# Introduction

The visual arts serve, and have always served, a distinct and special purpose in human history. We have built monuments to the gods and to men, we have painted pictures of a world like our own, and created enigmatic other-worldly sculptures, products of our imaginations rather than our observations. Viewers of artwork, and the makers of it, have all experienced moments of beauty, when time seems irrelevant, and we are completely engrossed in an aesthetic moment which emotionally and spiritually moves us. Immanuel Kant might call this event the supersensible, John Dewey might call this Experience, or flow. Great art philosophers and everyday people alike agree that through the experience of the beautiful, the engagement with a work of art may elevate the human consciousness to a level wholly separate from every-day life. When we engage with a thing of beauty, a work of art, we may achieve a higher level of *being,* if only for a moment. In this thesis, the questions I wish to explore are, why, or how, does art spur this elevation of consciousness when we engage with it; and furthermore, how should this affect contemporary education of the arts.

Before I delineate the two bodies of thought on this matter, formalism and symbolism, I will explain the three key concepts that I explore in this thesis: beauty, divinity, and morality, while I acknowledging that my definitions are not comprehensive or absolute. Beauty, I believe, as does Kant, is subjective, while definitions are objective. Divinity, too, is not a concept that I can assume to define with my human cognition alone. We still use these words, however, and give meaning to them; and for the purposes of my paper, I will provide my understanding of these terms.

My conception of beauty is based upon meditations and contemplations about beauty by Western philosophers from antiquity to the present. Based on their work, beauty is a judgment

of aesthetic taste, which combines our sensual and spiritual capacities. Beauty is a quality of art, which we perceive through, in Kant’s terms, a supersensible substrate. In other words, a capacity which combines the imagination and sensibilities of the mind. Our judgments of beauty are both universal and subjective at once, while this ability to judge beauty is a divine power within our human capabilities. Beauty embodies mysteries and the unknown; and is essentially good. Beauty must be perceivable to the senses, especially sight, and as such must have the aesthetic qualities of shape, color, and composition. My definition deviates from Kant’s because I believe beauty may involve symbols.

Let me now discuss this idea of judgments of taste as a divine ability, and my interpretation of the divine. The philosophers of whom I speak in this essay approach the divine from varying perspectives, comprising: the metaphysical, God, superhuman, supersensible, and genius. Since the divine is unknowable, I do not presume to discount any of these philosophical notions of it. However, for the purposes of my own argument, I believe that the divine, as it relates to art, is something supersensible, that it is beyond the typical human capacities of sensing it with the body or comprehending it with the mundane mind. The divine is something that is beyond the normal human experience. But, when we, through a supersensible substrate, achieve an elevated state of consciousness, we access the divine. One medium through which we may experience the divine, the supersensible, this more-than-human sensibility, is through an engagement with the visual arts.

Lastly, let me discuss my understanding of morality for the purposes of my argument. In this essay, I discuss a potential moral component to art and beauty. I propose that art which is good and beautiful may have moral implications, and that an ability to perceive beauty in art may indicate morality in an individual. This is not to say that art which is bad, or immoral cannot be

beautiful and equally moving. Both good and bad art can be beautiful, and thus may invoke moral sensibilities in a viewer. Plato discusses art which is untruthful as capable of immorally moving the viewer. While the idea of good and bad art are subjective qualities, the point I wish to make on art as having a moral dimension is that our perceptions of beauty may impact our personal moral sensibilities.

I will now delve into formalism and symbolism as avenues for achieving an elevated consciousness through art. Aesthetic theorists have distilled art into two basic components: form and symbol, and they debate about which, or which combination of the two, best serves to elevate the mind. Kant, who holds that form alone constitutes the purest beauty, and finds symbols not only irrelevant, but distracting from the beauty of an artwork itself. Kant reasons that what a picture symbolizes, remains external to it, and therefore, is extraneous. What an

image references, for Kant, has no connection to a work’s aesthetic or artistic success. Instead, the intrinsic quality of art, the form alone, constitutes beauty, and therefore is the force which allows the viewer to discover herself and something greater than herself through deep engagement. For Kant, symbols, that are inherently external from a work itself, only distract (Kant 239). Kant developed his ideas in a time before artists had conceived of Abstract Expressionism; but this pure abstraction was the ideal Kant was envisioning. Nelson Goodman offers a succinct summary of Kant’s view: “…pure art dispenses with external reference of all kinds [and has] the solid sound of straight thinking, and promise to extricate art from smothering thickets of interpretation and commentary” (240).

A dilemma confronts us however, if we adhere to this formalist theory. We might ask the question: what does elimination of an exterior object from art leave us with? If we follow Kant’s theory to its finality, would we have to say that only the work of Abstract Expressionists can be

called beautiful? The work of the Abstract Expressionists, Pollock’s splatters or Rothko’s hazy rectangles, attempt to free themselves from the influence of external symbols, and I would certainly agree that they are beautiful and have a capacity to engage the mind at a level higher than simply identifying a narrative or subject of traditional representational art. But, to fully accept this theory would be to reject works by titans of the visual arts such as the Sistine Chapel ceiling or *Guernica.*

For the sake of the argument we might try going in the opposite direction from Kant, valuing art for its symbolism and representational qualities. If we were to go to the extreme antithesis of formalism, we find ourselves with pure propaganda. If an artist places all emphasis on the message of concept, paying no mind to form at all, his work is not art, but something else entirely: a political or social message, something cognitive but essentially non-aesthetic. Art requires form to qualify as art, it requires form to contain aesthetic value. Without this necessary quality, a concept is merely that alone.

There are of course different types of symbols. A symbol can represent an idea or emotion. This would be a very abstract, intangible symbol, which can be found in the art’s form. Dark cool colors may symbolize melancholy. There are also more literal symbols, such as the iconography of religious paintings, meant to invoke specific theology or ideology through the use of designated, well-known elements. For example, a medieval biblical painting of Mary may feature sword lilies, which symbolize Mary’s pain over losing her son, and pureness of heart and body (Bokelman). Then there are the symbols which fall somewhere in-between these two extremes which embody the specific meaning of the artist. Albrecht Dürer paints himself with long brown hair, a beard, and red clothes, to bring to mind in the viewer thoughts of Christ, and divinity. I believe that the symbolic content in Dürer’s self-portrait (which I will discuss in more

detail later), adds a dimension to the work which fills me with awe; but this does not mean that works devoid of symbols lack pure beauty, nor does it mean that the extraneous should be emphasized over the content of a work of art. Here lies the middle ground upon which I wish to build my argument upon.

To fully adhere to either idea, formalism or symbolism, is to dismiss a vast range of art in this world. Since even the most abstract, non-representational artwork, still may express an emotion or inspire an idea in the viewer, symbols are unavoidable. Formalism is an ideal which is impossible to achieve through human interaction with art (colors unavoidably express ideas, lines may invoke feelings). Likewise, artists who use symbol and representation to render a recognizable image, may still create a beautiful form to engage the viewer’s imagination.

Symbol without form is merely propaganda, existing to convey a message and nothing else. On the other hand, art without symbol would not only be empty, but impossible. Each role is distinct, but no less important. I believe that through the harmony of form and symbol, a viewer may engage with a work of art to reach a heightened consciousness. Artists can us form to achieve beauty, but beauty cannot exist in human reality without symbol, and symbol may greatly enhance the viewer’s experience of art and beauty.

I hold that art has a capacity to elevate the mind of a viewer, by connecting her to herself and engaging her senses and understanding simultaneously. Secondly, two areas of thought exist in theories that constitute pure aesthetic success in artwork: the formalist view, which favors form, and the opposing side of this spectrum which favors symbol. I find value in the arguments of both, and like many scholars before me, I fall somewhere in the middle. I believe that it is neither form nor symbol alone which succeeds in engaging a viewer to create an experience beyond the mundane. Instead, the interaction of the two together, combined with the readiness

of the viewer to engage in a free play of mind and spirit, a concept of Kant’s theorizing, allows for this phenomenal experience to occur. While I disagree with Kant’s dismissal of concepts, I believe his theory of free play is essential to the interaction of form and symbol in elevating the mind.

To explore this dichotomy of form vs. symbol, and my own ideas of aesthetics, I will analyze the theories which make up this debate, throughout philosophy and art history. In the first chapter of this paper, I will define what it means to elevate human consciousness through art, since the debate of form and symbol relies on the truth of this possibility. In the second chapter, I will fully engage in the ideas of form and symbol, and define my own beliefs on this debate. Finally, to tie in my perspective as an art educator, I will in the third chapter delve into the implications of my findings on my own field, discuss the theories of philosophers of art education, and propose my own pedagogical perspective. In conclusion I will argue that through education of a union of form and symbol, we not only have the greatest chance of elevating our minds through aesthetic experience, but expose ourselves to the morally good found in art and beauty.

# Chapter 1

**Elevating Human Consciousness through the Visual Arts**

In America, we treat art as something sacred, we hang paintings in galleries, and put marble statues on pedestals, we do our best to preserve ancient works and we invest in the making of beautiful things, be it public monuments or prominent architecture. John Dewey in *Art as Experience*, proposes that our treatment of art, through the museum mentality (placing works of great significance on pedestals) is not a practice of art at all, but rather is a reflection of man’s religiosity and spiritualism, and his need to honor that which we understand to be sacred (6-7). So we know that our ideas of art involve identifying something as special, something which seems to be above the mundanity of everyday experience. Ellen Dissanyake reinforces this belief, arguing that art began when humans realized that they could recognize something as ‘special’, and also *make* something special (24). Of course, when we think of ancient artwork, religious material immediately comes to mind. For a long time, art as we know it did not exist; images and three-dimensional carvings existed solely for religious, political, or spiritual purposes.

In this chapter I will discuss the idea of a heightened state of mind through art, what exactly this means, and how we might achieve this through aesthetic experience. To do this I will reference various philosophers and their aesthetic theories, to illuminate the idea of arts capacity for elevating human consciousness. I will begin with Plato, who wrote of art’s capacity for danger in its untruthfulness and sensuality, followed by Leo Tolstoy’s theories of art as capable of invoking unique human experiences in the viewer. I will next invoke the theories of

R.J. Collingwood, who writes on arts capacity for revealing to us our own feelings and providing us with a medium through which to express them. I will also discuss Kant’s theory of subjective

universality in judgments of aesthetic taste, Hans-Georg Gadamer in his ideas of art as availing us to the history of human culture, and John Dewey’s idea of aesthetic Experience.

Figure 1. Lascaux: Axial Gallery Large Bull: det.: left wall. Lascaux Cave, France

Our first works of human-made art are essentially religious material. In fact, according to Mary Anne Staniszewski, in her work *Believing is Seeing: Creating the Culture of Art,* the concept of art, as we understand it today, did not even exist until the turn of the 20th century (1- 10). Prior to that time, art was propagandist in purpose, in that it existed to convey specific and important messages of the culture and patron who commissioned them. In the beginning, art and religious material may have been one and the same. Paleolithic art focuses around a common theme, across continents and cultures. Early peoples may have used art for sympathetic magic: a concept in which performing an act in the present, causes an effect elsewhere, or later. Painting the scene of a successful hunt, for example, could ensure the success of hunts in life. Scenes from Altamira Cave in Spain (approx. 35,000 – 7,000 BCE) depict wild animals, scenes of the hunt, and food (Bokelman).

