

Tolstoy: What is Art?

What Is Art?

by Leo Tolstoy

translation by Alymer Maude (1899)

CHAPTER FOUR (excerpts)

If we say that the aim of any activity is merely our pleasure, and define it solely by that pleasure, our definition will evidently be a false one. But this is precisely what has occurred in the efforts to define art. Now, if we consider the food question it will not occur to anyone to affirm that the importance of food consists in the pleasure we receive when eating it. Everyone understands that the satisfaction of our taste cannot serve as a basis for our definition of the merits of food, and that we have therefore no right to presuppose that the dinners with cayenne pepper, Limburg cheese, alcohol, etc., to which we are accustomed and which please us, form the very best human food.

And in the same way, beauty, or that which pleases us, can in no sense serve as the basis for the definition of art; nor can a series of objects which afford us pleasure serve as the model of what art should be.

To see the aim and purpose of art in the pleasure we get from it is like assuming (as is done by people of the lowest moral development, e.g., by savages) that the purpose and aim of food is the pleasure derived when consuming it.

Just as people who conceive the aim and purpose of food to be pleasure cannot recognize the real meaning of eating, so people who consider the aim of art to be pleasure cannot realize its true meaning and purpose because they attribute to an activity the meaning of which lies in its connection with other phenomena of life, the false and exceptional aim of pleasure. People come to understand that the meaning of eating lies in the nourishment of the body only when they cease to consider that the object of that activity is pleasure. And it is the same with regard to art. People will come to understand the meaning of art only when they cease to consider that the aim of that activity is beauty, i.e., pleasure. The acknowledgment of beauty (i.e., of a certain kind of pleasure received from art) as being the aim of art not only fails to assist us in finding a definition of what art is, but, on the contrary, by transferring the question into a region quite foreign to art (into metaphysical, psychological, physiological, and even historical discussions as to why such a production pleases one person, and such another displeases or pleases someone else), it renders such definition impossible. And since discussions as to why one man likes pears and another prefers meat do not help toward finding a definition of what is essential in nourishment, so the solution of questions of taste in art (to which the discussions on art

Explanations and Questions

Tolstoy looks to the AIM or PURPOSE of an activity as the key to defining it, so he endorses FUNCTIONALISM

Food has a purpose, and it's not pleasure

Likewise, pleasure is not art's purpose

What is the true purpose of eating?

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involuntarily come) not only does not help to make clear in what this particular human activity which we call art really consists, but renders such elucidation quite impossible until we rid ourselves of a conception which justifies every kind of art at the cost of confusing the whole matter.

...

CHAPTER FIVE (excerpts)

In order correctly to define art, it is necessary, first of all, to cease to consider it as a means to pleasure and to consider it as one of the conditions of human life. Viewing it in this way we cannot fail to observe that art is one of the means of intercourse between man and man.

Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression.

Speech, transmitting the thoughts and experiences of men, serves as a means of union among them, and art acts in a similar manner. The peculiarity of this latter means of intercourse, distinguishing it from intercourse by means of words, consists in this, that whereas by words a man transmits his thoughts to another, by means of art he transmits his feelings.

The activity of art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man's expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it. To take the simplest example; one man laughs, and another who hears becomes merry; or a man weeps, and another who hears feels sorrow. A man is excited or irritated, and another man seeing him comes to a similar state of mind. By his movements or by the sounds of his voice, a man expresses courage and determination or sadness and calmness, and this state of mind passes on to others. A man suffers, expressing his sufferings by groans and spasms, and this suffering transmits itself to other people; a man expresses his feeling of admiration, devotion, fear, respect, or love to certain objects, persons, or phenomena, and others are infected by the same feelings of admiration, devotion, fear, respect, or love to the same objects, persons, and phenomena.

And it is upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based.

If a man infects another or others directly, immediately, by his appearance or by the sounds he gives vent to at the very time he experiences the feeling; if he causes another man to yawn when he himself cannot help yawning, or to laugh or cry when he himself is obliged to laugh or cry, or to suffer when he himself is suffering — that

Goodness in art must be linked to its essential purpose

Tolstoy postulates art's general purpose

Art must be contrasted with speech, since they have the same general purpose

Speech communicates thought; art must communicate emotion

Why does Tolstoy describe the transmission of emotion as "infection"? How does it differ from "expression"?

Art is "based" on infection (so not all infection is art)

Examples of infection that are not art

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does not amount to art.

