau am Fenster”, Caspar David Friedrich



“Jeune fille à la mandoline”, Balthus



“Lady with pearl necklace” Johannes Vermeer

I then wondered about Dalí's inspiration: did he paint this picture in reference to previous paintings or did the theme come to him unprecedented? Most experts believe he knew Friedrich's work, and most probably also Vermeer's. But when I asked an amateur painter friend of mine, Georges Reynès, if he knew these pictures before he came to paint an old woman sitting in front of a window (see below, left), he said he did not: he had just painted his grandmother. He could not say why he had chosen to paint her sitting in front of a window. A professional artist friend of mine, François Mazzero, had painted this trompe-l'oeil picture on the wall of his flat (see below, right) because, he said, the woman he represented was passionate about an island in Brittany, Belle-Île. The *woman at a window* was a well-known theme, he said, but representing the character from the back was not common. The picture is then part of an existing genre, but the fact remains that he could have



painted her in another position. Even though the painting belongs to a genre, the mystery remains.



“Grand-mère Ménine”, Georges Reynès, 1970’s “Rolande”, François Mazzero, 1978

The *Woman at a window* theme certainly has a mysterious quality to it and this is probably why I had bought the reproduction of Dali’s painting in the first place. But what does it mean? Probably dissatisfaction, forlorn expectations, hope that something will happen at last in a dreary life, that a loved one will return or that someone new will appear. The poignant strangeness of Georges Reynès’s painting originates in the fact that we realise that the grandmother’s expectations have no future; age has deprived her of hope and all she has left now is waiting for the end.

There are not many *men at a window* paintings. Vermeer has painted a few, not many. Maybe the predominance of women is caused by deeply ingrained notions about women being passive, dissatisfied, forever waiting for something or someone, possibly Prince Charming, to reveal them to themselves. Maybe the painter has sensed some obscure aspect of femininity to which he has given a form.

Form and content are consubstantial. Artists do not paint a mystery they have conceived intellectually before; on the contrary, their work reveals the mystery to them as they are painting and to others who later look at the painting and perceive it. Without the work of art, there is no revelation, no meaning. The artist gives a certain form to some human truth people recognize when they see it. Art is not a form given to an idea; *it is a form given to a mystery* which is revealed by the work of art.

Let us now see if this notion about art is general and if it can be considered as a criterion to separate art from what is not art.

### 3.2 The Lascaux rock paintings

Are the Lascaux rock paintings “a form given to mystery”? There have been many theories on their meaning and on the cave’s function: a religious sanctuary (André Leroy-Gourhan), an astronomical observatory (Chantal Jègues-Wolkiewiez), a repository of Palaeolithic mythology (Thérèse Guiot-Houdart), a place for shamanic cults (Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams). Maybe they are all correct to a certain extent, and we would like to interpret them in the light of an observation made while studying ancient Egyptian writing. The first Egyptian hieroglyphs were pictograms. The photograph below shows what is known as the King Narmer Palette and it tells the story of a victorious king around 3000 B.C. Yet the pictograms could not be “read”: they did not refer to words. They were used as prompts to “relate” the story depicted in a “scene”, and specialists call them “memogrammes”. Pictograms later evolved into logogrammes (referring to words), phonogrammes (referring to sounds) and classifiers (referring to categories).



Palette of King Narmer, *circa* 3000 B.C.

The Chauvet cave<sup>15</sup> paintings are evidence that Palaeolithic art has been in existence at least since 35 000 years B.C.<sup>16</sup>, *i.e.* 18 000 years before Lascaux. Maybe the Egyptian hieroglyphic scenes 15 000 years later are the heirs of a very ancient tradition. In that case, rock paintings can be construed as memoranda to tell legends and myths, which will probably remain unknown for ever. This would also explain why there are some sort of abstract signs among the paintings, maybe serving as meaningful reminders or transitions (see below).

There is evidence that the caves were used over a long period of time. Hunter-gatherers followed game and roamed large swaths of land, and they periodically returned to places they had been before. One can imagine that one such place had specific meaning because there was a secret cave with paintings in it whose origin was unknown, the first painters having been long forgotten. One can imagine groups of people, adults and children, entering a mysterious dark place, lights flickering against the walls, sitting down and listening to an old person relating year after year stories about life, nature, animals, heroic feats, death, the origin of mankind, man’s fate after death, and so on, sometimes adding a picture or a sign for some reason. The children sometimes got restless and went sliding on muddy rocks (traces

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<sup>15</sup> The Chauvet cave was discovered by chance in 1994 in the Ardèche region in the South of France. It features over 1000 pictures and was in use for many thousand years.