People visited caves such as this for tens of thousands of years, because they may have believed these spaces were spiritually imbued. Perhaps they were tracking the herds, or teaching young ones to hunt (as spear marks pock the painting’s surface). The ritual function of this painted bull is not dissimilar from the *Venus of Willendorf*’s robust portable form, found in abundance throughout Russia and the Iranian Steps. She was a fetish figure; her ample, fertile, idealized body may have served as a sacred good luck charm for Paleolithic women, whose sense of ritual focused on fertility of land and women (Bokelman).



Figure 2 *Venus of Willendorf (Front View).* 30,000-25,000 B.C.E. Carboniferous Limestone, Naturhistorisches Museum, Austria.

Possibly, these ancient artifacts may have been understood to have magic properties. The very making of them was ritual practice, and any interactions with them may have indicated magical practice. Interacting with these works of art elevated the human consciousness by allowing the person to believe in something intangible. In the Christian world, one might think that religious works of art are best suited to elevate the human mind. Paintings, sculpture, and

stained glass adorn church walls, making the word of God visible. Those who practice Hinduism engage in darśan, a practice which involves the sacred act of looking at an image of a deity, and therefore looking at the deity herself, engaging in a sacred reciprocal exchange (Eck).

Clearly similarities exist between the purpose of ritual and the purpose of art. Harry B. Lee, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* considers prehistoric ritual objects to be religion and argued that art and religion are “twin institutions”, which, despite their differences, diverge from the utilitarian and practical conventions of our daily lives. According to Lee, on the matter of religion and art:

We attend to both as exercises of the spirit; they are alike in being experiences which are noble, passionate, and serene, and which absorb our interest most fully when we turn to them in solace and with a spirit of humility and devotion...Art, like religion, expresses the spiritual capacities of our human nature… (Lee 121)

Art, like religion, has the power to influence our ideals and feelings. It possesses the power to connect us with something greater than ourselves, some intangible and possibly divine element. Both the creation of art, and the reception of it, regardless of subject matter, are not purely secular pursuits. I will remind the reader that I am using a definition of divinity which does not depend on the existence of a god; I am not discrediting the work of Atheist artists who would not consider their pursuits to be divine. As I am using the word here, divine means essentially more than human.

This is also does not mean that only religious artwork has the capacity for elevating human consciousness however. The ancient artworks above have the power to bring us to a higher level of thinking, elevating the mind to a plane above the everyday, possibly even communing with a source greater than ourselves. However, non-religious art can produce the

same result. A viewer does not need to believe an artwork can bring her to a divine plane in order to experience the supersensible (a Kantian term which I will discuss at length later on). By the mid to late 19th century, artists began searching for new subject matter and media, in an attempt to elicit an emotional response from the viewer, moving them beyond the mundane (Tooth).

In Modernism, artists began to a focus on the self, the individual and his own

interests. As artists broke from the traditional influence of the Academies and patrons, their art began to reflect personal, non-religious ideas. For a time, ancient and religious artwork undoubtedly influenced the Modernists. Pablo Picasso’s paintings reference ritual African masks, while Henry Moore’s sculptures recall Mayan Chacmool. These ancient ritual influences remain a constant, and in Modern Art we find a new form of spirituality, with its own moral implications. Though many modern artists appropriated the ritual artifacts of indigenous cultures, they transformed them into their own visual experience of modern spirituality. A museum-goer may stop in front of Pablo Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and be swept away by the beauty of the piece, unaware of any influence traditional African masks may have played in its making, and find herself so deeply engaged in the visual impact that her mind reaches a new level of thinking for the time she takes to experience the painting.

Art has a capacity for engaging our minds, and touching our souls; this is the power of art. Plato spoke of these divine capabilities in the R*epublic*, in such a way that actually cautioned against the arts because of their powers of influence. Art has the power to change the fears, passions, and attitudes of men, and as such poses a threat to the balance of a man’s

soul. Drama may change a man’s soul for the worse if he imitates unworthy or untruthful characters, the poetry of Homer may strike fear in the hearts of young men who were to become

soldiers. Plato describes the power of “poetical charm” here, and though he does not deny the potential for artistic beauty, he acknowledges its dangerous influence, and the power of those who create art to influence man’s soul, deeming them a threat to the *Republic*:

And therefore when any of these pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything, comes to us, and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful being; but we must also inform him that in our State such as he are not permitted to exist; the law will not allow them. (Plato 28)

Because they are capable of corrupting the souls of the State, according to Plato, artists have a special power over man’s inner self. For Plato music is the most potent medium for changing us, since rhythm and harmony may attach themselves to the deepest recesses of our being and change us for better or worse. This power Plato describes lies in an artist’s ability to call upon our sensual, emotive human qualities, rather than our logical faculties. Art changes our thinking process:

For if you...allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers of our State. (Plato 43)

Plato professes the idea of a well-ordered soul, with rational nature at the top, ruling over the spirited, which in turn rules over the appetitive. If the appetitive nature shifts its place, and controls either of the other aspects of the human soul, then a grave imbalance occurs. A well- ordered soul is better equipped to handle the evils and injustices of life. However, art appeals to the appetitive nature of the soul, and is thusly positioned to move things out of balance. To Plato, the seductiveness of art makes it dangerous, as men fall easy prey to its sensuality. Surely this means that art as a medium captivates the human consciousness, separating it from everyday

experience; though for Plato, this is only a positive change under specific circumstances which align with the values of his ideal society.

For Plato, the portrayal of antireligious ideas and the appeal of arts to the irrational side of human nature, are not the only reasons he proposed the censorship of art in the *Republic.*

Artist’s capacity to present mistruths poses a problem for Plato as well. A painting is a mere representation of a thing, and is therefore a disingenuous endeavor, since what is painted will never be the thing itself. This idea brings to mind Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images,* which demonstrates that a painting of a thing will never be the thing it depicts. Magritte paints words beneath his image which read “Ceci n'est pas une pipe.”, which translates to “This is not a pipe.” The seeming contradiction perfectly fits into Kant’s aesthetic theory, that a work of art is only an image; it is not the original object that it represents. For Plato, a painter is dangerous because he may paint whatever he likes, even if he has no true understanding of the original thing. This logic applies to all the arts for Plato; for example, a poet who has never witnessed war should not write epics about the plight of a soldier, since the poet never experiences war or a soldier’s life. Likewise, Plato would likely have taken issue with Eakins’ *The Agnew Clinic*.



Figure 3. Eakins, Thomas. *The Agnew Clinic.* 1889, Oil on Canvas, University of Pennsylvania.

A painter who has never performed surgery, by Plato’s logic, should not paint an intimate depiction of surgeons and nurses in an active operating room. Artists have a capacity for creating visual falsehoods, making them therefore both powerful and problematic, in their potential to influence the minds, and for Plato therefore the soul, of viewers (13).

The testimony of artists often upholds this idea of art’s influence over human consciousness. Jacopo Carrucci De Pontormo said on painting “For had he considered that when God created man He made him in relief, it being thus easier to make him alive, the painter would not have chosen so difficult a subject, fitter for divine and miraculous powers” (Goldwater and Treves 86). These powerful words, make a claim that painting is so sacred a task that it is better suited to the ultimate creator. Albrecht Dürer illustrates this point in his self-portrait.



Figure 4. Albrecht, Dürer. *Self-Portrait*. 1500, oil on panel, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

He purposely invokes imagery typical of Christ as Salvator Mundi and Pantocrator, which were common subjects during Dürer’s time (1500 CE). He wears a red- toned garment, to bring to mind the Passion of Christ, and his long brown hair and facial hair resemble typical images and texts of Jesus during the Late Renaissance in Northern Europe. He poses his hand in a position so as to bring to mind the three fingers of the Trinity. However, his fingers are not held aloft as they would likely be in a typical image of Christ blessing; instead, they touch the incredibly naturalistic fur of Dürer’s garment. This purposeful position draws attention to Dürer’s ability to paint so illusionistically that his technique may fool the eye. He not only perfectly rendered the fur collar, but carefully executed each brushstroke, from the individual strands of hair, to the texture of his skin, as only the most proficient German Masters could achieve at this time. Self- Portraits served as tools to demonstrate a painter’s artistic skills, to attract patronage. Dürer

visually likened himself to Christ for a distinct purpose, clearly revealed in the attention drawn by his hands to his collar: the ability to render God’s word realistically on a 2-D surface was god-like (Bokelman). Interestingly, Dürer likens himself to God or divinity, by touching the fur collar of his garment, a material which is animalistic and very mortal. He makes a claim of a divinely inspired genius, but reminds us that he is very much human, claiming his abilities as miraculous.

Dürer and Pontormo are two of many artists who speak to the divine power of painting alone; so Plato’s caution, perhaps even distrust, of the arts and of artists possessing this more- than-human ability in the *Republic* may be wise; or at least certainly understandable posing a

danger to his ideal society. In the *Symposium* however, Plato takes a less cautious stance towards the arts. Here, Plato intimately and explicitly connects the aesthetic, the beautiful, with love; and describes love as an intermediary between man and the divine. If we are to assume the presupposition of Plato, that art is necessarily beautiful, then we may acknowledge that art is indeed concerned with the beautiful, in that artist are seeking beauty (Plato 56-63). Love, like art, is still capable of good and evil; Plato calls it a “mean between them” (Plato 57); but its divinity is undeniable in the exchange between Diotima and Phaedrus. In this dialogue, Diotima proposes that love, as a pursuant of beauty, “is neither mortal nor immortal, but a mean between the two” (Plato 57). With love as a mediator between man and the divine, our understanding of it is a spiritual one. So too then, is beauty, a spiritual understanding, beauty which love inherently seeks out. I believe that it is when the sensual faculties of man rise to meet our spiritual understandings, that we may perceive the aesthetic. In the *Symposium,* Plato retains his stance of morality and art, but this time in stronger favor of the positive power of beauty. In

terms of art’s moral dimension, he writes that the understanding of fair forms leads to fair

practices, then fair notions, upwards to the pure essence of beauty. He states that beholding beauty may lead to creating beautiful realities, and asks is this an ignoble life? The answer to which is of course no (63). This is the height of morality for Plato in terms of virtue through art and beauty.

Plato writes in the same vein in *Ion.* Here, the artist makes art while “not in [his] right mind”, but in a consciousness possessed by the Muse. Plato, through the voice of Socrates, states:

Many are the noble words in which poets speak concerning the actions of men; but like yourself when speaking about Homer, they do not speak of them by any rules of art: they are simply inspired to utter that which the muse impels them, and that only; and when inspired, one of them will make dithyrambs, another hymns of praise, another choral strains, another epic and iambic verses - and he who is good at one is not good at any other kind of verse: for not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine...and therefore God takes away the minds of poets, and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses diviners and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves who utter these priceless words in a state of unconsciousness, but that God himself is the speaker, and that through them he is conversing with us (Plato 49).

