

What Is My Art?

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I am not a professional artist, and yet I practice my arts: writing, cooking and gardening. I continue to be enthralled by them. As I see myself getting better and better at them, I am encouraged. I do not receive any financial benefit from them. I am not showered with kudos for my efforts, and I am not recognized as special in any way because of them. I believe the practice of the arts by individuals at the amateur level is the key to a well-rounded, well-adjusted life.

Art as practiced by the amateur is a self-fulfilling activity regardless of the medium, and an expanded view of what constitutes one's art should include both the classic artistic traditions and those outside that realm. There is an argument to be made that the perfect jump shot is a thing of beauty. The same is true of a perfectly turned phrase, piece of metal, polished wood, brush of paint, expressed emotion or conveyed feeling and executed note. These and more are how the amateur artist expresses himself, but these mediums don't begin to answer the question of "Why?". That answer is as complex and unique as the individuals who practice them.

Pablo Picasso said, "Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life." As we busily go about our day-to-day existence, artistic pursuit is a way of clearing the cobwebs and getting in touch with the beauty that lies within. Through creative endeavor, we bring to the surface that which connects us to our inner self, our soul. Once tapped into this resource, we can stretch it as often as needed. During times of stress this expression can help make sense from chaos, provide a much needed outlet for frustration and anxiety, and give back the spiritual energy and faith we need. This is a main reason why counselors often employ the arts with their patients suffering from stress-related disorders, both physical and mental. It helps the patient focus on issues and frustrations, bringing them to the surface in a manner that can then be addressed. Neglect of the self is one of the causes of mental illness.

The desire to write "The Great American Novel", paint the next *Mona Lisa*, sculpt the next *David* or compose the next *Ninth Symphony* exists in most of us at some point. The creation of something is an end in itself, the goal being the journey, not the destination. For others, the objective is the fame and fortune it would

provide. It is only recently in human history that the practice of an art is reduced to how much money or fame one can make. From early civilizations until the middle of this century, artists were still valued by societies for their ability to bring beauty to the human existence. "Aristotle disdained those who received money to play music for others. His ideal consisted of activities pursued purely for their own sake, arts undertaken without any thought of praise, money or utility" (Yudkin, *New Age*, Sept/Oct 1998).

Artists were supported by patrons who gave them stipends, commissioned specific works or sanctioned them as a member of the household. This allowed the artist to be freed of day-to-day responsibilities and provide them an atmosphere where creative energy would flourish, bringing more joy and beauty into the world. The very rich were expected to provide for artists, often simultaneously supporting several, possibly in different disciplines, in effect purchasing their own artistic communities.

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During "The Renaissance," the idea of a well-rounded individual was one who was accomplished in multiple areas, such as arts and letters, finance and banking, sport, leisure and romance. All these parts were considered to be necessary parts of a whole human being. If one or another were sacrificed, an individual's understanding of his world would remain incomplete, stunted. It was still expected that working classes work. Dilettantes were not only tolerated, but encouraged to dabble in everything that struck their fancy in order to determine in which disciplines they could excel.

What is your art? For which of the multiple activities that qualify as a personal artistic endeavor are you best suited? Think about the things that interest you, the things you can get lost in doing, the thing that raises a passion in you. Passion is intricately intertwined with the love of the amateur for their art. Passion is that which drives us to do, to create, to perform those acts of senseless grace and beauty for reasons we have no need to

understand. It is that which motivates us towards something that we may not be able to articulate, that provides no financial or visible reward. It is the driving force with which we know what we must do and have no need of reasons why. It is that link with the spiritual self that lets us feel as if, in the practice of the arts, we are in communion with our God. Many amateurs, when interviewed, suggest they felt they were merely the vehicles for some greater act of creation. Victor Hugo once said, "There is one spectacle grander than the sea, that is the sky; there is one spectacle grander than the sky, that is the interior of the soul."

When we show our soul, our passions through the arts, are we the vehicles of a greater act of creation?

Amateur artists speak of the feeling of spiritual communion both individually and when they are within a group such as musicians or actors. The feeling of "transcendence" is common to both. Emotional states can migrate between individuals who are tied together by or within something they feel passionately about. If this is what happens between individuals practicing their art, isn't it possible that this same feeling can migrate to those enjoying or appreciating these efforts? Have you ever seen a painting, scene in a film or play or heard a particular piece of music that brought you to the verge of tears or the edge of your seat? Most would have a hard time answering that with a firm "No!" I would have difficulty relating to someone who had never been moved by some form of artistic expression.

Carl Jung's theory of "the collective unconscious," with innate human knowledge shared at some genetic level, could explain the feelings experienced by not only the artist but by those who enjoy the art they see and hear as well. A more spiritual, metaphysical or purely religious influence could also be at play in this connection. At the particular moment when the onlooker feels the emotion and passion of the piece, could it be at the same point in which the artist reaches that spiritual plane in its creation?

If that were true, I would suggest that in order to connect to ourselves and other people at that emotional and spiritual level, we need to practice our art with all the fire and passion we can manage. The practice of arts is one of the most subtle yet direct methods of increasing our capacity for meaningful interaction. Once we are connected to ourselves, to repli-

cate that connection to those around us become easier. This could explain actors developing emotional connections with those they perform with. If the actor constantly opens up emotionally, completely exposing himself to another, the transfer of the connection from the character being portrayed to the person portraying him is not a big jump to make. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that all artists are easily attached to others, but there is a definite connection between the exposure of self through artistic expression and the exposure to another within a deeply passionate relationship.

Amateurs often fill their free time with their art, struggling to find more time to devote to it. It is their addiction, their passion, and their personal drug. Many set goals and increment their progress towards achievement, but most participate strictly for the love of the activity in itself. When people do try to turn their hobby into their profession, it may be a disappointment. A profession suggests that something of monetary value is produced, and this detracts from the ability to love the activity for itself. Just as with any other professional frustrations, the deadlines, trends and interferences of others strips the joy out of the activity.

That's why I never became a chef. I know the perfect steak should be done medium-rare, and I didn't want to cringe every time someone said, "Burn it!" What about the days I didn't feel like cooking? Going professional could have taken the joy out of cooking for me.

What is your art? There are a hundred and one reasons to practice some form of the arts. It's just a matter of which one. If you already have one, good for you, exercise your soul with it regularly. Joseph Joubert said "Imagination is the eye of the soul," so if you don't know what your art is, follow your imagination to figure it out. Devote a little bit of time to it every now and again, just to keep the dust and cobwebs off your soul.