<sup>16</sup> Some even say 40 000 years.

have been found). After the death of the story-teller, someone else would take his or her place and tell the same stories using the pictures and the signs as memogrammes. Until some day, for some reason, they stopped going and the cave was forgotten.



The Lascaux horse, with abstract signs around the front legs and above the horse

Our hypothesis is that the first rock painters gave a recognisable form to stories that had been told over and over long before their time, giving answers to metaphysical interrogations and ensuring their preservation for future generations. Art is then very close to religion and indeed all religions have prompted artists to give form to the sacred mysteries. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches have made extensive use of pictures, sculptures and carvings to provide support for biblical teachings. Islam did this too in a more abstract genre, calligraphy, after the prohibition of the representation of God and God's creatures.

The tradition of using art as prompt for discourse has probably survived into the modern era. The *Unterlinden museum* in Colmar, France, owns an extraordinary painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) titled "Melancholy" (see below), showing a winged woman sharpening a stick. She is sitting in front of a table with a dish full of fruit and a glass of wine. On the floor there is a black sphere, a dog lying down, two partridges and behind the table, a window is open on a black cloud with witches chasing a knight; in front of the window there are four cherubs playing, one of them on a swing. Cranach's painting is a reference to an engraving by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) titled "Melancholia" of which he reused some elements. The modern spectator enjoys the weird atmosphere of the painting but he has to do some research to understand its meaning and symbolism. In medieval times melancholy was considered a demonic state of mind, and indeed Evil is looming through the window while everyone is passive and idle: the woman is doing a pointless job, the children are playing, the dog is half-asleep. Life is still pleasant, as epitomised by the wine and fruit, and also by the partridges, a symbol of lust. The sphere represents geometry, and probably knowledge in general, of which the Church was wary because it gives humans an exaggerated Promethean confidence about their understanding of God's creation and distracts them from what really matters: obedience to and faith in God.



Lucas Cranach the Elder's "Melancholy"



Hans Holbein the Elder's "Portrait of a woman"

If we are able to understand Cranach's painting today, it is thanks to extraneous knowledge available in books and in other domains, a key that is entirely missing for the Lascaux murals. The modern art criticised on post-its at the *Tate*, then, is not breaking with but honouring an ancient tradition.

The *Unterlinden* museum features another extraordinary painting, in the same room as *Melancholy*, painted by Hans Holbein the Elder (1465-1524) and titled *Portrait of a woman* (see above). No symbolic elements have been added: what we see is a mature woman, not particularly beautiful, in a simple dress, looking at something in front of her, slightly below. The painting is extraordinarily expressive and the spectator has a feeling that Holbein has caught some sort of truth about the character. He has painted the woman and her clothes in amazing detail: her eyes, nose and mouth; the contrast between the whiteness of her skin against the darkness of the dress, headgear and background; the intricate ties across the opening of the dress; the shadow of the fine straps holding up the white garment beneath. Even though this painting is inscribed in the Gothic tradition typical of that time, the modern spectator does not need any specific knowledge or a key to understand it. He wonders about this woman, who she was, why she agreed to a pose for a picture that does not enhance her beauty and does not loudly advertise her social status, which is high as can be surmised from the double-stoned ring on her hand. She remains mysterious, despite the abundance of detail, and the spectator has a feeling that this is what Holbein wanted. He meant simply to describe her, knowing that a description is unable to reach the essence of things. The picture can be commented upon, as was done in this paragraph, but its mystery has not been unravelled.

During the Renaissance art shifted from the depiction of communal mysteries to representations and expressions of the individual. Montaigne and Samuel Pepys wrote about their own lives, something which had not happened before. This individualistic trend has produced some of the worst art, as will be seen in the section dedicated to Marcel Duchamp,

but also some of the best, as in Holbein's case. Marcel Proust's *In search of lost time* is another example of fine individualistic art, which will be presently examined.