Socrates proposes here that the very words of the poet are not his own, but the work of the God who speaks through him and for him, an idea which Nietzsche expands on in *Birth of*

*Tragedy.* Here, the artist abandons his role as maker, and becomes the art himself. He transcends human capabilities; his performance becomes supernatural to the point that he “feels himself a god” (Plato 165). Art, as described here, is the pinnacle of human achievement, through divine inspiration.

Both the making of and witnessing of art involves something beyond mundane experience, a transcending of the physical, every day, state of being. When we encounter a work of art, we may engage in a sacred exchange. Plato introduces the idea of art as sacred experience. Ion agrees with Socrates, and speaks from his own experience as an orator,

confessing that when he hears poetry filled with sorrow and pity, he is moved towards these emotions; when he recites tales of horrors, his own hairs stand on end and his pulse quickens. It is the act not only of making art, but our interactions with it, which move us to a higher plane, able to feel the emotions of which we may have no human experiential knowledge ( 45-55).

Leo Tolstoy defines art by its ability to infect the spectator with the feeling of the author.

The purpose of a work of art is to inspire this experience of feeling. If this union goes unachieved, then the work must not be art; and if the work does invoke an emotion, with a potent degree of infectiousness, then the work of art not only satisfies its qualifications as such, but achieves excellence in its field. It is miraculous to think that a work of art may invoke emotions in any viewer who happens upon it. Tolstoy’s definition of art, of good art, is that a painter may imbue his work with his own emotions, which we as viewers, may never have experienced before (i.e. the fear of death in battle, passionate love, murderous fear) but we may be miraculously moved as to a similar emotion when engaged with it (179).

R. J. Collingwood proposes that art is the medium through which we may not only express, but discover these feelings. The act of making art is the act of uncovering and exploring the range of human feeling; therefore, art is expressive, and the very act of expression is an exploratory one. Art gives us the means by which to discover our own feelings. It may unlock the deepest recesses of our emotional life. G. W. F. Hegel calls that which is truly beautiful

“spirituality given shape, the Ideal, and more precisely, absolute spirit, the truth herself”

(154). Certainly our interactions with it then involve something beyond engaging our eyes. Art is the “self-comprehending” endeavor we engage with in an attempt to better understand ourselves, and human nature (159). Art provides a medium through which we explore our higher consciousness, and discover inner truths which may be otherwise inaccessible. Speaking

as an artist myself, I often am surprised by my own work. I put pencil to paper, and though I may have a vague idea of what I will attempt to create, I have no preconceived idea of what will appear on the page. When I have too specific an idea, I find the process of physically rendering the image much more difficult, and the result lacking in depth and feeling.

The emotion both uncovered and imbued in the art-making process, gives a unique and exclusive accessibility to the inner working of the artist by a viewer. To paraphrase Paul Ricoeur in an interview with Jean-Marie Brohm on arts, language, and hermeneutical experience, each work of art is not just a representation of the soul, but a genuine modality of it. To listen to a piece of music composed with a strong emotion, we may uncover areas of the soul otherwise inaccessible. We discover feelings which we may only have through experiencing *this* song. If the human experience operates on a spectrum with the utilitarian on one end, and the sacred and mystical on the other, art, if not already existing within the latter end, is one gateway to it. Our engagement with art reveals our spiritual tendencies and capacities as humans (Ricoeur 942).

So, both religious and secular art alike hold are capable of elevating the human mind. By engaging the spirit of the viewer, art allows one to transcend mundane experience and venture deeper into human experience. This “heightened” sensibility still lacks clear definition. Some suggest that there is an ethical dimension to art’s lifting of the human mind, and define this phenomenon in terms of morality.

Kant, in a theory which I will describe in much greater detail in the next chapter, argued that when one makes a judgment of taste, he attempts to make a universal statement. In other words, if I attend a gallery opening with friends, and stop in front of a piece so immediately pleasing it takes my breath away, I say “wow, this piece is beautiful”. I will say so with certainty, not only assuming my peers will agree, but expecting that they will. Thus, I would

have made an attempt at a universal statement, speaking not just for myself, but for everyone. Kant claims that by this act, “the mind is made conscious of a certain ennoblement and elevation of the mere sensibility of pleasure received through sense…” (Kant 137). Because this phenomenon is possible, that man’s mind might be ennobled through an aesthetic judgment of taste, Kant proposes that the beautiful is a symbol of the morally good. He then goes further to say that those who have developed an interest in the morally good, take an interest in the beauty of nature.

Hans-Georg Gadamer illuminates Kant’s philosophy on beauty as a symbol of morality, with particular regards to natural beauty. When we observe nature, “we find no ends in themselves and yet find beauty, i.e., a conformity with the goal of our pleasures, nature gives us a ‘sign’ that we are in fact the ultimate end, the final goal of creation” (Gadamer 353). Nature, through beauty, finds something to say to us. So too, Gadamer suggests that the significance of art depends on its ability to speak to us: “it confronts man with himself in his morally determined existence” (Gadamer 353).

Perhaps there is some truth in these theories. Someone with a sound sense of morality, with a developed understanding of the good, would be pre-disposed to finding beauty in the world. In this way, there may be an ethical element to the elevation of the human mind through art. By engaging with beauty, the mind engages with something fundamentally and inherently good. While this might come with more ease to someone of highly developed morals, I would propose that it may strengthen the ethical capacities of someone less developed in their own sense of right and wrong. I have to believe that spending time with beauty has a positive effect on the mind and soul of the viewer.

To transition and broaden this idea, Gadamer has another idea about what it means to elevate human consciousness through art, in that it connects the viewer to all of lived history, an idea that I find most compelling and profound. He states that the pantheon of art as we understand it today, does not exist as a timeless entity availing our aesthetic consciousness; but rather, it is “the assembled achievements of the human mind as it has realized itself historically” (Gadamer 358). Art, and aesthetic experiences (which I will describe in further detail below), enhance our self-understanding, which is a transcendent idea. However, self-understanding cannot occur in a vacuous space. All self-understanding takes place in relation to something other than ourselves, which is how we relate to both ourselves and our world. Art offers us an access point into history, an opportunity to contextualize our own understanding of self-identity and understanding in relation to all humanity. While we encounter the world in a work of art, as Gadamer eloquently states, “this does not remain a strange universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in it…” (Gadamer 358).

This idea strays from the metaphysical completely, and engages with the historical, temporal, lived qualities which define art. Art exposes us to the continuity of human existence, it holds us together across time and space. When we engage with a work of art, we tap into this context; and if we allow ourselves to steep in this experience, we may reach a new level of self- understanding within the context of human culture. In other words, through engaging in the continuum of human experience housed in art, we are pulled from the mundanity of every day experience, and are able to develop our sense of self, effectively elevating our consciousness through broadened contextual immersion. We come into contact with lived human history through art, and in doing so, elevate our own minds to a greater understanding of ourselves as a part of this lived history.

I have touched on the idea of an aesthetic experience, and the role it plays in elevating the mind through art. Dewey philosophizes about what constitutes an aesthetic experience, and how this differs from the everyday. Dewey describes how art elevates the mind through his idea of Experience, with a purposefully capitalized E. The Experience differs from its lowercase counterpart in that it fully involves the aesthetic, and a sense of continuous, consummate fulfillment, through engagement of the senses, and feelings. Time and curiosity take a backseat, as the pure pleasure of whatever engages you serves as the only motivation you need to engage. This happens most readily with works of art, in which beauty readily avails itself to take hold of and dive into the bliss of aesthetic pleasure. Furthermore, Dewey claims that art itself is proof

that man feels a need to expand upon his life, “and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action, characteristic of the live creature” (Dewey 26). To expand on this idea, I believe that the truly miraculous part of art’s capacity for elevating the human mind is that the viewer plays just as pivotal a role in this fantastic experience. The viewer rises to meet the qualities of beauty in an artwork, and through a free play of the sensual and intellectual faculties, she might find herself on a higher plane. The conscious understanding of this happening is what Dewey calls an aesthetic Experience, and it is what Kant calls the supersensible.

Kant looks at what Dewey called an aesthetic Experience, as something beyond the mundane human capacity for thought. He called this experience, in particular regards to the experience of art, the supersensible; that is to say, transcendent, and above the everyday plane of thinking. To engage with the supersensible, one must experience a free play between the faculties of imagination and understanding. The experience of art provides an opportunity for

these two faculties to interact with each other, and find a harmony which elevates the mind to something greater beyond the mundane and the concrete to the spiritual.

To summarize some of the theories of these aesthetic philosophers and their opinions of just how the visual arts serve to elevate the mind, I will begin with Plato, who takes a metaphysical and somewhat moral stance. Art has the power to seduce and change people, but is also tied to love in its transcendent relationship with beauty, and in its capacity for the moral good. Gadamer offers a historical perspective that art constitutes the whole of lived history, and through experiencing it, gives us access to the contexts of culture before depositing us back in our own reality, enriched through this profound connection to human life. Dewey’s view is both a social and personal one. Engaging with art allows us to forget the every-day concerns of time and task, and enjoy the pure pleasure of the beautiful. It furthermore reveals the common desire of humans to improve upon their experience of life. Kant’s stance is universal, but not

metaphysical like Plato’s. We reach for something universal when we make statements of aesthetic taste, and do so without questioning the validity of our opinion, rather we assume we speak for all humankind when we claim a work of art is beautiful.

I agree with Kant in this respect, because I have observed people making these universal claims when speaking of art, myself included. I also firmly believe in the power of the free play of the faculties, and believe this is integral to the experience of art in elevating human consciousness. Where I differ with Kant is in his absolute formalism, which I believe is an idealistic, but ultimately unachievable standard of beauty in art. As for Dewey, I fully accept his claim that aesthetic experiences are a class of their own, capable of transporting us from the every-day concerns of agendas and goal-oriented activity, and something which might provide us with enriched social connectivity. Aesthetic experiences are timeless moments of pure aesthetic

pleasure, unencumbered by the mundane. Plato’s ideas of art and the human mind also compel me. I agree most with his writings in the S*ymposium*, in his connection of beauty to love, and the morality in acknowledging beauty in art. I disagree with his distrust of art as inherently untruthful. I understand that a painting of a thing is not the thing itself, but a representation.

However, I disagree that it is a misrepresentation simply because it is an interpretation. I believe there is a new truth to be found in painting, and this truth is capable of conquering beauty and goodness. It is with Gadamer that I most fully align myself. The idea that art holds the history of human culture, which is an access point through which we might enrich our lives with aesthetic experience, I find incredibly compelling. Art shapes and is shaped by culture, and through engaging with it we might immerse ourselves in a historical context greater than our own reality. By engaging with this something greater than ourselves, we experience a level of consciousness beyond the everyday, and beyond anything we knew prior to that aesthetic experience.

