**Why make art?**

The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart is currently exploring this question – inspired, in part by evolutionary biology and the study of human nature – in their new exhibition, The Red Queen. Here, Island asked several leading evolutionary scientists why we make art and why we seek out art made by others. Photos: MONA/Rémi Chauvin.

MARK PAGEL

In my book Wired for Culture (2013) I develop the argument that we evolved to produce art (including music and fiction) because of its role in enhancing the beliefs and emotions that promote important behaviours in our everyday lives. By this I mean that the origins of art lie in its use in promoting our individual and group wellbeing, specifically in ways related to our survival and reproduction.

I compare our ‘art’ to other enhancers that our societies have built in more recent times, such as performance-enhancing drugs in athletics and sports. These drugs enhance an athlete’s performance, even though they are not the reason the athlete is competing in the first place. Similarly, I see our art as playing the role of something like a performance-enhancing drug, but in the context of our social behaviours – those behaviours exist anyway, but our art enhances our performance of them.

Thus, a cave-art drawing of an ancient bison might have been used for teaching about how to hunt it, or, just as significantly, to call attention to its importance for a community as a source of food, thereby coordinating group hunting activities. In this latter role, art is much like photography today. Even in our societies overflowing with images, we still use pictures of relatives to remind us of the importance of these attachments in our lives, making it more likely we will maintain these important links. Similarly, the ancient ‘Venus’ carvings might have been used to draw attention to the characteristics of healthy females.

But few of us can make our own art and this has probably been true throughout our history. I think our attraction to art made by others, then, arises directly out of art’s role as an enhancer of our emotions. Emotions – such as love or rage – exist to motivate behaviours that promote our survival and reproduction. Thus, we have sets of emotions related to attraction, survival, family ties and group activities, among others.

We seek out others’ art then because it is playing this role of a ‘performance-enhancing drug’ acting on our emotions – we really do feel things when surrounded by art that we cannot feel, or have difficulty feeling, on our own. In a crude sense, then, art is not so different from nicotine or caffeine, it is just that it acts on higher emotional centres of our minds, rather than purely increasing our – in the case of these two drugs – alertness.


PAUL S C TAÇON

What we call art truly is an extraordinary thing. This is because art is all about stories, experience, memory, history, creativity and imagination. It also can express social change, religious belief, political viewpoints, conflict, change and emotion. Art is powerful in this sense as not only a communication tool but also as a transformative experience. It excites us humans, eliciting all manner of responses from titillation to horror, exasperation to serenity. It is a playful thing to engage with, whether as producers or consumers.

For animals, especially mammals, play is a very important behaviour for learning, exploring and establishing social relations. Indeed, it is important for survival. Some animal play has an art-like quality. For instance, birds play with sound and compose new songs. Some mammals may even paint pictures if given the right human-arranged conditions, as we know from over sixty years of paintings by primates, pachyderms and even seals and dolphins. But they do not produce or engage with ‘art’ in the same way or to the same extent as humans do.

The origins of art lie in the deep past of perhaps over 100,000 years ago in Africa. The first humans to colonise Asia, Europe and Australia began marking the land with rock art soon after arriving in these strange new worlds. They likely also engaged in story, song, dance and many other forms of symbolic expression. Indeed, this behaviour may well have been instrumental for human survival for it seems Neanderthals may not have
painting or carved rocks much. Rock art by humans was produced for tens of thousands of years and as recently as last century in many parts of the world.

Rock art sites are popular tourist destinations, just as are built art galleries, museums and theatres. So, too, are novels, television, science fiction. Why is this so? It is because at these places and through these media we can become enriched with human knowledge, experience, creativity and imagination. We experience the diversity of what it is to be human, past and present. We see the world from new perspectives, allowing us to better understand or question our own. We play, we have fun. We walk away excited and refreshed from the drudgery of the everyday part of human reality. Art lets us escape for a while but in the process we are educated and renewed.

Analogously, singers, painters, writers and sculptors seek the pleasure that bubbles up when one of their products meets their criterion of perfect. Not surprisingly, artists, like children who cry when criticised for a poor performance, become angry if a critic finds fault with one of the products they themselves had evaluated as good or perfect.

The creation and enjoyment of art was an inevitable consequence of the chance events that created the human brain because it exploits the other three unique human properties of a symbolic language, consciousness and morality.

Jerome Kagan is an American psychologist, an Emeritus Professor from Harvard University. His groundbreaking work explores the role of temperament and emotion in human developmental psychology.