Art begins when one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications. To take the simplest example: a boy, having experienced, let us say, fear on encountering a wolf, relates that encounter; and, in order to evoke in others the feeling he has experienced, describes himself, his condition before the encounter, the surroundings, the woods, his own lightheartedness, and then the wolf's appearance, its movements, the distance between himself and the wolf, etc. All this, if only the boy, when telling the story, again experiences the feelings he had lived through and infects the hearers and compels them to feel what the narrator had experienced is art. If even the boy had not seen a wolf but had frequently been afraid of one, and if, wishing to evoke in others the fear he had felt, he invented an encounter with a wolf and recounted it so as to make his hearers share the feelings he experienced when he feared the world, that also would be art. And just in the same way it is art if a man, having experienced either the fear of suffering or the attraction of enjoyment (whether in reality or in imagination) expresses these feelings on canvas or in marble so that others are infected by them. And it is also art if a man feels or imagines to himself feelings of delight, gladness, sorrow, despair, courage, or despondency and the transition from one to another of these feelings, and expresses these feelings by sounds so that the hearers are infected by them and experience them as they were experienced by the composer.

The feelings with which the artist infects others may be most various — very strong or very weak, very important or very insignificant, very bad or very good: feelings of love for one's own country, self-devotion and submission to fate or to God expressed in a drama, raptures of lovers described in a novel, feelings of voluptuousness expressed in a picture, courage expressed in a triumphal march, merriment evoked by a dance, humor evoked by a funny story, the feeling of quietness transmitted by an evening landscape or by a lullaby, or the feeling of admiration evoked by a beautiful arabesque — it is all art.

If only the spectators or auditors are infected by the feelings which the author has felt, it is art.

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling — this is the activity of art.

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.

Art is a conscious infection that is brought about by “external indicators” – what does this mean?

Words are examples of external indicators

Painting and sculpture

Music

The kind of emotion that is communicated does not matter. Any intentional “infection” by means of external material is art

Art is primarily an activity.

Tolstoy summarizes his definition of art

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Art is not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious idea of beauty or God; it is not, as the aesthetical physiologists say, a game in which man lets off his excess of stored-up energy; it is not the expression of man's emotions by external signs; it is not the production of pleasing objects; and, above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity.

Because art is produced to share emotions, it has a kind of "union among men" as its overall purpose

As, thanks to man's capacity to express thoughts by words, every man may know all that has been done for him in the realms of thought by all humanity before his day, and can in the present, thanks to this capacity to understand the thoughts of others, become a sharer in their activity and can himself hand on to his contemporaries and descendants the thoughts he has assimilated from others, as well as those which have arisen within himself; so, thanks to man's capacity to be infected with the feelings of others by means of art, all that is being lived through by his contemporaries is accessible to him, as well as the feelings experienced by men thousands of years ago, and he has also the possibility of transmitting his own feelings to others.

Tolstoy returns to the parallel beyond speech and art.

Art can make use of speech, but when it does, the purpose is a union of "feelings"

If people lacked this capacity to receive the thoughts conceived by the men who preceded them and to pass on to others their own thoughts, men would be like wild beasts, or like Kaspar Houser.

Houser was a child raised with limited human contact

And if men lacked this other capacity of being infected by art, people might be almost more savage still, and, above all, more separated from, and more hostile to, one another.

Tolstoy speculates what will happen to a society without art

And therefore the activity of art is a most important one, as important as the activity of speech itself and as generally diffused.

We are accustomed to understand art to be only what we hear and see in theaters, concerts, and exhibitions, together with buildings, statues, poems, novels. . . . But all this is but the smallest part of the art by which we communicate with each other in life. All human life is filled with works of art of every kind — from cradlesong, jest, mimicry, the ornamentation of houses, dress, and utensils, up to church services, buildings, monuments, and triumphal processions. It is all artistic activity. So that by art, in the limited sense of the word, we do not mean all human activity transmitting feelings, but only that part which we for some reason select from it and to which we attach special importance.

Notice these examples

However, our definitions do not aim to cover all art

This special importance has always been given by all men to that part of this activity which transmits feelings flowing from their religious perception, and this small part of art they have specifically called art, attaching to it the full meaning of the word.