### 3.3 Marcel Proust's "In search of lost time"

Most readers of Marcel Proust's *In search of lost time* recognise that there is something absolutely original in it, both in terms of content and of style. This is probably why he earned the *Prix Goncourt* in 1919 for the second volume of his oeuvre, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*. At the time, it was rather shocking for many that, just after the First World War, this coveted and prestigious literary prize should be awarded to a writer for descriptions of the superficial life of the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy rather than to Roland Dorgelès for his excellent novel about the war, *Les croix de bois*, "Wooden crosses", which was runner up.

Proust had endeavoured to describe nature and human life in exquisite and profound detail. He turned away from convention in favour of very precise and honest accounts of what he could perceive, feel and understand about people and life in general, even if it was unusual, scandalous or trivial. This is the beginning of *Swann's way*, Proust's first volume.

For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say "I'm going to sleep." And half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would try to put away the book which, I imagined, was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading, but my thoughts had run into a channel of their own, until I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V<sup>17</sup>.

This passage is about something quite trivial, falling asleep, which we all do at least once a day without giving it a thought, something we never discuss because we are not generally conscious of the process. The charm of the description comes from the simple truth we recognise in it when we read it. Proust put into words this banal episode of everyday life and gave it an artistic and pleasurable form, something no writer had done before. He also gave it social existence: this passage is so well-known in the French learned culture that it is practically impossible to talk about falling asleep without mentioning Proust.

The reader of Proust quickly surmises that he will be offered many more such descriptions of unremarked daily experiences. And Proust's oeuvre is indeed teeming with unexpected and remarkable descriptions, e.g. of dried up lime leaves used for tisane, of memories suddenly brought back to consciousness by a smell, of feelings and impressions while waiting in a cold room, etc. And as the novel unfolds, the reader eagerly anticipates more revelations about our common human experience, so mundane yet so mysterious.

Proust reveals the deep mystery of trivial episodes of our lives to himself and to his readers by giving them form. Without form, we might be able to *feel* the mystery for a while, but it would quickly vanish from our memory. The descriptions put the mystery into words and we can then remember it and link it to other thoughts; yet they do not resolve it, nor is any explanation given.

Later in *Swann's way*, towards the end of the first chapter, *Combray*, Proust describes a weird almost mystical feeling we have probably all experienced in our life, that there is something out there just waiting to be noticed and understood.

Here is a depiction of unexpected pleasures he sometimes experienced as a boy while walking in the countryside with his grandfather.

Then, [...], suddenly a roof, a gleam of sunlight reflected from a stone, the smell of a road would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also

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<sup>17</sup> *Swann's way*. Marcel Proust. Translated from The French by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1922 (The Gutenberg Project on-line).

because they appeared to be concealing, beneath what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to approach and seize from them, but which, despite all my efforts, I never managed to discover. As I felt that the mysterious object was to be found in them, I would stand there in front of them, motionless, gazing, breathing, endeavouring to penetrate with my mind beyond the thing seen or smelt.

One evening, on their way back, they met Dr Percepied who gave them a lift home in his horse-drawn carriage. Young Proust suddenly notices the Martinville steeples in the sunset and he experiences a very special sort of pleasure, which he tries to understand. Yet he feels he is missing something:

In ascertaining and noting the shape of their spires, the changes of aspect, the sunny warmth of their surfaces, I felt that I was not penetrating to the full depth of my impression, that something more lay behind that mobility, that luminosity, something which they seemed at once to contain and to conceal. [...] I wished only to keep in reserve in my brain those converging lines, moving in the sunshine, and, for the time being, to think of them no more. And it is probable that, had I done so, those two steeples would have vanished for ever, in a great medley of trees and roofs and scents and sounds which I had noticed and set apart on account of the obscure sense of pleasure which they gave me, but without ever exploring them more fully.

But this time something new happened while he was trying to remember the spires.

And presently their outlines and their sunlit surface, as though they had been a sort of rind, were stripped apart; a little of what they had concealed from me became apparent; an idea came into my mind which had not existed for me a moment earlier, framed itself in words in my head; and the pleasure with which the first sight of them, just now, had filled me was so much enhanced that, overpowered by a sort of intoxication, I could no longer think of anything but them.

This time his observations did not “vanish for ever” in his unconscious memory, they turned into words, and this considerably increased the author’s pleasure.