STEPHEN DAVIES

We make and appreciate art because doing so is both intrinsically rewarding and functionally valuable. Through it we share ideas, emotions, perspectives and values. Art serves multiple purposes and is done for diverse reasons, which is not surprising given that it links and unites many facets of our human nature.

This is apparent from the earliest art, dating back forty thousand years. Some cave art is found in resonant chambers that might have hosted communal rituals. But much work is confined to inaccessible spaces. And some caves were only rarely visited when the painting was done. So, art behaviours were often a private matter.

This ancient art reflected what was important to its makers. They were hunters living in a world dominated by animals, so that is what they painted and engraved, often with great power and skill. Erotic graffiti and sexually explicit Venus figurines also were made, indicating males’ interest in sex. Finger flutings and handprints were easy to create and probably satisfied the human desire to leave a mark on the world. Prehistoric art also is replete with abstract, geometric figures. Though we do not know their significance, clearly they are expressions of symbolic thought and possessed meaning as insignia or the like.

The earliest art was not for distanced contemplation. And there would not have been a clear separation between art and the utilitarian products of other skillful behaviours, such as sewing and carving. Everywhere, functional objects were skilfully decorated and humans adorned their clothes and themselves. In recent centuries, some art has become the exclusive province of expert makers and connoisseurs, but when art loses touch with its vibrant origins it can be deprived of its power to speak movingly to the human spirit.
Brigita Ozolins  
Moira, 2013  
timber and plywood, gold leaf, red stain, high definition video and soundtrack

Hubert Duprat  
Untitled (dice), 2011  
ulexite, plastic dice, glue
Art includes many ancient practices and objects, such as cave paintings, body adornments and figurines dating to around 40,000 years ago. What do these have in common with the music of Bach and Bonnie Raitt, the paintings of Gainsborough and Jackson Pollock, the movements of Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey, the poetry of the Brownings and Oodgeroo Noonuccal?

For our human ancestors, aesthetic practices were ingrained in day-to-day experience, not relegated to a separate sphere of culture. Still, ancient arts exhibit commonalities with contemporary art forms. All are distinguished by the care taken to create something that is not obviously useful. All are designed to attract the attention of other humans, and all are usually successful in doing so. According to the pragmatic philosopher John Dewey, all are intentionally shaped to produce experiential wholeness and completeness and, with it, a sense of meaning.

But why create and attend to something that is not directly useful? Ellen Dissanayake, an evolutionary anthropologist, theorises that art is a form of elaboration for the creator and participant, giving it human form and development, help situate individuals within their environment and circumstances, and it was bound up with myth and ritual.

The arts evolved as a response to the psychological stress of being acted upon by the environment, which means they were a central force in the evolution of culture. Today, they have been compartmentalised into leisure-time activities. This is a shame, because through shaping with the aim of producing something significant, the arts provide a perception of control over circumstances, thus fulfilling a fundamental need of a meaning-making species. And the arts exhibit none of the toxic forms of control over the environment now so pervasive elsewhere in human culture.

Above left: Zhang Huan
Berlin Buddha, 2007
aluminium and ashes

Left: Sachiko Abe
Cut Papers #15, 2013
performance piece

NANCY EASTERLIN

JOSEPH CARROLL

Darwinian literary theorists and aesthetic philosophers have proposed several distinct functions for the arts: providing practical information about the environment, enabling people to envision alternative scenarios of action, creating social bonds through shared images of tribal identity, stimulating cognitive flexibility, enhancing pattern recognition, relieving anxiety, activating pleasure centres in the brain, fabricating therapeutic delusions and providing a medium for sexual and social display. All of these particular functions can be subsumed within one more basic function: helping to create an imagined world.

The disposition for creating and responding to the arts would have solved an adaptive problem that, like art itself, is unique for the human species: organising motivational systems disconnected from the immediate promptings of instinct. For human beings, every action and event takes place within an imagined world. Humans live not just in the immediate sensory present but in the past, the future, and the abstract. Our imagined communities include memories of the dead, ancestral traditions, visions of future generations, and the awareness of others who wear our tribal insignia or share our values and beliefs.

Our behaviour is not regulated only by impulses toward pleasure and recoil from pain. It is regulated also by imaginative constructs that include belief systems, moral norms and narratives of personal identity lodged within the collective narratives of our social groups. All such constructs are causally intertwined with myths, legends, stories, music, paintings and three-dimensional aesthetic objects. The arts coalesce in ceremonies and rituals that mark the major stages of life: birth, initiation, coming of age, marriage and death. In all known cultures, the arts enter profoundly into normal childhood development, help situate individuals within their environments and, thus, help organise motives and values.