Tolstoy adds one more criterion to his definition

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That was how men of old — Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle — looked on art. Thus did the Hebrew prophets and the ancient Christians regard art; thus it was, and still is, understood by the Mohammedans, and thus it still is understood by religious folk among our own peasantry.

“Mohammedans”
are Muslims

Some teachers of mankind — as Plato in his *Republic* and people such as the primitive Christians, the strict Mohammedans, and the Buddhists — have gone so far as to repudiate all art.

What does he
mean by
“repudiate”?

People viewing art in this way (in contradiction to the prevalent view of today which regards any art as good if only it affords pleasure) considered, and consider, that art (as contrasted with speech, which need not be listened to) is so highly dangerous in its power to infect people against their wills that mankind will lose far less by banishing all art than by tolerating each and every art.

Can art's
audience control
how it makes
them feel? If not,
is art dangerous?

Evidently such people were wrong in repudiating all art, for they denied that which cannot be denied — one of the indispensable means of communication, without which mankind could not exist. But not less wrong are the people of civilized European society of our class and day in favoring any art if it but serves beauty, i.e., gives people pleasure.

Despite its
dangers, Tolstoy
rejects the total
removal of art
from society

Formerly people feared lest among the works of art there might chance to be some causing corruption, and they prohibited art altogether. Now they only fear lest they should be deprived of any enjoyment art can afford, and patronize any art. And I think the last error is much grosser than the first and that its consequences are far more harmful. ...

What does
Tolstoy identify as
the greater
danger?

CHAPTER EIGHT (excerpts)

... To the remark that if our art is the true art everyone should have the benefit of it, the usual reply is that if not everybody at present makes use of existing art the fault lies not in the art but in the false organization of society; that one can imagine to oneself, in the future, a state of things in which physical labor will be partly superseded by machinery, partly lightened by its just distribution, and that labor for the production of art will be taken in turns; that there is no need for some people always to sit below the stage moving the decorations, winding up the machinery, working at the piano or French horn, and setting type and printing books, but that the people who do all this work might be engaged only a few hours per day, and in their leisure time might enjoy all the blessings of art. ...

Tolstoy considers
an objection

Do people who
have more leisure
time spend more
time with art?

But even were we to admit the inadmissible and say that means may be found by which art (that art which among us is considered to be art) may be accessible to the whole people, another consideration presents itself showing that fashionable art cannot be the whole of art, viz., the fact that

“fashionable art”
is fine art

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it is completely unintelligible to the people. Formerly men wrote poems in Latin, but now their artistic productions are as unintelligible to the common folk as if they were written in Sanscrit. The usual reply to this is that if the people do not now understand this art of ours it only proves that they are undeveloped, and that this has been so at each fresh step forward made by art. First it was not understood, but afterward people got accustomed to it.

"It will be the same with our present art; it will be understood when everybody is as well educated as we are—the people of the upper classes—who produce this art," say the defenders of our art. But this assertion is evidently even more unjust than the former, for we know that the majority of the productions of the art of the upper classes, such as various odes, poems, dramas, cantatas, pastorals, pictures, etc., which delighted the people of the upper classes when they were produced, never were afterward either understood or valued by the great masses of mankind, but have remained what they were at first — a mere pastime for rich people of their time, for whom alone they ever were of any importance. It is also often urged, in proof of the assertion that the people will some day understand our art, that some productions of so-called "classical" poetry, music, or painting, which formerly did not please the masses, do—now that they have been offered to them from all sides—begin to please these same masses; but this only shows that the crowd, especially the half-spoiled town crowd, can easily (its taste having been perverted) be accustomed to any sort of art. Moreover, this art is not produced by these masses, nor even chosen by them, but is energetically thrust upon them in those public places in which art is accessible to the people. For the great majority of working-people, our art, besides being inaccessible on account of its costliness, is strange in its very nature, transmitting as it does the feelings of people far removed from those conditions of laborious life which are natural to the great body of humanity. That which is enjoyment to a man of the rich classes is incomprehensible as a pleasure to a workingman, and evokes in him either no feeling at all or only a feeling quite contrary to that which it evokes in an idle and satiated man. Such feelings as form the chief subjects of present-day art—say, for instance, honor, patriotism, and amorousness—evoke in a workingman only bewilderment and contempt, or indignation. So that even if a possibility were given to the laboring classes in their free time to see, to read, and to hear all that forms the flower of contemporary art (as is done to some extent in towns by means of picture galleries, popular concerts, and libraries), the workingman (to the extent to which he is a laborer and has not begun to pass into the ranks of those perverted by idleness) would be able to make nothing of our fine art, and if he did understand it, that which he understood would not elevate his soul but would certainly, in most cases, pervert it. To thoughtful and sincere people there can, therefore, be no doubt that the art of our upper classes never can be the art of the whole people. But if art is an important matter, a spiritual blessing, essential for all men ("like

Who is the audience for fine art?

