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# The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, And Human Evolution



## THE ART INSTINCT

BEAUTY, PLEASURE,  
AND HUMAN EVOLUTION

DENIS DUTTON



## Synopsis

The Art Instinct combines two of the most fascinating and contentious disciplines, art and evolutionary science, in a provocative new work that will revolutionize the way art itself is perceived. Aesthetic taste, argues Denis Dutton, is an evolutionary trait, and is shaped by natural selection. It's not, as almost all contemporary art criticism and academic theory would have it, "socially constructed". The human appreciation for art is innate, and certain artistic values are universal across cultures, such as a preference for landscapes that, like the ancient savannah, feature water and distant trees. If people from Africa to Alaska prefer images that would have appealed to our hominid ancestors, what does that mean for the entire discipline of art history? Dutton argues, with forceful logic and hard evidence, that art criticism needs to be premised on an understanding of evolution, not on abstract "theory". Sure to provoke discussion in scientific circles and an uproar in the art world, The Art Instinct offers radical new insights into both the nature of art and the workings of the human mind.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In "The Art Instinct," Denis Dutton asks an interesting question: is there a way to explain our human predilection for art in evolutionary terms? How can this drive for art be seen as a trait instilled by the process of evolution? Dutton's answers, unfortunately, turn out to be rather pedestrian, in that he (a) borrows and does not add to the conclusions of others; and (b) focuses on "easy cases" of representative art as opposed to cases that would be more problematic for his theory. First, Dutton

outlays his very pluralistic theory of what constitutes art. He makes very good arguments against the reigning culturally relativistic views (art is whatever we define it as). In its place, he offers twelve criteria that art must have in order to be art (none of which are necessary or sufficient on their own. They are: (1) gives direct pleasure; (2) exhibits skill and virtuosity; (3) novelty and creativity; (4) style; (5) ability to evoke criticism; (6) representation; (7) special focus; (8) expressive individuality; (9) emotional saturation; (10) intellectually challenging; follows artistic traditions; (12) imaginative experience. Dutton writes that while none of these criteria are necessary or sufficient, anything that is to be classified as art must exhibit a greater or lesser degree of at least several of these traits. He certainly shows that even the most different cultural definitions of art all have at least these criteria in common, and more importantly, that, regardless of culture, we all have a human drive to admire things with these characteristics. From here, Dutton's argument focuses on how to see art in evolutionary terms.

Every culture we know of, every tribe, current or historic, tells stories. They all make music. They might not all do watercolors, but they all do some sort of representational art. Why is this? After all, storytelling, music, and painting are far less effective in putting food on the table than, say, hunting or planting. In examining a cultural universal, like making art, it makes sense to seek an answer from evolution. No one scientifically doubts that we have our bodies and physiology due to evolution (although religious doubters continue to pipe up). Over the past three decades, we have seen evolutionary explanations for human sexuality, language, even religion. Can Darwin's principles be applied to our diligence in making art, and our love of art? Denis Dutton thinks so, and in *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (Bloomsbury Press), he has put forward a cogent and entertaining evolutionary explanation of our artistic impulses. Dutton, who teaches the philosophy of art, and also founded and edits the popular and useful website *Arts & Letters Daily*, has good grasps on art and evolution, and his explanations for artistic behavior and appreciation help us understand both disciplines. If evolution explains art-making through all cultures, you'd expect some general agreement on, say, what paintings are beautiful. Statistics have been done, and it does seem that there is a consensus between cultures on what is the prettiest landscape. In the Pleistocene era, our ancestors were nomads. They would have liked the blue of water or of distant vegetation; it would have meant sustenance from good hunting grounds. Music is perhaps harder to explain.

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