I believe that the necessity of this free play in the experience of art reveals that both the intellect and the senses play pivotal roles in elevating the mind; which brings us to the debate: form vs. symbol. Some theories support form as the ultimate tool in the visual arts for engaging the mind and taking it to new heights, while other theorists hold that symbol is the most efficient vehicle for reaching a higher plane of experience. I believe in a balance between the two, or even a tension between form and symbol, which is necessary to fully engaging the mind and spirit of a viewer and to put them in touch with something greater than themselves and their everyday experiences. Furthermore, form and symbol may exist in a work of art together; but it is when the viewer engages with it through her senses and imagination that the phenomenal takes place and the viewer may consciously understand themselves existing on a level inaccessible

before the artistic experience began. I ultimately stand with Gadamer on this point, in that I believe that the heightened level of consciousness achieved through aesthetic experience has a historical dimension. It moves us from the mundanity of our own time and place, and puts us in touch with the whole of human culture. This phenomenon, both a sensual and cognitive experience, must require form and symbol to work in tandem in order for us to achieve it. In the next chapter, I will discuss the debate of form vs. symbol by analyzing the position of Kant and formalism, as well as the opposing extremes of pure symbol, in order to defend the necessity of both.

# Chapter 2 Form vs. Symbol

Having discussed in detail the meaning of an elevated consciousness through engagement with the visual arts, I will now introduce the dominant bodies of thought on how best to achieve this state. Formalists, Kant principle among them, claim that form is the ultimate vehicle of beauty. Formalism leaves behind distracting concepts, and looks at pure beauty comprising only form. To take this philosophy to the extreme eliminates the possibility of meaning or symbol within a work of art, including even the form of cognitive expression, valuing the senses over the intellect. To state that beauty relies on symbol, likewise, has merit, but can also err on the side of extremes. Being human, it may be impossible to not search for symbols when looking at an artwork. Even if a painter believes himself to create beauty from formal elements alone, the viewer brings unavoidable symbolic understanding with him. However, to rely entirely on symbol eliminates the need for the painting itself; for if the beauty relies on concepts alone, there is no need to look at it. I feel that the success of art in heightening our consciousness necessarily involves the artist combining both form and symbol. But in order to reach this conclusion, I must first fully flesh out the two schools of beauty, beginning with form. I will first discuss Kant and his four moments of beauty, and Clive Bell’s formalist theories, before transitioning into symbol, and ultimately a union of the two, with Nelson Goodman.

# Kant and Formalism

Kant, a cornerstone of formalist thinking, philosophizes in his *Critique of Judgment*, that judgments of taste elevate the human mind. He details this claim in the first book *Analytic of the Beautiful.* With his four moments of the beautiful, Kant argues that the beautiful reveals itself to us through a convergence of the sensual and the spiritual. Our ability to recognize

beauty through aesthetic judgments of taste, indicates a divine power in human kind. Through these judgments of taste, we are exposed to the metaphysical, though we are unable to have true knowledge of it. Our determinations of beauty are felt rather than cognized according to Kant; these determinations are made on the personal level, with an expectation of universality, and are therefore both universal and subjective at once, revealing aesthetic judgments to be a quality set apart from the basic human faculties, something more powerful and profound.

Kant’s first conclusion, that beauty involves an “entirely disinterested satisfaction” (Kant 103), means that, miraculously, beauty does not depend on the existence of the beautiful

object. This makes the apprehension of beauty different from other pleasures. For example, the morally good, such as a good deed, pleases only when one performs the deed. Or in the gratifying Kant posits that one cannot enjoy good food unless one smells its aroma, or eats

it. Kant uses the example of a flower, whose perfume pleases one man, and offends another, to further illustrate his idea. True beauty is different, as it may please regardless of the existence of an object. In essence, we may find beauty in something unidentifiable; we do not need to know what we are seeing to find it beautiful, and feel pleasure from its beauty. Likewise, we as humans can imagine beauty, we can fantasize about beauty which does not exist in a physical plane. Because we may find beauty in the unseen, or the unidentifiable, Kant concludes that we do not involve our cognition in judgments of beauty, but rather, these are non-cognitive universal determinations:

But this universality cannot arise from concepts; for from concepts there is no transition to the feeling of pleasure or pain...Consequently the judgment of taste, accompanied with the consciousness of separation from all interest, must claim validity for every man, without this universality depending on objects. That is, there must be bound up with it a title to subjective universality. (Kant 103)

With this, Kant introduces the second moment: beauty “pleases universally without [requiring] a concept” (Kant 106). Kant relies on his previous conclusion, that beauty needs not the existence, or at least identification, of an object. If one does not need to identify the beautiful thing, then this judgment of taste need not require concepts. A man cannot prove the presence of beauty to another, so concepts play no part; and yet, when we make a claim about beauty, we automatically expect the agreement of others. When I walk through an art gallery, and happen upon a work so beautiful that I am moved to speech, I do not say ‘this painting is so beautiful *to me’,* on the contrary, I speak my mind with certainty, unwavering in my assumption that my peers will agree with me:

He judges not merely for himself, but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. Hence he says ‘the *thing is* beautiful’ and he does not count on the agreement of others with this his judgment of satisfaction, because he has found this agreement several times before but he *demands* it of them. He blames them if they judge otherwise and he denies them taste, which he nevertheless requires from them (Kant 104).

These claims and these expectations are aesthetic, they are subjective. She who professes that a work of art is beautiful does not make a logical demand, instead this is a statement of expectation. I must accept Kant’s proposition since I have heard myself make these claims of beauty. It was not long after I first read the *Critique of Judgment* that I was walking through the Albright Knox in Buffalo, which was holding an exhibition of Picasso’s works at the time. I stopped in front of the first work I saw upon entering the show space, *Three Musicians,* 1921. I had just finished a semester studying a survey of Modern Art, and upon seeing the work, in its proper size, mounted on a wall in front of me, I uttered breathlessly “Wow. That’s

incredible”. It never occurred to me that someone could disagree; I spoke an absolute. But a member of my party made a disinterested shrug and moved onto a piece he favored, which had

caught his eye more quickly. I remember raising my eyebrows, not feeling nearly ready to move on from the beauty in front of me so quickly. At that moment I realized Kant was right.

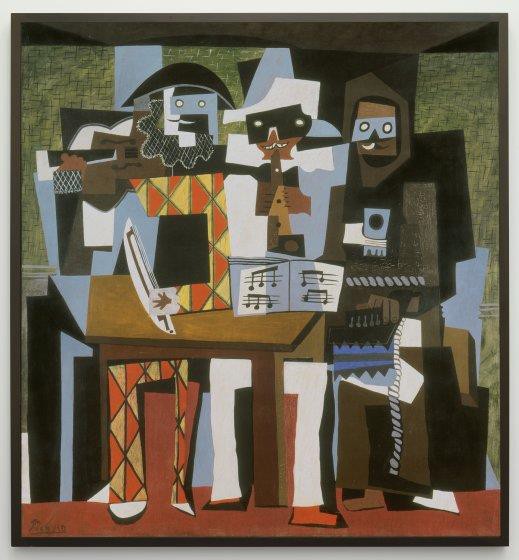


Figure 5. Picasso, Pablo. *Three Musicians*. 1921. The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Kant may have taken issue with the fact that Picasso rendered identifiable subjects, or that he gave a title, to this work that I found so beautiful. A title denotes meaning, and therefore introduced concept into the work of art, or it otherwise may not have existed for the viewer. A title distracts from the form by giving it a name or attaching ideas. He might have preferred just a number be given to a work of art (i.e. “Composition No. 3), or one which states objective facts about the work, such as “Red and Green”. If both colors are present, the title does no more than

state what the viewer can see, without attached extraneous meaning or conceptual details to the work; and therefore does not distract or cheapen the beautiful form.

In his third moment Kant concludes that beauty is “the subjective purposiveness in the representation of an object without any purpose” (108). In this moment he examines the idea that we make judgments of taste in a free play between imagination and understanding. Here Kant relies on his previous proposition, that art needs no concepts. If concepts give an object purpose, and beauty requires no concept, then beauty must require no purpose; yet beauty does have a ‘purposiveness’. Kant explains this apparent contradiction by proposing that our judgments of taste come from a free play between the human faculties of understanding and of imagination. We do not play to gain anything in particular, and yet in play is benefit; hence purposiveness, without explicit purpose. Purposiveness involves a potential for purpose, without an explicit purpose. This ties into the idea of a free play between the imagination and understanding in that through engaging in this free play, there is an intellectual element, you consider what you are doing; but since it is play, there is no explicit purpose or goal you strive to achieve through the interaction of mind and senses. Thus there is purposiveness without purpose. It is this concept of a free play between the sensual and intellectual faculties which I find to be pivotal in understanding the relation between form and symbol in elevating the human mind (Kant 107-111).

Though in exercising our aesthetic play, we attempt to achieve nothing in particular; I must think that continued use of our imaginative and cognitive faculties in tandem improves our ability to recognize the beautiful when we come across it. All humans possess this more than human capability, to recognize beauty, and make judgments of taste; but it is logical to then suppose that someone who spends hours in pursuit of beauty, say an art student, through making

her own art, through expression, may more easily and readily perceive beauty around her. Her faculties of understanding and sense converge constantly in her pursuit of beauty; and so for her, aesthetical judgments come reflexively. Regardless of the frequency however, these judgments of taste, made by all humans, indicate a more than human consciousness.

Kant’s ideas of free play bring to mind Plato’s idea in the *Symposium*, in which a meeting between the divine and the human constitutes beauty. We determine beauty through a convergence of sensual and spiritual understandings; and through this interaction, one may discern beauty effortlessly, reflexively, and without an objective purpose. If aesthetic judgments are the product of our sensual perceptions rising to meet our spiritual one, art clearly facilitates a higher level of human consciousness.

In Kant’s fourth moment of beauty, that the beautiful “is that which without any concept is cognized as the object of a necessary satisfaction” (Kant 113), he proposes that subjective judgments of taste, have a universal quality. Art and beauty are often indefinable concepts. We treat our ideas of art with a certain reverence, and with this reverence comes a degree of mystery. To define the exact parameters of art seems to be presumptuous, and to take away the essence of art itself. Its mystery is what sets it apart as something special and necessary to the human experience. Kant speaks to this idea in acknowledging that when we find something to be beautiful, we lack a full knowledge of what makes it so; and for Kant, this means there is an element of the ‘supersensibe’ in judgments of taste (134). Through our subjective judgments of aesthetics, we access the transcendental quality of beauty. Kant holds that in the foundation of humanity lies something of the divine, and it is this metaphysical quality which allows for the experience of beauty, which is above typical human experience (135). On this idea he builds his final component of beauty; that judgments of taste must please necessarily and universally

despite their subjectivity. Kant’s rejection of concepts plays a pivotal role here. When an individual makes a universal claim of beauty, her claim cannot be proved through a concept. Therefore, judgments of taste rely on a supersensible faculty. Rather than arriving at a conclusion through intuiting a concept, judgments of taste are made beyond the sensible realm; they are supersensible. Kant ventures to the metaphysical here, calling this the “supersensible substrate of humanity” (Kant 135). This ability for the mind to go beyond the conceptual, and into a supersensible realm, is proof that art has a capacity for elevating consciousness, and reveals, what is for Kant, the basis for human life. We are unified by this divine ability within our human selves.