What is meant by "taste" here? Is taste subject to manipulation?

Why DON'T truck drivers and construction workers spend more time at the art museum and symphony?

Tolstoy presents a dilemma

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religion," as the devotees of art are fond of saying), then it should be accessible to everyone. And if, as in our day, it is not accessible to all men, then one of two things: either art is not the vital matter it is represented to be or that art which we call art is not the real thing.

The dilemma is inevitable and therefore clever and immoral people avoid it by denying one side of it, viz., denying that the common people have a right to art. These people simply and boldly speak out (what lies at the heart of the matter), and say that the participators in and utilizers of what, in their esteem, is highly beautiful art, i.e., art furnishing the greatest enjoyment, can only be "schöne Geister" [beautiful souls] "the elect," as the romantics called them, the "Übermenschen" [superior men] as they are called by the followers of Nietzsche; the remaining vulgar herd, incapable of experiencing these pleasures, must serve the exalted pleasures of this superior breed of people. The people who express these views at least do not pretend and do not try to combine the incombable, but frankly admit what is the case—that our art is an art of the upper classes only. So essentially art has been, and is, understood by everyone engaged in it in our society. ...

Here, "our art" is fine art

CHAPTER TEN (excerpts)

... Moreover, it cannot be said that the majority of people lack the taste to esteem the highest works of art. The majority always has understood, and still understands, what we also recognize as being the very best art: the epic of Genesis, the gospel parables, folk legends, fairy tales, and folk songs are understood by all. How can it be that the majority has suddenly lost its capacity to understand what is high in our art?

Tolstoy offers a list of "the very best art"

Of a speech it may be said that it is admirable, but incomprehensible to those who do not know the language in which it is delivered. A speech delivered in Chinese may be excellent and may yet remain incomprehensible to me if I do not know Chinese; but what distinguishes a work of art from all other mental activity is just the fact that its language is understood by all, and that it infects all without distinction. The tears and laughter of a Chinese infect me just as the laughter and tears of a Russian; and it is the same with painting and music and poetry when it is translated into a language I understand. The songs of a Kirghiz or of a Japanese touch me, though in a lesser degree than they touch a Kirghiz or a Japanese. I am also touched by Japanese painting, Indian architecture, and Arabian stories. If I am but little touched by a Japanese song and a Chinese novel, it is not that I do not understand these productions but that I know and am accustomed to higher works of art. It is not because their art is above me. Great works of art are only great because they are accessible and comprehensible to everyone. The story of Joseph, translated into the Chinese language, touches a Chinese. The story of Sakya Muni touches us. And there are, and must be, buildings, pictures, statues, and music of similar power. So that, if art fails to move men, it

Tolstoy clarifies his criterion of universal accessibility

For Joseph, see Genesis 39; Sakya Muni is Siddhārtha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism

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cannot be said that this is due to the spectators' or hearers' lack of understanding; but the conclusion to be drawn may and should be that such art is either bad art or is not art at all.

Art is differentiated from activity of the understanding, which demands preparation and a certain sequence of knowledge (so that one cannot learn trigonometry before knowing geometry), by the fact that it acts on people independently of their state of development and education, that the charm of a picture, sounds, or of forms, infects any man whatever his plane of development.

The business of art lies just in this—to make that understood and felt which, in the form of an argument, might be incomprehensible and inaccessible. Usually it seems to the recipient of a truly artistic impression that he knew the thing before but had been unable to express it.

