

## Art is supposed to make you think

The Cranky Professor

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No it isn't. Closer to the mark might be that art is supposed to make you feel. But that isn't right, either. Art isn't supposed to do anything. The idea that art is supposed to do something is confused. We're each of us free, audience and artist, to do with or in art whatever we like.

Now art can sometimes be challenging or demanding. That is, a work of art might be strange to us, its genre or construction unfamiliar, its point or meaning obscure. We might have to work hard to find its rhythms and its coherence. We might have to look at it or listen to it in ways new to us. Or a work of art might require us to hold in mind images or ideas that are distressing or disturbing—a man being raped, for instance, or racist oppression. A piece of art might be difficult to interpret or to grasp, or it might be unpleasant to consider. Having met the challenge or the demands of the work, though, we might find ourselves moved by it. The hard work could well be worth it.

That is to say, coming to understand a work of art can require a lot of thinking (though that understanding, if it is the same as one's appreciation of the work, is not simply a thought). The thinking, though, is a means to an end, understanding the work. The work of art is not itself valuable in virtue of our having had to think in order to get it. In any case, people who say that art is supposed to make you think probably aren't merely reminding us that sometimes we have to think hard in order to appreciate a piece of art.

Sometimes a bit of thinking, an argument, is an element within the work itself. Novels and films often contain arguments; even some poems do. Since understanding a piece of art involves understanding the elements of the work and their relations, understanding a piece of art that contains arguments will require whatever thinking is necessary to understand those arguments. But what we prize in those works of art that make us think in this way is not that they make us think or even, necessarily, the content of the arguments they contain. (The argument contained in or expressed by a work of art might be fallacious.) We prize them for the experiences they provide. We value art for moving us emotionally.

I suspect that what's really behind the slogan "art is supposed to make you think" is the doctrine that in part what makes a work of art good or worthwhile is its making us aware of some social problem. It makes us aware of racism, say, or poverty or war or inequity. Being made aware, we are stimulated to think about the problem, to recognize its ubiquity in contemporary society and the harsh effects it has on people. We recognize that some people's enjoyment is bought at the price of other people's unmerited suffering. In this lies the emotional experience provoked by the work, an experience involving sympathy for or empathy with others. Perhaps we are, thereby, stimulated

to do something about the social problem to which the piece refers. “Art is supposed to make you think”: one thing to value in a piece of art, that is, is its ability to make a person really care.

Some pieces of art do indeed raise people’s consciousness, as do some newspaper articles, sociology courses, conversations with friends, and much else besides. Yet quite a lot of art does nothing at all to raise anyone’s consciousness, and is no less wonderful for that. Those who speak the slogan “art is supposed to make you think” have a very pinched view of art and its value. Art can be appreciated and enjoyed whether it serves to raise people’s consciousnesses and to make them really care or not.

A sad fact about Saint Mary’s is that we do very little here with regard to educating taste. We do little by way of enabling our students to appreciate and enjoy art. That might be why “art is supposed to make you think” passes for many on our campus as wisdom. Certainly our English department helps students to develop their aesthetic sensibilities and their taste, as does our Classics and Modern Languages department, with its courses in ancient and contemporary cultures. And we are fortunate to have an art gallery. But all that is still too little. Students at Saint Mary’s can graduate with a bachelor’s degree though their sense of art is no deeper or more refined than it was before they began their studies.

That’s a pity. Art, whether it makes you think or not, is too wonderful to neglect. No one is properly educated who does not feel at home among works of the imagination.