In a culmination of Kant’s criteria for apprehending the beautiful, this quality in the human mind, which surpasses physical understanding in our comprehension of beauty, allows us to make universal and absolute judgments despite an utter lack of any objective proof. To experience beauty is to experience the divine, for how else can one presume to make claims of taste with an expectation of universality, when one is limited by one's own human, finite, experience. Universal claims are for the gods, who have access to a higher, singular, perhaps fictitious truth; and yet, profoundly, we make one when we call a painting beautiful. We recognize beauty suddenly, instinctually, and unwaveringly, it is pure feeling; and this human feeling, our experience of beauty, implicitly reveals an element of the divine within our human consciousness. Kant’s theory of this divine capability is not metaphysical in the same way that Plato’s theory is. Kant suggests that though we are given access to the idea of the metaphysical, we cannot comprehend, or have true knowledge of it (135).

Kant certainly lays out the formalist ideology well. He defends form as the purest source of beauty, and describes how symbols may detract or cheapen an aesthetic experience, hindering

the human mind from taking off to new dimensions. Kant wrote his critiques during a time before Abstract Expressionism existed; but their use of pure form fulfilled Kant’s prophetic theories. I cannot agree with all of his ideas. In Kant’s first conclusion, he proposes that beauty can exist regardless of the existence of the beautiful thing. This idea is idealistic in that even if beauty is imaginary, it must still be perceivable to the senses. Beauty is a quality and not an entity itself. Beyond the visual arts even, music and poetry are still, through the mediums of space and time, perceivable to the senses.

Furthermore, I believe that Kant’s idea of the supersensible compelling and powerful, rings true in his proposing that this human faculty gives us a touch of something more than human, allowing us to reach for something greater than ourselves through our interactions with beauty. When it comes to elevating human consciousness, I believe that the free play between the imagination and understanding is essential. I also agree that this connects humanity in some way. However, I must also agree with Hegel, that this experience of engaging with something greater than ourselves may have a moral dimension. I believe beauty is essentially good, and engaging with it on such an elevated level must have moral implications. Furthermore, though I do not reject the metaphysical which Kant brings into this phenomenon, I believe the historical plays just as significant a role as the moral, not only in elevating consciousness, but in the idea of a shared foundation for human life. The area in which my aesthetics beliefs differ most evidently with Kant is in his treatment of symbol. Where Kant sees symbol as unnecessary to beauty, I see it as unavoidable. Where Kant sees symbol as a potential distraction and detraction of beauty, I feel it has potential to allow us a greater understanding of beauty, and as such, a more fulfilling aesthetic experience.

Of course Kant is not the only formalist philosopher. Clive Bell, another proponent of form, contributes to this theory of aesthetics.

# Bell, Formalism, and Where it Leaves us

Bell proposes the idea of “significant form”, which builds upon Kant’s writings on the ideal of formalism (187). All art must have this significant form in order to be called art; and this significant form constitutes the arrangements and combinations which move us in some way (i.e. composition). If message alone moves you, then the piece is not a work of art; instead, the form must move you aesthetically (187).

Like Kant, Bell theorizes that should a viewer understand an artwork conceptually, their response may lack purity. Ignoring subject matter is near impossible when one understands it. He views “primitive” art as more emotionally sophisticated than the artwork of say the Renaissance or Greco-Roman antiquity. Representational accuracy takes less precedence than form and feeling. Essentially, Bell claims that to appreciate a work of art, we need only a sense of form, color, and three-dimensional space (Fisher 252).

We certainly find beauty in the perfect geometry, and the sheer grandness of the pyramids. Of course their form held symbolic value for the cultures which erected them. Egyptians saw the shape as a symbol for their sun god Ra and as conducive to the soul’s journey to the afterlife. But when one sees an image of the pyramids at Giza, or better yet glimpses them in person, one will be awestruck by the beauty of the *form* before him.



Figure 6. The Pyramids at Giza, Retrieved from Google Street View

Human aesthetics naturally gravitates towards and appreciates beautiful forms. Further proof is in the golden ratio, which our brains naturally recognize as perfect when we find it created naturally or in art.

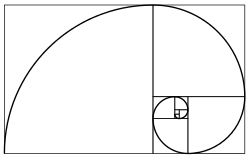


Figure 7. The Golden Ratio (left), and the Golden Ratio applied to Katsushika Hokusai *The Great Wave off Kungawa* 1830- 1831. Print, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (right).

To take formalism to its extreme however, is problematic when considering the great collection of beauty that is the visual arts. Formalism completely separates that which we know from that which we feel in aesthetics, concerned only with the formal elements of beauty, disregarding content as adding value to a work of art. In his ideas on art, Kant concerns himself

with the formal elements of beauty, shape, color, composition, and concepts play no part. He reasons that one does not need to know what a beautiful thing is to find it so. Our concept of beauty is not logical, but aesthetic, and so concepts play no role. They may even detract from beauty by distracting us. Kant’s perfect example of beauty is a Rothko, with no title other than a number, or the names of the colors most present in the work. Kant’s concept of beauty made visual: Rothko’s *Orange and Tan,* which certainly is beautiful.



Figure 8. Mark Rothko, *Orange and Tan,* 1954, oil on canvas, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Only form exists in this painting, and not even the title can distract the viewer from this, serving only to name the colors we already see. But surely paintings which meet this very strict criterion cannot be the only truly beautiful works of art.

For really, what does pure Formalism leave us with? Only work which is abstracted, only Rothko, Pollock, Louis? Nothing like the works produced by these artists existed when Kant spoke of Formalism, but they certainly live up to his standards. The Abstract Expressionists sought to push art into purer abstraction than artists had before. Some, such as Malevich, attempted to undue the gentrification of art, make it accessible to the common people by stripping it of hidden, philosophical or political meanings. Mondrian wished to abstract reality until it was distilled to its very essence, without a need for realistic representation.

I would never claim that Rothko’s work does not have beauty. However, I also cannot claim that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel lacks beauty, a work of art brimming with symbolism and conceptual undertones. Here lies the problem with taking Formalism to its furthest degree. To disregard symbol disqualifies the vast majority of artwork from being truly beautiful; and furthermore, I believe, that it is impossible to fully eliminate concepts from a work of art, for when it comes into contact with a human mind, concepts unavoidably become involved as a result. I find it difficult to imagine that form is the only conduit towards an elevated consciousness through art.

Goodman articulates these concerns by outlining the debate between form and symbol as

such:

If we accept this doctrine of the formalist or purist, we seem to be saying that the content of such works as the *Garden of Delight…*doesn’t really matter and might better be left out. If we reject the doctrine, we seem to be holding that what counts is not just what a work is but lots of things it isn’t. In the one case we seem to be advocating lobotomy on many great works, in the other we seem to be condoning impurity in art, emphasizing the extraneous. (Goodman 240)

Though Goodman proposes that the main function of art is in fact cognitive, he also asserts that it cannot be cognitive alone. Without form, there would be no reason to *look* at a painting. Having detailed formalist philosophy and its implications, I will now do the same with its antithesis.

# Symbol

Symbol involves the meaning in a work of art. It is the message, or the thought associated with different elements within a work of art, or even from the gestalt of the whole. Hieronymus Bosch and his G*arden of Earthly Delights* exemplifies symbol excellently. In his painting, filled with undeniable symbolism, from the duality of animals of identifiable species, to the religious iconography, symbols play an important role, but so does form. The colors and composition affect me as a viewer, just as the symbolism does. Goodman not only professes that symbols are inevitable in artwork, but that symbolism is capable of great aesthetic beauty itself:

This subsumption of aesthetic under cognitive excellence calls for one more reminder that the cognitive, while contrasted with both the practical and the passive, does not exclude the sensory or the emotive, that what we know through art is felt in our bones and nerves and muscles as well as grasped by our minds, that all the sensitivity and responsiveness of the organism participates in the invention and interpretation of symbols. (Goodman 249)

Let me examine a painting which fits in well with the idea of formalism and abstraction, under a symbolic lens. Even within the realm of abstraction, symbol can play a role in perceptions of beauty. When I was young I saw the famous colored grids of Mondrian and thought that the painting was made of pretty colors and nothing else. I could look at them and find no displeasure in the act, but I would not linger in front of them, I would not be drawn to them from across the room in awe. However, once I learned Mondrian’s process, and what he was attempting and succeeding to do with his absolute abstraction, I found immense beauty in his

work that I did not see before. The knowledge that changed my feelings towards his work from lukewarm to pure aesthetic fascination is that Mondrian was painting trees.

I first learned of Mondrian’s process in my freshmen year drawing class. The lecture, given by Maureen Brilla-Fitzpatrick, took us through a timeline of Mondrian’s work. Mondrian painted during a period of Modern art in which major changes were made to subjects and styles that had previously been accepted as beautiful high art. Cubists reduced objects down to their most basic shapes and rearranged those shapes into abstracted forms. The result was total abstraction, Kant’s ideal aesthetic achievement. Before he was painting his famously simple grids however, Mondrian rendered realistic trees. To look through a timeline of his work, is to witness his very careful and progressive abstraction of the form, until the tree is no longer visible. Rather, one only sees the essence of a tree which Mondrian found most interesting: the way that line, shape, and color interact on physical plane. The viewer can see that, over time, Mondrian changed the organic branches into rigid geometric intersections. The negative spaces between the branches become just as important as the positive space. The contrasting colors visually vibrate within the frame. When our class saw this presentation, and witnessed Mondrian’s journey of abstraction, we looked at *Composition II, in Red, Blue, and Yellow* and our mouths hung slightly open in fresh and astounded understanding: all this time we had been looking at trees.



Figure 9. Evolution of Mondrian, retrieved from http[s://www.tes.com/lessons/iq6Tg9j5xbOwqQ/abstraction-from-reality](http://www.tes.com/lessons/iq6Tg9j5xbOwqQ/abstraction-from-reality)

I found Mondrian’s work to be beautiful before I understood it. The colors and geometry naturally pleases; and yet, it was not until I knew the context and knew the progression of abstraction, that I looked at his work in awe. I now look at his work and see it as gorgeous, because he painted the world in a way I cannot imagine when I look at it through my own eyes, and his perspective is beautiful. My feelings prove that there must be merit to symbol when married to form. Concepts did not distract from Mondrian’s work when I learned of them, as Kant feared, they enhanced the paintings’ beauty. Similarly, with Mondrian’s *Broadway*

*Boogie-Woogie,* I may have looked at this painting without seeing the title and felt the vibrations and vitality of the colors as they dance and move across the canvas. But seeing the title, and understanding Mondrian’s way of abstracting the physical world, I feel even more engaged and enchanted with the piece. I feel the life of a city, and motion of people and society, the light of a metropolis at night. Its beauty is augmented by the concepts that I can tie to the work.