And such has always been the nature of good, supreme art; the Iliad, the Odyssey, the stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the Hebrew prophets, the psalms, the gospel parables, the story of Sakya Muni, and the hymns of the Vedas: all transmit very elevated feelings and are nevertheless quite comprehensible now to us, educated or uneducated, as they were comprehensible to the men of those times, long ago, who were even less educated than our laborers. People talk about incomprehensibility; but if art is the transmission of feelings flowing from man's religious perception, how can a feeling be incomprehensible which is founded on religion, i.e., on man's relation to God? Such art should be, and has actually always been, comprehensible to everybody because every man's relation to God is one and the same. And therefore the churches and the images in them are always comprehensible to everyone. The hindrance to understanding the best and highest feelings (as is said in the gospel) does not at all lie in deficiency of development or learning, but, on the contrary, in false development and false learning. A good and lofty work of art may be incomprehensible, but not to simple, unperverted peasant laborers (all that is highest is understood by them)—it may be, and often is, unintelligible to erudite, perverted people destitute of religion. And this continually occurs in our society in which the highest feelings are simply not understood. For instance, I know people who consider themselves most refined and who say that they do not understand the poetry of love to one's neighbor, of self-sacrifice, or of chastity.

So good, great, universal, religious art may be incomprehensible to a small circle of spoiled people but certainly not to any large number of plain men. ...

Tolstoy looks ahead to Chapter Fifteen

Notice these examples

The Vedas are the four ancient sacred texts of Hindu teachings

Does all "religious perception" recognize the same divinity? In another book, Tolstoy defines religious perception as "a relation to the whole immense Infinite in time and space conceived as one whole."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Art, in our society, has been so perverted that not only has bad art come to be considered good, but even the very perception of what art really is has been lost. In order to be able to speak about the art of our society, it is, therefore, first of all necessary to distinguish art from counterfeit art.

How does “exclusive” art relate to counterfeit art?

There is one indubitable indication distinguishing real art from its counterfeit, namely, the infectiousness of art. If a man, without exercising effort and without altering his standpoint on reading, hearing, or seeing another man's work, experiences a mental condition which unites him with that man and with other people who also partake of that work of art, then the object evoking that condition is a work of art. And however poetical, realistic, effectful, or interesting a work may be, it is not a work of art if it does not evoke that feeling (quite distinct from all other feelings) of joy and of spiritual union with another (the author) and with others (those who are also infected by it).

Infection is accompanied by a second feeling, that of a union that gives us joy when we experience it.

It is true that this indication is an internal one, and that there are people who have forgotten what the action of real art is, who expect something else from art (in our society the great majority are in this state), and that therefore such people may mistake for this aesthetic feeling the feeling of diversion and a certain excitement which they receive from counterfeits of art. But though it is impossible to undeceive these people, just as it is impossible to convince a man suffering from "Daltonism" that green is not red, yet, for all that, this indication remains perfectly definite to those whose feeling for art is neither perverted nor atrophied, and it clearly distinguishes the feeling produced by art from all other feelings.

Art “in the limited sense” is now identified as “real art”

Daltonism is a type of color blindness

The chief peculiarity of this feeling is that the receiver of a true artistic impression is so united to the artist that he feels as if the work were his own and not someone else's — as if what it expresses were just what he had long been wishing to express. A real work of art destroys, in the consciousness of the receiver, the separation between himself and the artist — not that alone, but also between himself and all whose minds receive this work of art. In this freeing of our personality from its separation and isolation, in this uniting of it with others, lies the chief characteristic and the great attractive force of art.

An important paragraph: Tolstoy says more about his idea of a feeling of union with artist and the rest of the audience

Art creates a community

If a man is infected by the author's condition of soul, if he feels this emotion and this union with others, then the object which has effected this is art; but if there be no such infection, if there be not this union with the author and with others who are moved by the same work — then it is not art. And not only is infection a sure sign of art, but the degree of infectiousness is also the sole measure of excellence in art.

Tolstoy again insists that TWO feelings occur in real art (infection of emotion PLUS a feeling of union)

The stronger the infection, the better is the art as art, speaking now apart from its subject matter, i.e., not considering the quality of the feelings it

He sets “subject matter” aside

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transmits.

And the degree of the infectiousness of art depends on three conditions:

1. On the greater or lesser individuality of the feeling transmitted;
2. on the greater or lesser clearness with which the feeling is transmitted;
3. on the sincerity of the artist, i.e., on the greater or lesser force with which the artist himself feels the emotion he transmits.

The more individual the feeling transmitted the more strongly does it act on the receiver; the more individual the state of soul into which he is transferred, the more pleasure does the receiver obtain, and therefore the more readily and strongly does he join in it.

“real” art provides pleasure (even if that’s not its purpose)

The clearness of expression assists infection because the receiver, who mingles in consciousness with the author, is the better satisfied the more clearly the feeling is transmitted, which, as it seems to him, he has long known and felt, and for which he has only now found expression.