Without admitting to myself that what lay buried within the steeples of Martinville must be something analogous to a charming phrase, since it was in the form of words which gave me pleasure that it had appeared to me, I borrowed a pencil and some paper from the Doctor, and composed, in spite of the jolting of the carriage, to appease my conscience and to satisfy my enthusiasm, the following little fragment, which I have since discovered, and now reproduce, with only a slight revision here and there.

And then follows a beautiful description of the spires. He concludes:

I never thought again of this page, but at the moment when, on my corner of the box-seat, where the Doctor’s coachman was in the habit of placing, in a hamper, the fowls which he had bought at Martinville market, I had finished writing it, I found such a sense of happiness, felt that it had so entirely relieved my mind of the obsession of the steeples, and of the mystery which they concealed, that, as though I myself were a hen and had just laid an egg, I began to sing at the top of my voice.

Proust does not offer any psychological or cultural clues which could “explain” why he was so struck by the Martinville steeples. The mystery remains but ceases to be troubling. The artist has put it into words in order, not to understand it, but to give it a manageable reality which reduces its inscrutability.

Good literature is often about giving form to unnoticed and inexplicable episodes that the reader recognises because he has experienced but not clearly remembered them, let alone given them artistic form. As Merleau-Ponty says, the writer is someone who says and thinks something for the first time, someone who “turns a certain silence into discourse” (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 214, our translation)<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> This is the full text in French : « Nous perdons conscience de ce qu’il y a de contingent dans l’expression et dans la communication, soit chez l’enfant qui apprend à parler, soit chez l’**écrivain** qui dit et pense pour la première fois quelque chose, soit enfin chez **tous ceux qui transforment en parole un certain silence** » (Merleau-Ponty 1945 : 214).

“The borders of my language mean the borders of my world”. In a way, novelists such as Proust see something just beyond those borders and endeavor to bring it into our common language. The mystery is not solved, but it has become part of our culture because the artist has pointed it out and given us the words to think about it and discuss it.

### 3.4 Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain”

It was mentioned in section 2 that art is now often thought of as the expression of an individual’s inner disposition. Artists express their deep thoughts, emotions and feelings which art-lovers may feel and understand. Art is then considered to be a means of communication, similar to ordinary speech, but heightened. This widespread notion is in harmony with modern-day individualism. As a result, the artists’ ego has become central, often eclipsing their actual work.

Marcel Duchamp submitted a urinal titled “Fountain” and signed R. Mutt, an invented name, for the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York, of which he was a board member. When it was rejected by the committee, who did not know the real “author” of the piece, Duchamp resigned from the board in protest. This kindled a controversy that still rages. Duchamp’s motives were never very clear: some say he wanted to embarrass the Society, some that it was provocation (he wanted to “take the piss”, as the English says), some that he had at one stroke invented “conceptual” art and the urinal became the first of a long series of “readymades”.



Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain”, original picture by Stieglitz

We prefer to think that he was the first to have an inkling that the ego would clash with art, eventually depriving it of meaning. Even if he was not fully aware of it, he raised some fundamental questions about the link between the artist and the work. The same urinal without a signature would just have been an object of everyday life and it would have had no artistic value. And not just any signature would have done the trick: R. Mutt was not a famous name and the piece was rejected. It was only when Duchamp, a recognised artist, revealed he was the author of “Fountain” that the controversy began.

Anything signed by a recognised artist is, then, art. As a consequence, the artist’s main aim is to become famous. He can achieve fame by creating popular art that will be sold to the masses (songs, books, paintings...), but what everyone likes does not have the Bourdieusian

distinguishing quality mentioned above. Those who think of themselves as genuine high art-lovers then appreciate what other people find meaningless: an all blue painting (Yves Klein) or all black ones (Pierre Soulages); paintings made of dots and wriggles (Jackson Pollock); symphonies made from noises; abstruse plays; experimental novels; art-house cinema. There is a condition though, that the artist be recognised. To achieve this, artists have to generate the rumour around them, and this is why the media and the experts' discourse are so important. Artists' success consists less in their own work than in the corpus of discourse *about* them.

Such art is easily recognised: it draws attention, not to meaning but to itself and the artist. When looking at Dali's and Friedrich's *women at windows*, one forgets the artists and the paintings, one is struck by the theme. The authors and their work may be investigated at a later stage for professional or personal reasons, but it is not essential. Jeff Koons' plastic dogs and Andy Warhol's series on Marilyn Monroe and Mao Ze Dong would be disregarded if they had been made by an amateur. They are the descendants of Duchamp's urinal.

