



Shaman dancing on a waterfall

The Value of Art

What is art for? Why does and why should anyone care about it? Most of the time today, people are not even sure what art is. Is it decoration? Design? Self-expression? Performance? Display? And

why is it so highly valued by some people that they will pay millions of dollars for it?

Actually, none of the above is central to the purpose and meaning of art. Art is not a thing. Art is a process, a process of human experience, an interior process which the artist undertakes as an expression of love and a form of worship (in the sense of communing with something greater than they are). Objects that are bought and sold as artworks are the outcome of art. The artist is moved to create something because she thinks it's beautiful, expressive, meaningful, valuable, worthwhile, important...sacred... Now there's an unpopular word in today's world! Sacred? Sacred in the sense of having the highest possible value, not necessarily religious, but rather the very best we can conceive of—the greatest good and excellence.

Of course, one can produce a drawing, a work of literature or a sculpture (to name just a few forms) that comments on something the artist thinks, positively or negatively, is important. But I don't believe that this is art. It might be beautifully crafted, well thought out, a host of positive qualities (or negative: stinging, ugly, etc.) But art is and has been reserved for the highest human values. To speak of truly great artists: Michelangelo, Raphael, Mozart, Balzac, the unknown artists of the exquisite Paleolithic paintings we have found at Lescaux, or the art of the Ajanta Caves in India—these are representative of the highest human values.

In a sense, art attempts to represent the unknowable —something so great and high that we can barely glimpse it—yet the artist is moved to try to give it form. And here is my point:

Art is actually undertaken and experienced by the creator. The viewer or the person who experiences a work of art is only getting the left overs, the second-hand inner experience of someone else, of the creator. It is a shared glimpse into the best we are and can conceive of being, but the real value of art is for the creator. And speaking of value, art is valued precisely because it aims at the greatest human experience possible. It aims at a perfect rendering of the artist's most sublime states of mind translated with the greatest possible finesse and quality of technique. But still, viewers only get this second hand. They may sense the artist's transcendent quality, but they can only get a glimpse of what the experience of creation was like. But all human beings would like even a glimpse of the divine (whatever that means to each of us).

Someone who spends a great deal of money for a work of art is actually purchasing a representation of the greatest imagined good of another human being, an idea executed with the greatest possible profundity and technique.

Now, we have created an “art market” based on various measures of value, but the only real value, apart from it's value to the artist, is the trickle down effect of the artist's experience—which many viewers might intuit for centuries. ■