How could an emotion be unclear?

But most of all is the degree of infectiousness of art increased by the degree of sincerity in the artist. As soon as the spectator, hearer, or reader feels that the artist is infected by his own production, and writes, sings, or plays for himself, and not merely to act on others, this mental condition of the artist infects the receiver; and contrariwise, as soon as the spectator, reader, or hearer feels that the author is not writing, singing, or playing for his own satisfaction — does not himself feel what he wishes to express — but is doing it for him, the receiver, a resistance immediately springs up, and the most individual and the newest feelings and the cleverest technique not only fail to produce any infection but actually repel.

Can you think of an example of insincere art?

I have mentioned three conditions of contagiousness in art, but they may be all summed up into one, the last, sincerity, i.e., that the artist should be impelled by an inner need to express his feeling. That condition includes the first; for if the artist is sincere he will express the feeling as he experienced it. And as each man is different from everyone else, his feeling will be individual for everyone else; and the more individual it is — the more the artist has drawn it from the depths of his nature — the more sympathetic and sincere will it be. And this same sincerity will impel the artist to find a clear expression of the feeling which he wishes to transmit.

Is sincerity really enough to allow clear communication of an emotion?

Therefore this third condition — sincerity — is the most important of the three. It is always complied with in peasant art, and this explains why such art always acts so powerfully; but it is a condition almost entirely absent from our upper-class art, which is continually produced by artists actuated by personal aims of covetousness or vanity.

“Peasant art” would be a type of folk art

For whom is most art created?

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Such are the three conditions which divide art from its counterfeits, and which also decide the quality of every work of art apart from its subject matter.

A summary of Chapter Fifteen's central point

The absence of any one of these conditions excludes a work from the category of art and relegates it to that of art's counterfeits. If the work does not transmit the artist's peculiarity of feeling and is therefore not individual, if it is unintelligibly expressed, or if it has not proceeded from the author's inner need for expression — it is not a work of art. If all these conditions are present, even in the smallest degree, then the work, even if a weak one, is yet a work of art.

Is sincere art ALWAYS better than insincere (and therefore counterfeit) art?

The presence in various degrees of these three conditions — individuality, clearness, and sincerity — decides the merit of a work of art as art, apart from subject matter. All works of art take rank of merit according to the degree in which they fulfill the first, the second, and the third of these conditions. In one the individuality of the feeling transmitted may predominate; in another, clearness of expression; in a third, sincerity; while a fourth may have sincerity and individuality but be deficient in clearness; a fifth, individuality and clearness but less sincerity; and so forth, in all possible degrees and combinations.

How can we determine the DEGREE of sincerity in a work of art?

Thus is art divided from that which is not art, and thus is the quality of art as art decided, independently of its subject matter, i.e., apart from whether the feelings it transmits are good or bad.

But how are we to define good and bad art with reference to its subject matter?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN (excerpts)

... It must be the art, not of some one group of people, nor of one class, nor of one nationality, nor of one religious cult; that is, it must not transmit feelings which are accessible only to a man educated in a certain way, or only to an aristocrat, or a merchant, or only to a Russian, or a native of Japan, or a Roman Catholic, or a Buddhist, etc., but it must transmit feelings accessible to everyone. Only art of this kind can be acknowledged in our time to be good art, worthy of being chosen out from all the rest of art and encouraged.

Subject matter is independently discussed because it affects accessibility

The most accessible art is the best

Christian art, i.e., the art of our time, should be catholic in the original meaning of the word, i.e., universal, and therefore it should unite all men. And only two kinds of feeling do unite all men: first, feelings flowing from the perception of our sonship to God and of the brotherhood of man; and next, the simple feelings of common life, accessible to every one without exception—such as the feeling of merriment, of pity, of cheerfulness, of tranquility, etc. Only these two kinds of feelings can now supply material for art good in its subject matter.