Humans are neither creatures of pure instinct nor creatures of pure intellect. They are creatures of imagination. As used by evolutionists in the humanities, the word imagination does not signify some mysterious faculty set apart from other forms of cognition. It signifies an interactive set of mental operations that include aesthetic perception, discursive reason, mimetic representation, symbolic imagery and emotional responsiveness. All these operations working together produce an imagined world that is both the inescapable context of all human behaviour and the source of meaning in human life. Because the arts feed and shape the imagination, they are an indispensable functional component of our specifically human behavioural repertory.

Why do we seek out art made by others?
Because we begin that way: we hear adults sing or tell stories to us before we first sing or pretend as we play.

Brian Boyd

In a world where creatures have to compete for survival, art can look crazy. Our forebears devoted hundreds of hours to pounding a hemispherical hole in the rock 300,000 years ago or to carving swimming reindeer 15,000 years ago. Our contemporaries have been building Gaudí’s ornate Sagrada Familia for over a hundred years. Why do we spend so much in time, and often, in resources, on activities that seem useless?

Of course, art gives us pleasure, but that’s no answer. Dung beetles love dung, but then they feed and breed in it. Why do we get the pleasure we do from art when we have to forgo feeding and breeding time to make or wallow in art? Evolution doesn’t like costs without benefits. Why hasn’t it bred out our inclination to this apparently useless activity in the twelve thousand generations or more since art first emerged?

I explain art as play for the mind. Play evolved in so many animal lines because critters that practice crucial behaviours like fighting, fleeing or chasing over and over again in their down-time do better when these moves are urgently needed than those who haven’t practiced. Because individuals more inclined to play than simply rest and save energy have had more offspring over the generations, the inclination to practice intensified to the point where it became sheer, compulsive, irresistible fun.

Unlike other animals we humans are not particularly strong, or swift, or agile, and we thrive, mostly, not through any physical advantages, but through our brains, our mastery of information. Information is costly to process, and we can process it in real time only if it falls into patterns. Brains work by pattern recognition, and neuroscientist Daniel Bor notes that we humans ‘are alone in the animal kingdom in just how aggressively we constantly search for patterns, and even in how they may be a source of so much pleasure.’

The arts all involve play with pattern, in our key senses, sight and sound, and, at a higher level, in terms of social information and language. Because art, like play, usually stands aside from immediate action, it can seem the most useless of all classes of human activity. But its compulsive appeal — and its high and repeated dosage of intensely focused attention to patterns that matter — allows it to develop and shape minds, imaginations, and eventually traditions of creativity that have made us the dominant animal on earth.

Why do we seek out art made by others? Because we begin that way: we hear adults sing or tell stories to us before we first sing or pretend as we play. Because by the time we’re seven or eight years old we sense realistically who can do what better than we can. Because we have evolved to divide up tasks, and because specialisation and expertise can make little initial differences in skill enormous. Because we can reap most of the benefits of playing with patterns without paying many of the costs. Because prestige and social sharing, from classic status to Facebook likes, cut down search time: we know that others think the Mona Lisa or MONA worth attention, so we take notice too. Because, since we’re such social creatures, our emotions intensify when we sense others sharing them, in a film, a concert or a gallery.

Brian Boyd is University Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Auckland. Long regarded as the world’s leading Nabokov scholar, he has also worked on evolution, art and literature, including On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction (2009), Why Lyrics Last: Evolution, Cognition, and Shakespeare’s Sonnets (2011) and the co-edited Evolution, Literature, and Film (2010).

(More Red Queen images)

Above right: Sam Porritt
We’re Tripping Myself Up
ink on paper

Right: Tessa Farmer
The Depraved Pursuit of a Possum, 2013 (detail)
sculptural installation

Next Page: Rirkrit Tiravanija & Mai Ueda
Untitled, 2013
(running out of time)

Mirrored room with stage, bonsai trees (indigenous Tasmanian species) on mirror plinths, furo (brazier), chagama (water pot), hai (ash), sumi (charcoal), matcha (powdered green tea), higashi (sweets) and utensils including tana (shelves), natsume (tea caddy), chashaku (bamboo spoons), chasen (whisk).

Photos: MONA/Rémi Chauvin
Images Courtesy MONA
Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia
Left:
Kutluğ Ataman
Kuba, 2004
forty-monitor video
installation

Photo: MONA/
Rêmi Chauvin

All Red Queen images
Courtesy MONA
Museum of Old and
New Art, Hobart,
Tasmania, Australia