Beautiful art needs more than pure form or pure symbol to elevate the mind; this elevation of consciousness occurs in the interaction between the viewer and a work of art. For this, both form and symbol play a necessary role. For art does not inherently need to be meaningful and beautiful equally, or at once. The fact is, symbols are something we bring with us as a viewer, even if they are not intentionally put into a work of art. John Andrew Fisher in Reflecting on Art asks:

Why…are there no two artworks whose content is identical even though their forms are different? Why do there seem to be as many ‘messages’ as there are works of art? The explanation may be that each artwork has a unique form. But if this uniqueness of form accounts for the work’s uniqueness of message, then form seems to generate content rather than to be separable from it. (Fisher 246)

I must conclude that symbol is an unavoidable component of the visual arts, be it put there by the artist, the viewer, or both.

Goodman, who asked the question, ‘when is art’ rather than ‘what is art’, proposed that what qualifies as art comes from human perceptions, and how we choose to interact with a thing of beauty (238). He recognizes Kant as a purist, whose ideas of art and beauty, while perhaps

idealistic, are unrealistic. He states: “Whoever looks for art without symbols, then, will find none – if all the ways that works symbolize are taken into account. Art without representation or expression or exemplification – yes; art without all three – *no”* (Goodman 243). Without form, symbol may be merely propaganda. Symbol requires beautiful form to constitute a work of art, and to successfully elevate the mind through deep engagement; but I do hold that symbol plays an important role in this process. Form alone can be beautiful, symbol alone can have anesthetic meaning, but when an artist combines the two in a work of art, an opportunity for something extraordinary exists. That being said, there are still works of art which place emphasis on one or the other, to varying degrees of success.

A beautiful form then will of course engross a viewer, and is capable on its own of elevating the human mind; but I have felt my mind deeply engaged, challenged, and expanded by looking at artwork which I do not feel had beautiful form, and in some cases, was even purposefully grotesque. There are instances in art when form either succeeds or fails, and likewise instances when symbol succeeds or fails.

# Form vs. Symbol Case Studies

One such instance in which symbol triumphs and form fails, according to my own artistic tastes, is Malevich’s *White on White.*

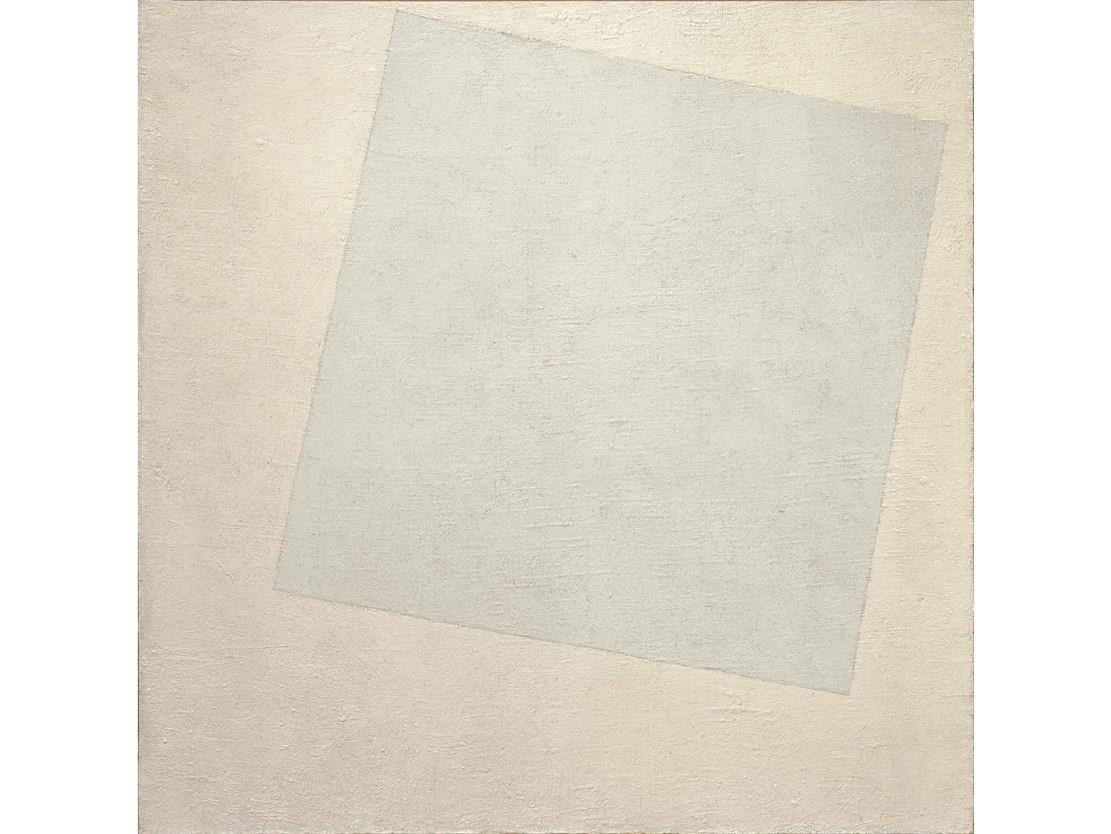


Figure 10. Malevich, Kasimir. *Supremitist Composition: White on White.* 1918, Oil on canvas, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Malevich’s goal was to reduce painting to its absolute most abstracted degree, so far that it would cease to be painting if taken any further. He wanted no hint of concept, no hidden meanings. He wanted to give art to the people by making it accessible, removing the need to

interpret and theorize. Anyone could view this painting, and spiritually connect to the pure form of it (Bokelman). When I first looked at this painting, in my 20th Century Art History lecture, my reaction was to laugh. The painting, supposedly entirely about form, is not terribly interesting to view. Unlike the *Black Square,* which at least has depth, pulling the viewer in like a black hole (this is a perfect foil for *White on White*), this painting gives nothing to engage the eye. Because I found the form so intangible, I felt an overwhelming need for some underlying meaning. I felt like this sea of slightly conflicting white must have a reason other than just visual, because I was finding no joy in just looking. Interestingly enough, historically, people have let their imaginations run wild as to the meaning and symbol behind the painting, mostly having to do with social commentary on the Russian Revolution, materialism, and a thirst for spiritual freedom. While Malevich intended for no symbolism to impede the human mind and spirit when interacting with this work, people elevated their mind in a search for meaning, rather than through form alone, which fell short. Moreover, Malevich intended to create an image purely of form, with no symbolic influence whatsoever; but he did so by painting squares, a shape rigid, geometric, and not occurring in nature. The painting is loaded with symbolism as a result, regardless of Malevich’s intent. I hold that it is impossible to create an image devoid of any symbol, or for a viewer not to find an unintended symbol in a work.

I will not argue with Kant about the incredible beauty to be found in Abstract

Expressionism. Returning to Rothko, the perfect exemplar of Kant’s aesthetic theory, the painter did achieve something remarkable through form. Leading art critic of the Abstract Expressionist movement, first coined as Action Painting by the critic himself, Harold Rosenberg, spoke to this particular success of form (Wolfe 42). Rosenberg described Rothko’s reduction of painting, to color, tone, and volume, to create expressive form, devoid of identifiable symbol: “The psychic

tensions evoked by Rothko are at once extreme and featureless, mythical without mythic personages or events” (Rosenberg 103). I do find myself engrossed with Rothko’s hazy-edged shapes, transfixed with the colors and transported by them. I would certainly consider this a success of form.

Let me expand this analysis by breaking from abstraction, for there is work which relies heavily on sensuous form, despite the presence of representational subject matter. Rococo paintings, tantamount to sensuousness, exist purely for decorative pleasure, through the depiction of pure pleasure.



Figure 11. Wattaeu, Jean-Antoine*. The Embarkment to Cythera.* 1717, Oil on Canvas, Musée de Louvre

Watteau’s painting of a pilgrimage to Cythera, epitomizes Rococo aesthetics. The movement, a direct response and in some respects the antithesis to its predecessor, Baroque, sees scenes such as this one: pastels, frothy forms of color, hazy and ill-defined in the landscape, slightly clearer in the sensuous swells of human figures. The objective of Rococo art, to paint

pretty people doing pretty things, was laughed at as frivolous. Coming from the dark arabesques of Baroque majesty, Rococo seemed to fall flat and shallow for many of the time as well as many scholars after. The painting above focuses on beautiful form, colors meant to delight the viewer; There is no significant depth to be had, it is pretty and pleasurable; but is this at the expense of deep engagement of the mind? I am aware of the few concepts which did inspire some of the subject matter, the island Cythera was a pilgrimage site for lovers, likely due to connections with Aphrodite (Stein). Yet even knowing of some small symbol within the work, seems trite: the allusion to the goddess of love, sensuousness personified, echoes hollowly in the hazy pastel strokes. The true focus is clearly the sensuous form, which immediately gratifies the senses. In doing so, the image involves the mind in Kant’s free play, of the intellect and imagination. It matters little that the symbols fall flat when the significant form succeeds in engaging the viewer.

There is of course symbol-heavy work which does not engage the mind as fully. Early Renaissance art focuses on the message of the Catholic Church and Neo-Platonism. Outward calm and composure, indicates and ensures inward calm and a well-ordered, moral

mind. Therefore, the artwork aims to inspire in the viewer feelings of calm and stability. One- point perspective brings the eye to a central point, and all lines run in stationary horizontals and verticals. The compositions are balanced, with all significant figures clear and in the foreground. The artists use primary colors and clear contour lines. The works lack any agitation, energy, or emotion. These are symbol-heavy works; but I believe these elements

extinguish any chance of the viewer’s consciousness rising to higher elevations. The calmness numbs, rather than excites the senses, which was of course the goal, but which nevertheless anesthetizes the mind.

This style contrasts greatly with Baroque art, full of symbolism yes, but entirely reliant on energetic chaos and busy composition, with dark rich colors. Consider the interior of a Baroque church.

Figure 12. Moosbrugger, Kaspar. Einsiedeln: Abbey Church Interior Nave at crossing. 1721- 1725. Einsiedeln, Switzerland

Everything about the architecture is meant to bamboozle the viewer’s senses. A person is meant to enter this church, and engage with iconographic program which overwhelms the mind and spirit. The lavishly decorated interior aims with heavily wrought architectural units and dramatic imagery is meant to overwhelm the senses, providing a dynamic visual space in which to experience the divine.