In the past, art only needed to unify small groups. Today, it is imperative that it "unite all men"

There are two ways to do this

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And the action of these two kinds of art, apparently so dissimilar, is one and the same. The feelings flowing from perception of our sonship to God and of the brotherhood of man —such as a feeling of sureness in truth, devotion to the will of God, self-sacrifice, respect for and love of man— evoked by Christian religious perception; and the simplest feelings—such as a softened or a merry mood caused by a song or an amusing jest intelligible to everyone, or by a touching story, or a drawing, or a little doll: both alike produce one and the same effect, the loving union of man with man. Sometimes people who are together are, if not hostile to one another, at least estranged in mood and feeling till perchance a story, a performance, a picture, or even a building, but most often of all music, unites them all as by an electric flash, and in place of their former isolation or even enmity they are all conscious of union and mutual love. Each is glad that another feels what he feels; glad of the communion established, not only between him and all present, but also with all now living who will yet share the same impression; and more than that, he feels the mysterious gladness of a communion which, reaching beyond the grave, unites us with all men of the past who have been moved by the same feelings, and with all men of the future who will yet be touched by them. And this effect is produced both by the religious art which transmits feelings of love to God and one's neighbor and by universal art transmitting the very simplest feelings common to all men.

The art of our time should be appraised differently from former art chiefly in this, that the art of our time, i.e., Christian art (basing itself on a religious perception which demands the union of man), excludes from the domain of art good in subject matter everything transmitting exclusive feelings which do not unite, but divide, men. It relegates such work to the category of art bad in its subject matter, while, on the other hand, it includes in the category of art good in subject matter a section not formerly admitted to deserve to be chosen out and respected, namely, universal art, transmitting even the most trifling and simple feelings if only they are accessible to all men without exception and therefore unite them. Such art cannot in our time but be esteemed good, for it attains the end which the religious perception of our time, i.e., Christianity, sets before humanity.

Christian art either evokes in men those feelings which, through love of God and of one's neighbor, draw them to greater and ever greater union and make them ready for and capable of such union, or evokes in them those feelings which show them that they are already united in the joys and sorrows of life. And therefore the Christian art of our time can be and is of two kinds: (1) art transmitting feelings flowing from a religious perception of man's position in the world in relation to God and to his neighbor—religious art in the limited meaning of the term; and (2) art transmitting the simplest feelings of common life, but such, always, as are accessible to all men in the whole world ... —universal art

While “religious perception” is our awareness of our relationship to the universe as a whole, the Christian religious perception involves recognition of our absolute equality as human beings

How art gives us joy

Tolstoy: What is Art?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN (excerpts)

... The religious perception of our time—which consists in acknowledging that the aim of life (both collective and individual) is the union of mankind—is already so sufficiently distinct that people have now only to reject the false theory of beauty according to which enjoyment is considered to be the purpose of art, and religious perception will naturally take its place as the guide of the art of our time.

Tolstoy returns to the religious perception “of our time” (implying that it has changed over time)

And as soon as the religious perception, which already unconsciously directs the life of man, is consciously acknowledged, then immediately and naturally the division of art into art for the lower and art for the upper classes will disappear. There will be one common, brotherly, universal art, and first that art will naturally be rejected which transmits feelings incompatible with the religious perception of our time, feelings which do not unite, but divide men, and then that insignificant, exclusive art will be rejected to which an importance is now attached to which it has no right.

Is Tolstoy too optimistic?

And as soon as this occurs, art will immediately cease to be what it has been in recent times, a means of making people coarser and more vicious, and it will become what it always used to be and should be, a means by which humanity progresses toward unity and blessedness. ...

The art of our time and of our circle has become a prostitute. And this comparison holds good even in minute details. Like her it is not limited to certain times, like her it is always adorned, like her it is always salable, and like her it is enticing and ruinous.

A real work of art can only arise in the soul of an artist occasionally as the fruit of the life he has lived, just as a child is conceived by its mother. But counterfeit art is produced by artisans and handicraftsmen continually, if only consumers can be found.

What does this imply about highly productive artists, such as Picasso?

Real art, like the wife of an affectionate husband, needs no ornaments. But counterfeit art, like a prostitute, must always be decked out.

The cause of the production of real art is the artist's inner need to express a feeling that has accumulated, just as for a mother the cause of sexual conception is love. The cause of counterfeit art, as of prostitution, is gain.

Do commercial motives ruin art?

The consequence of true art is the introduction of a new feeling into the intercourse of life, as the consequence of a wife's love is the birth of a new man into life.

The consequences of counterfeit art are the perversion of man, pleasure which never satisfies, and the weakening of man's spiritual strength.

Tolstoy: What is Art?

And this is what people of our day and of our circle should understand in order to avoid the filthy torrent of depraved and prostituted art with which we are deluged....