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Great Art is Divine Creation

The Greeks believed that all art is divinely inspired. Poets are inspired by muses, artists by gods, and musicians by lyres. All great art has an element of divinity within it – its aesthetics transcend the mundane values of everyday life. The Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov distinguished between art and mere craft. Craft was anything with a worldly function and utility, and was essential for human existence. Art, on the other hand, went beyond the mere utilitarian value of craft, and reached for a higher realm of human existence. I will defend the Greek and Nabokov position that art brings an element of the divine to human life. The divine gives a perspective that is beyond ordinary human senses, interactions, and functions. The divine brings an element of eternity to the fatality of human life.

The distinction between art and craft is an essential one. The purpose of craft is to serve some specific human aim, requirement, or desire. Carpenters who make furniture for everyday use, photographers who take passport photos, and weavers who make carpets for the home can all be excellent craftspeople, but they are not artists. Some would argue that crafts have elements of art, such as beautiful furniture or a beautiful carpet may be considered artistic. While this may be true for many crafts, nevertheless the *primary* function of crafts is purely utilitarian. And of course, every work of art contains an element of craft, and every artist must be a master with his materials. But the primary purpose of art cannot be utilitarian. Similarly journalists,

news reporters, and pop singers are craftspeople, and cannot be considered artists since their main roles are utilitarian – writing a news article, reporting a story, or entertaining an audience, respectively. Pure entertainment cannot be considered art because it serves a base human instinct against boredom.

Leo Tolstoy, another Russian novelist, makes the argument contrary to Nabokov that the cost of art must be considered within human life as a whole. “In a highly entertaining eye-witness account of the rehearsals of an opera, Tolstoy points to the immense time, energy and expense, and above all the great personal sacrifice, that such productions demand” (*WP* 573). It is not altogether uncommon for a great artist to sacrifice health and life for their work – the tragic death from stress of the German composer Wolfgang Mozart as portrayed in the film *Amadeus* is an excellent example. Similarly, the “Broadway in Boston” production of *The Lion King* demanded great expense in elaborate costumes, stage sets, and a \$38-million theater restoration. Some would reasonably ask, “Why all this expense unless the work of art has some redeeming social or moral content?” In a sense, such people are confusing art with craft, when they expect art to serve some specific purpose, even an exalted purpose such as social change or moral inspiration. Propaganda, with the aim of either inspiring or discouraging social change, or preaching a certain type of provincial morality, cannot be considered art. At best, such works are inspiring and socially unifying; at worst, they are simply instruments of state power.

Many concerned citizens would argue that the money spent on art is better spent on social causes, such as poverty reduction, education improvement, or medical research.

However art provides something that cannot be provided by anything else, especially not by crafts. The value of art cannot therefore be counted in monetary considerations alone.

Liza Weisstuch, reviewing the production of *The Lion King*, emphasizes the divine element within this particular artistic creation:

“Our imagination is unleashed because Taymor’s designs allow us to connect with these creatures as dynamic personalities . . . The inventive incarnations are especially engaging because we’re not simply seeing characters’ antics and exploits, we’re bearing witness to the artistic tricks that make it possible for these creatures to live. *In a sense, we’re getting a glimpse of creation itself.*”

The allusion to divine genesis in the review is rather appropriate. Great art brings into the world something that has never been. It seeks to infuse human life, however briefly, with an element of the eternal. This is the reason some works of art are rightly considered *priceless*. Even if the amount of effort the artist and his or her team put into the artwork can be quantified, nevertheless the value of the art piece transcends the marketplace, and hence may be considered without a price (i.e., priceless).

Art cannot be required to serve a specific purpose or desire – that is the role of craft. Artists often say they are divinely inspired – either by God, by the gods, or by a muse or lyre. Either way, art expresses the human longing for the divine in the worldly and for the eternal in the fatal. Human life is short, and often brutal and hellish, and art provides the rare chance to experience the magical and divine.