The purpose of Baroque architecture and art reminds me of Kant’s concept of the sublime. This idea describes the feeling of fear, conquered by comprehension, making one feel safe despite that which frightens them. Kant refers to this in relation to nature, but I feel that the daunting interior of a baroque church may ignite a feeling similar to that of the sublime in a

viewer. This feeling found in nature, which is awe-inspiring without instilling fear, in the face of a storm or a mountain peak, is similar to that of experiencing a baroque interior. Where one’s imagination fails, understanding steps in to compensate. When applied to a Baroque church, I believe the sublime can be found in the awe inspiring forms, which may strike some fear into the hearts of viewers, in the face of something so grand and overbearing; and yet there is something empowering in this. For you as the viewer are a part of the majesty, and your mind grasps something so much greater than yourself.

I feel that this application of the sublime, for Kant a force of nature, here applied to the visual arts, indicates that the interaction between form and symbol is what makes for the most powerful aesthetic experiences. Symbol without form is merely propaganda. When symbol overwhelms form, it has the potential to become mind-numbing, and non-aesthetic. Form without symbol, though capable of true beauty, inevitably involves symbols once engaged by human interaction. For we naturally include symbols in our interactions with works of art, that is, we bring with us an intellectual element. To deny this would be to deny human nature. When form and symbol interact within one work of art, a human mind may engage and transcend to new levels beyond that of their ordinary experience.

When a work of art fully engages our senses through significant form, already our consciousness involves itself in a free play between the intellect and imagination. To add symbolic understanding to this experience heightens and enriches the experience. This empowers art with the potential for meanings myriad and universal. This combination of form and symbol gives art the power to house emotions, connections, and agency. These concepts need not cheapen the beauty of the form, but can enhance it. Just as I found Mondrian’s abstracted trees to be infinitely more engaging and beautiful once I learned of their conceptual

undertones, so too can all aesthetic experiences deepen when one brings her own thoughts and understandings to the sensual experience of looking at something beautiful. I therefore believe that it is through the engagement of form with symbol, in the visual arts, that allows for the elevation of human consciousness during aesthetic experience.

The concept of higher consciousness to which I refer most closely aligns with Gadamer’s definition: a profound, historical understanding of the whole, which we gain access to through the visual arts. In the next chapter, I will discuss the implications of this necessary relationship between form and symbol, which elevates the human mind, in art education.

# Chapter 3 Implications for Art Education

Having discussed the importance of both form and symbol in elevating human consciousness through the arts, I am interested in applying this philosophy to arts education. Education in the arts plays a pivotal role in teaching artistic behaviors, and creative problem solving in young minds. It also influences the art of the future, which will eventually impact society’s standards of beauty, architecture, and visual culture.

Philosophies of art education have changed greatly over time. In ancient cultures, artists were considered ‘supernatural’ beings, influenced by either a higher power or capable of creating sympathetic magic, and so therefore passed down their skills not to anyone wanting to learn, but specific worthy individuals (Bokelman). During the Medieval and Renaissance eras, art education meant an apprenticeship. In the 1800’s, arts were taught in Europe and America with the goal of supporting a social order. Later, art was taught as a technical skill in order to aid in the era of the Industrial Revolution. It was not until the 1920’s that attitudes towards art education shifted to be child-centered, and focused on a promotion of self-expression.

With these shifts in the purpose of art education, particularly in America, came shifts in our approach to teaching the methods of making successful works of art. Until quite recently,

beginning in the 1980’s, the Discipline Based Arts Education (DBAE) approach held the standard (Bates). This approach to art education aligned quite well with formalist philosophies in many ways. The overarching focuses included: art production, art criticism, aesthetics, and art history. In terms of art making, the famous elements and principles of design reigned supreme. These elements (line, shape, form, value, space, color, texture) and principles (rhythm, balance,

emphasis, contrast, proportion, gradation, harmony, variety, movement) were the backbone of instruction, informed the focus of lessons, and determined student success. These elements and principles certainly coincide with formalist theory, in that they fundamentally pertain to creating form and compelling compositions using form. As a creed of teaching art, they ultimately left out the concept entirely.

DBAE though, had its faults (amongst them that it focused too much on analysis and not enough on making, it de-emphasized self-expression on the part of students, it failed to represent non-Western cultures, and it avoided interdisciplinary teaching), and so it fell out of favor amongst art educators (Bates). I believe that this necessitates a need for something more than pure formalism in teaching the arts. Students require more substance in order to make meaningful artwork, make cultural connections, experience empowerment in their creative voice, and think critically about the visual culture which surrounds them. Symbols are primarily visual, and secondarily linguistic. Students need to be visually literate in order to be critical citizens, consumers, and producers in today’s world. I believe that educating students in visual literacy is a necessity, and that this teaching must begin in the art classroom. Moreover, we must still teach the fundamentals of art, in terms of pure technical skills. As I established earlier in this paper, art must be more than symbols alone; it must have, as Bell writes about, significant form, in order to qualify as art and make aesthetic experience possible (187). And this aesthetic experience is the phenomenal elevation of human consciousness. I will now unpack the roles of form and symbol in relation to art education, to determine the implications for art curricula, and my own pedagogy.

There is no avoiding the fact that form is necessary for creating works of art; but symbol plays an inherent and powerful role in the human mind when creating and looking at artwork.

Examining the psyche of children indicates just how important symbol is to the developing artistic mind. Viktor Lowenfeld famously proposed that children go through a series of developmental stages of drawing. Appearing in a range of ages, as children develop at different rates, the first occurs around 2 to 4 years: the scribbling stage. Children here are learning to think in images, and developing their visual imaginations. This cognitive development combined with their still developing motor skills, is a momentous time in human development, broken down into four further sub-stages, all under the umbrella of scribbling. Next comes the Pre-schematic stage, in which a child develops schema or visual ideas. The hallmark of this stage is the “tadpole person”, a circular shape for the entire head and body, with stick legs and maybe arms protruding from the central form. At this stage colors and composition are not logical, but emotional. The child draws what she understands, important things take size precedence, and colors match feelings rather than imitate the natural world. What happens next seems to directly contradict Kant’s supposition that beauty exists in form alone. Children between ages 7 and 9 typically fall under the Schematic stage. The hallmarks here are indications of space (skylines and ground lines, objects are spatially related), objects are easily recognizable, and what I find most interesting: the X-Ray phenomenon (in which a child will draw an object as though it is see-through, to show all parts even if they would not be visible to the human eye looking at it directly. I.e. a bus might be drawn so that you can see the seats and passengers inside, as though the bus wall is transparent). As a child develops into the next stage, her preoccupation is with realism. In third and fourth grade, a child believes the purpose of art is to represent something, and their concepts of beauty coincide with this belief. They are drawn to works of art which are representational and illusionistic; the more naturalistic the better.

Illusionism is the key style, but subject matters. Children react positively to images of realistic

beauty (Lowenfeld 13-257). If you took a child who likes to draw, at this stage, to the Memorial Art Gallery of Rochester, to see the *Printseller’s Window,* a tromp l’oeil painting by Walter

Figure 13. Goodman, Walter. *Printseller’s Window*, 1883, oil. Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester NY

Goodman (a French term which “to fool the eye”, as in so realistic it tricks the viewer), she would most likely respond with “wow, I wish I could paint like that!”

Children have a natural reaction of love and awe for this style because they see immense beauty in the illusionism. In fact, so strong is their preference for representational art that when children see abstract works they look for something identifiable hidden in the image.

This is something I think breaches more stages of life than just those of young Schematic Stage minds. Lynn Duggan, former metalsmithing professor at Nazareth College, called this the “where’s the dog phenomenon” (a term I later found to be technically called isomorphic correspondence). When teaching my own sophomore 3-D design class, she assigned the task of creating a cardboard free standing composition, which consisted entirely of abstract design. The goal was to think compositionally, elementally, and structurally through cardboard and hot glue. We were to create a pleasing and coherent piece not based on an object from life, but from line, shape, form, texture, etc. In critique however, it took little time before students started saying “I think it looks like a dachshund from this angle. Do you see it? There’s the body and the tail” or “I see a face here”(Duggan). None of us intended to make representational forms, in fact we were trying not to; but our eyes sought something recognizable. Just as a 10-year-old looking at a Jackson Pollock might look for faces, in class 18-year old collegiate art students found dogs in abstract, non-representational sculpture. I believe there is a natural human inclination towards symbol in beauty. We seek, to an extent and certainly not always, something familiar and relatable in the artwork that we find beautiful.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the addition of symbols to a work of art does not in any way diminish the absolute necessity of form. If students are to make expressive artwork, the ability to use the formal elements and principles of design must be a part of their education. It is through the marriage of form and symbol that students may learn to connect with artwork on a

deep level, and in doing so elevate their minds to higher states. It is likewise through the marriage of form and symbol that students may learn to make artwork which involves not purely interesting and beautiful form, but expressive, meaningful content. I believe that art education should not focus on one or the other exclusively, not simply beautiful form, and not simply expression, but a purposeful interaction between the two.

To confront the role of form and symbol in art education, one must inevitably confront the ideas of Dewey. Dewey, a philosopher who became one of the lead advocates of arts education, largely through his aesthetic theory on art as experience. Unlike Kant, who rejected the necessity of concepts in artwork in elevating the mind, Dewey argued that concepts were the key to this elevation phenomenon. Dewey famously proposed the theory of art as experience; and that through engaging with the deep level of synthesis which constitutes an aesthetic experience, one may better understand the wider expanse of human consciousness. The goal of art viewing and art making, therefore, is not to create aesthetically pleasing forms alone, but to better understand human experiences. Like Nietzsche, Dewey holds art as the highest level of human achievement. (Ross 203).

Dewey philosophizes that art has the potential to engage the human mind in a deep and profound flow, which transcends time, true for both the artist and the viewer. A true Experience, as Dewey writes, involves doing and undergoing, a dichotomy which necessarily synthesizes both the human faculties of reasoning and of sensing. This is where Dewey’s ideas

fundamentally conflict with Kant’s: to elevate the mind through artistic engagement, one must inherently experience an embodied reaction, involving the reasonable and the sensible, the dichotomy of doing and undergoing at once. I must agree with him here, for I believe that art

most fully captivates us when it engages all aspects of human functioning. The mind must be engaged to be elevated, and to be engaged it must have a concept with which to grapple.

Now I will illuminate Dewey’s ideas and their implications for education. Dewey writes that young minds, when given the opportunity to engage in creative conceptual thinking, achieve deeper, heightened levels of consciousness. Dewey’s definition of art is that it exists as proof of man using his physical and mental capacities to expand upon his own life, and to this both form and symbol are necessary (Dewey 26). I agree with Dewey, in that I too believe art is a form of language. I believe that the sacred exchange between a viewer and an artwork, is an exchange of some meaning, which might elevate the mind. The capacity of art to induce an emotion does seem linguistic; though this is not to say that an artist can imbed a particular message in a work of art and expect every viewer to understand it as they intend. When looking at a work of art, the artist’s intent becomes less important than the interpretation of the viewer. The interaction of my own feelings and experiences mixing with those the painter imbued in his work creates a new concept entirely.