Nevertheless, it does sometimes happen that an artist's style is really a new way of expressing a mystery which requires some learning on the part of the public. Such was the case with Picasso's abstract paintings, with Jean-Luc Godard's cinema, with William Faulkner's literature, with Samuel Beckett's theatre, and many other artists who have managed to give new forms to something that we eventually recognise. The limit between creative and uninspired art is difficult to draw.

#### **4. Art and aestheticism in education**

It has been argued here that *art is a form given to mystery*, a mystery that we recognise when we see it in a work of art. Art involves technique and style, which evolve through time depending on available technology and the evolution of aesthetics. It is legitimate for artists to try and develop new ways of expression as long as they keep in mind the duty to meaning. This involves hard technical and intellectual work on the part of the artist.

What is meaning then? The content of art is the artist's astonishment at the world and life. Artists cannot express it the way a scientist or a philosopher would, either because they does not have the necessary disposition or because the complexity of the mystery makes it impossible to express in discourse. They then produce a piece which reveals it, opening the door for commentary and story-telling. This is probably what the Lascaux rock-paintings are about, and all meaningful art since then. Art originates in the individual, but an individual within a community which gives art its meaning; art is about the revelation of shared meanings and common values.

Decorative art and much of amateur art lack this metaphysical quest. Their aim is to produce nice objects for sale and adornment; art is then very close to craftsmanship. A craftsman creates beautiful objects for practical use: vases, dresses, knives, etc.; decorative and amateur artists create beautiful objects for aesthetic use: paintings, poems, sculptures, carvings, etc. The same is true for commercial art, even very expensive art such as Damian Hirst's *For the love of God*, a human skull covered with diamonds: it was made to adorn a museum or a rich art-lover's house, not to give form to a mystery.

From an educational point of view, the teaching of art should involve the notions both of transmission and of individual creation.

Art should be taught at school as well as the three other paths used by mankind to try to fathom our human condition: religion, science and philosophy. This involves studying the history of art and the evolution of various genres; getting acquainted with the role of amazement and curiosity and their link to creativity; learning the significance of major works of art; and mastering some techniques in drawing, painting, carving, writing, playing music.



Students should be put into situations where creation has meaning but they should not be expected to be able to give form to mystery: they have not yet mastered the techniques and they lack the necessary aesthetic culture and life experience. Becoming an artist involves hard work and this means time and education.

We wonder at the mastery of the Lascaux painters. It is doubtful that some hunter-gatherers one day went into a cave with pigments and managed to create their art out of the blue, without preparation and learning. The *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris is dedicated to the evolution of civilisation in all parts of the world. Among the exhibits there are Palaeolithic stones with engravings of the sort of animals featured in caves: lions, bears, horses ... Specialists are at a loss to interpret them. We would like to offer a suggestion: these stones may have been used to teach the techniques of rock-painting. Apprentices would train on stones until their technique was good enough. The better rock engravings might then have served as models for the paintings inside the caves. Apprentices might also have learned the craft of preparing and using pigments, most probably on wood or open air rocks of which nothing remains.

“Es ist noch kein Meister vom Himmel gefallen” (“*No master ever fell from the sky*”), says the German proverb. If good art is to go on being produced, education has a central role to play by giving children the means to acquire techniques and knowledge. Such an education develops manual and creative skill and links children to their past: art is also about transmission. Some students will then go on to give form to mystery in their maturity.

## Conclusion

Let us now go back to the three dichotomies in section 1: art of the past v. contemporary art; high art v. popular art; art as expression v. art as merchandise. They were useful to distinguish the many mansions in the house of art, but it should be apparent now that they are not a basis for defining art. Art has happened in all parts of the world and in all historical periods. The distinction between high and popular art seems to be a fiction to the advantage of the upper classes. The onus put on art as expression as opposed to art as merchandise is the result of modern-day individualistic values clashing with ideological stances about the corrupting influence of money.

So how can art be distinguished from what is not art? It has been argued in this text that art is a metaphysical quest. Without it, it is craft, or decorative or commercial art. “Man is a metaphysical animal”, Schopenhauer says; we *need* to give form to mystery.

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