Another great thinker whose ideas not only call upon but augment those put forth by Dewey, is Elliot Eisner. Eisner’s educational philosophies on art and creative thinking to elevate the mind heavily involve symbol, which for the sake of his argument he calls representation. For art students, representation provides an opportunity to learn the technical skills necessary for perfect form, which I will not deny; and it does have the potential to lift the mind from the levels of everyday experience. But according to Eisner, representation in and of itself serves a similar function in art:

Representation can be thought of, first, as aimed at transforming the contents of consciousness within the constraints and affordances of a material…Representation

stabilizes the idea of image in a material and makes possible a dialogue with it” (Eisner 6).

The implication here is that art creation allows for a young artist to take elusive and immaterial ideas, and engage with them until they might craft them into something tangible and communicative. For Eisner and Dewey, art can be viewed as language, capable of communicating across space, time, and cultures. I must say that the idea that I might look at the beautiful figure of the Venus of Willendorf, made so long ago by people I have naught but my mortality in common with, and understand its purpose. I may read the beautiful forms as a text (that the overemphasis of her hips, the swell of her breasts, and the indication of her female organs shout a message of fertility and an ideality). The fact that I can imagine the voices of a culture through the form and *symbol* of an artwork, is a sacred experience in my eyes.

Furthermore, Eisner comments on the inevitability of symbol in a work of art, not from within the work itself necessarily, but from what the viewer brings with them:

The meaning secured from a work depends not only on the features of the work but also on what the individual brings to it. Different backgrounds lead to different experiences of the same work. A painting of Jesus for a practicing Catholic takes on a meaning different from that for an agnostic. A person who has long collected non-objective painting and who understands its place in the history of art is likely to experience a painting by Willem de Kooning quite differently from someone who has never heard of abstract expressionism. ( Eisner 17)

To teach students how to look at artwork and find meaning, beauty, and a capacity for elevating their own consciousness, educators must teach more than form alone, and certainly more than symbol alone. Furthermore, educators must anticipate that students, and any human viewer of art, bring with them their own understanding and preconceived ideas of the world and of art.

Olivia Gude offers a framework within which art educators may work to cultivate artistic minds in their classroom. She calls them the “Postmodern Principles”, and they include the following: appropriation, juxtaposition, re-contextualization, layering, interaction of text and

image, hybridity, gazing, and representin’ (Gude 6-14). All of these ideas involve an integration of form and meaning. In a world more inundated with images than possibly ever before, due to the speed and methods of communication of the internet, learning to utilize both beautiful form, and meaningful concepts into a work of art, as well as into the analysis of art, is a necessary step for art education to succeed in fostering artistic abilities in students. Furthermore, I believe it is necessary to keep art alive within a visual culture which is immersed in images.

Maxine Greene offers yet another educational perspective on the importance of form and symbol in art education. For Greene, the experience of art in the classroom releases the imagination of the student, which has a profound impact on the mind and spirit. On this, both form and symbol are foundational. Greene states : “…students might come to use imagination in a search for openings without which our lives narrow and our pathways become cul-de-sacs” (Greene 17). This argument brings to mind Dewey’s theories on elevating human consciousness through art as indicative of humans’ need to expand upon their lives, and break with the mundane. Greene calls this a feeling of wide-awakeness. If we are to be aware of our own aesthetic consciousness and experiences, in order to achieve this self-awareness, this wide- awake, perhaps supersensible plane of thinking, there must be a concept involved. We must give our students works of art with which to engage, not on a level of purely form, for as we have established, symbol is inevitable. We must give students the opportunity to conceptually explore artwork, search for meanings, so that they might be able to express meanings of their own through the visual arts. This liberating element is so valuable to the education of the arts; thus, we should strive to provide for students. To engage with a work of art critically and conceptually, as well as aesthetically in terms of beauty and visual pleasure, is to have a deep and powerful experience. This type of critical, aesthetical engagement, allows for a student to

“imagine something coming of their hopes” (Greene 25). Given this instruction of both form a*nd* symbol, and an interaction and collaboration of the two, students have an opportunity to explore themselves, come to a heightened understanding of their own minds and spirits, and better yet, express their findings through art making.

There are, however, times in which students need not concern themselves with concepts or symbols in their art-making. There must be time in artistic instruction to allow for the free and creative play with materials. Students come into contact with oils, linoleum, clay, etc. for the first time in the art classroom. They must learn the personalities of these mediums and their workability to develop an understanding for them. Students must be given time to experiment and engage in self-directed play with their materials before we as teachers can expect them to use a medium to communicate an idea or symbol. The products of such experimentation need not always qualify as art, but they aid in the pursuit of art, and the students’ artistic development. I believe that teachers must give students the space in the classroom to experiment without the pressure of conceptuality about their work. For successful art, in my experience, is not very often the result of happy accidents, but as a result of repeated failure. Time and space for failure is necessary for artistic growth. These failed attempts have led me to better understand the material in use, and strengthen my concepts and thoughtful art-making. In other words, teachers must allow students the time and freedom to explore form without symbol, before they can expect them to synthesize the two. This synthesis is one of the goals of art instruction, but if it were the only goal, it would be a disservice to students.

To return to the philosophy of Kant and apply it to art education, his concept of free play is pivotal. The imagination and the intellect naturally interact when engaging in the creative pursuits of the art classroom; and it is through form that students learn to work with new

materials. However, to make something meaningful of the form, we must involve symbol. If we were to teach art history in accordance only to Kant’s theories, we would fail to educate our students in how to interpret an inverted still life, using the beauty and naturalism of a chaotic foreground to force a viewer to visually crawl through the symbols represented arriving at the hidden meaning in the hazy back. We would fail to instruct students on the revolutionary emotive techniques of Vincent Van Gogh, one of the first artists to represent his feelings through brushwork and color. In order to foster artistic minds, capable of relating to themselves and their worlds through the visual arts, we must expose our students to both form and symbol, and the synthesis of the two, both in viewing and creating.

I believe the moral dimension of beauty, as I discussed earlier, also plays an interesting role in art education. If you are to believe Kant, as I do, when he says that those who spend time looking at beauty are more likely to act morally, then you must acknowledge the impact on art curriculum. To best serve our students, we should expose them to art, and provide them with the tools to actively seek out beauty in art. We must allow them the space to develop their own tastes, challenge them to develop their own skills, guide them towards the movements of art which transfix them, so that they might benefit from the moral dimension that art can evoke. To do so is to expose them to both beauty, and morality, an opportunity to strengthen their taste and their character. Through arts education, students might be more apt to seek out beauty, and put beauty out into the world as a result.

Ultimately, art education should encompass both form and symbol in order to foster creative minds and give students the tools necessary to express themselves visually and think critically about the world of art and visual culture. Kant’s theory of the free play is a cornerstone of this idea. Students engage in a free play of their imaginative and intellectual faculties when

they experiment, fail, and learn about new materials and techniques. Teachers must allow for free experimentation of form, without a necessary symbolic element. However, this practice is in pursuit of making art which does entertain symbols. By learning to express themselves visually, and interpret artworks for meaning and content, students will gain the creative and critical thinking skills necessary to be successful artists.

# Conclusion

Through aesthetic experience, in engaging with the visual arts, we may achieve an elevated level of consciousness. This heightened state may manifest differently in viewers depending on the work of art. Religious artwork might transport us to some higher plane; but not explicitly religious artwork also holds this power. Kant’s concept of the supersensible, one way to describe this phenomenon, suggests that through a free play between the intellect and imagination, we might access something greater than ourselves. I agree that there must be an aspect of play between the human sensual and logical human faculties in order to achieve this heightened consciousness. For Kant, the supersensible gives us an idea of the metaphysical, though stops short of availing us to true knowledge of it. Dewey takes a social rather than metaphysical stance in explaining aesthetic Experience. He claims that art can give us relief from the mundane, and an escape from the goal-oriented minutiae of everyday life. Plato speaks both reverently and apprehensively of this power within art. He discusses art’s pull on the appetitive nature of man, capable of changing one’s emotions. Gadamer, with whom I ultimately agree with completely, speaks of this power in art as a historical one. Art gives us an opportunity to escape our physical and mental present, and tap into the whole of human history. Art puts us in touch with the entirety of culture, and as such, changes our understanding of ourselves.

Through engaging our imaginations and intellects at once, and giving us access to humanity in an aesthetic way, art has a capacity for elevating the mind. The schools-of-thought which demonstrate how exactly we might achieve this in engaging with the visual arts are two- fold. Kant, the cornerstone of the first school, formalism, holds that form constitutes beauty alone. Symbols, or concepts, are extraneous to a work of art, and therefore, not only irrelevant to

its beauty, but potentially diminishing of it. Concepts distract from beauty, potentially detracting from it. If we are to accept this theory completely, however, we are left with little other than the Abstract Expressionists, a movement not yet conceived as Kant made his formalist proposal. To accept this theory in its entirety, one must reject the significance of the rich symbolism in Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights,* and the meaning of the divine claim of Dürer’s S*elf Portrait.* To take Kant’s theory to its absolute extreme would be to discount the fact that we naturally seek meaning in the works of art we see, no matter how abstracted. Lines suggest feelings, colors can connote emotions. To fully ignore the symbolic input of our human understanding of art would require an incredibly abstract mind.

To venture to the other extreme is also problematic. To place the emphasis in art entirely on symbol discounts the fact that form allows us to engage our sense of sight. Without form, symbol is either propaganda or mind-numbing concepts. To fully align with either extreme discounts and discredits vast amounts of the artwork we acknowledge as such today. Form entirely devoid of symbol is near impossible, and also leaves us with only the most abstracted, and therefore potentially meaningless, works of art. Symbol without form either occupies the mind to the extreme of a non-aesthetic numbness, or exists as merely propaganda.

The joining of form and symbol, however, offers us the perfect balance for aesthetic experience capable of elevating the mind. When existing in cohesion, symbol need not detract from the beauty of form, but may enhance it. Symbol offers meaning and depth to the beauty of form. Through bringing your own understanding, concepts, and emotional intelligence to the beauty of form, you might enhance the experience of elevated consciousness through aesthetic engagement.

Furthermore, when applied to art education, both form and symbol play absolutely necessary roles in cultivating artistic minds. Students require an understanding of form in order to create artwork. They must be given the opportunity to experiment with materials free of a symbolic element. Once they understand the visual language of their media, students may utilize form to effectively express themselves, their ideas and feelings. This idea involves Kant’s concept of free-play. Students need time to engage their imaginations and intellect in the process of art-making, at first free of a necessary concept. However, concepts do play a role in utilizing the formal skills of making art. Students exercise their formal skills by expressing something with their art. Through a joining of form and symbol, students may make meaningful works of art, and interpret the art which surrounds them, making for deep, engaging, heightened aesthetic experience. By engaging in a work of art, either through the making of it or through the viewing of it, students may gain access to humanity and culture, aesthetically broadening their understanding of themselves in the context of the world. As teachers, we must instill a value for form, and an appreciation for symbol, to give our students access to the phenomenal, heightened state of being which aesthetic experience offers.

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