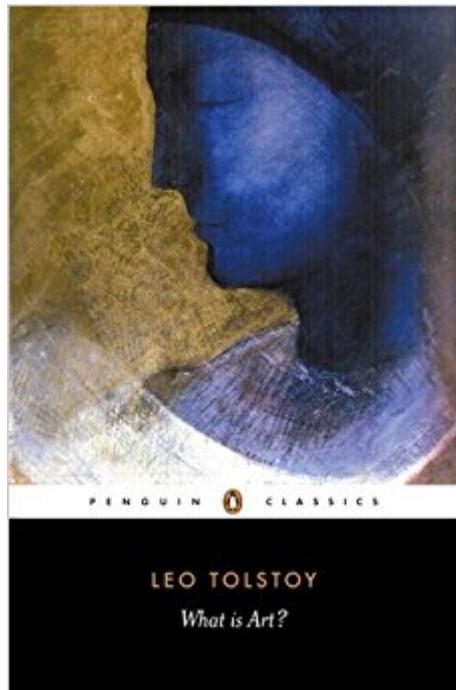


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What Is Art? (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

This profound analysis of the nature of art is the culmination of a series of essays and polemics on issues of morality, social justice, and religion. Considering and rejecting the idea that art reveals and reinvents through beauty, Tolstoy perceives the question of the nature of art to be a religious one. Ultimately, he concludes, art must be a force for good, for the progress and improvement of mankind. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

I'm surprised that nobody (so far) has commented on the physical aspects of this book. Because the original is so old - written in 1899 after sixteen years of thought-it is now a rare book. This then, is printed using a patented Print on Demand technology. It is printed using a robot that turns and photographs each page. Since the book has been re-typeset, page numbers change and there is no index or table of contents. Also, there are a number of typos. However, none of this really matters as far as the actual content of the thought is concerned and the typos are not too distracting. "What Is Art" is an interesting read with many aspects applicable to today. For example, in discussing the definition of "beauty", Tolstoy observes, "As is always the case, the more cloudy and confused the

conception conveyed by a word, with the more aplomb and self-assurance do people use that word, pretending what is understood by it is so simple and clear that it is not worth while even to discuss what it actually means." Along with gems of insights, Tolstoy betrays his own prejudices as he is against nudity ("female nakedness"), even referring to a ballet as a "lewd performance". He dislikes Wagner, all of Beethoven's later works and the whole Impressionist movement - which, of course, was new back then. However, he is also against realism, "When we appraise a work according to its realism, we only show that we are talking, not of a work of art, but of its counterfeit". He also dislikes art schools- but not art education in public schools-, critics, art about art, and the idea of grants to artists. He believed that artists should earn their living in the real world, so as not to lose a connection to regular life. For this, he conveniently overlooks the fact that his inheritance of vast tracts of land worked by peasants enabled him to pursue his own career. He has great hopes for the role of art creating brotherhood among man. "Art should cause violence to be set aside". Tolstoy's main point is that art is real art if the artist was sincere in his feelings about the subject and that viewers were then "infected" with the feeling. "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 some one else's- as if what it expresses were just what he had been longing to express". This brings us to deeper thinking about just what it is that we are trying to convey in works of art. For any artist who likes to think about conveying feeling, I would also recommend a more modern outlook on this subject- Creative Authenticity by Ian Roberts- 16 Principles to Clarify and Deepen your Artistic Vision

Unlike many works of aesthetics which tend to be overly abstract and dense, using technical terms from philosophy and a layering of sophisticated concepts, What is Art by Leo Tolstoy is as clear as clear can be, using language and ideas anybody can understand. Tolstoy is passionate about art and art's place within human experience. For many years, he tells us, he has been observing art and reading about art. And what he sees and reads is not pretty. For instance, he goes to a rehearsal of opera: "All is stopped, and the director, turning to the orchestra, attacks the French horn, scolding him in the rudest of terms, as cabmen abuse each other, for taking the wrong note." Seen through Tolstoy's eyes, the entire production is a ridiculous, grotesque, overblown extravagance. We can imagine Tolstoy shaking his head when he observes, "It would be difficult to find a more repulsive sight." Tolstoy goes on to give us a detailed sampling of what philosophers and aestheticians have written about art and beauty throughout history, particularly since the eighteenth century, when aesthetics became a subject unto itself. The theories range from art being an

expression of divine truth to art being a titillation of the senses of seeing, hearing, feeling and even tasting and smelling. Tolstoy notes toward the end of his study, "Therefore, however strange it may seem to say so, in spite of the mountains of books written about art, no exact definition of art has been constructed. And the reason of this is that the conception of art has been based on the conception of beauty." Further on in his work, Tolstoy gives us an example of a young art gallery-goer being baffled at the painting of the various modern schools of art, impressionism, post-impressionism and the like. Tolstoy empathizes with the gallery-goer and knows most other ordinary people share this same reaction, ". . . the majority of people who are in sympathy with me, do not understand the productions of the new art, simply because there is nothing in it to understand, and because it is bad art . . ." Why is this the case in the modern world? Tolstoy lays the blame on the artistic and spiritual fragmentation of a society divided by class, "As soon as ever the art of the upper classes separated itself from universal art, a conviction arose that art may be art and yet be incomprehensible to the masses." Tolstoy sees the modern institutionalization of art producing works that are degrading, meaningless and fake. He writes: "Becoming ever poorer and poorer in subject-matter, and more and more unintelligible in form, the art of the upper classes, in its latest productions, has even lost all the characteristics of art, and has been replaced by imitations of art." To compound the problem, Tolstoy tells us schools teaching art take mankind away from what is true in art, "To produce such counterfeits, definite rules or recipes exist in each branch of art." We come to see, with Tolstoy as our guide, how aspiring artists are given these counterfeits as models to follow and imitate; things have gone so far that creating art is reduced to 'acquiring the knack'. Anybody who is familiar with the way in which writing is taught in today's colleges and universities will see how exactly right Tolstoy is on this point, as students are given a collection of essays written by modern writers in which to model their own writing. The book continues with Tolstoy providing more examples of false, muddled, insincere, bad art. His description of an opera by Richard Wagner is laugh out loud funny. We read: "This gnome, still opening his mouth in the same strange way, long continued to sing or shout." We are given the impression Tolstoy hated going to the theater to see an opera or ballet. He predicts art forms like opera or ballet could never and will never be appreciated and enjoyed by the common person. Actually, on this point, he was off by a mile. Turns out, for those who are at all inclined toward art, the average person today can't get enough of productions like the Nutcracker. Taking about being off by a mile, Tolstoy judges Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as bad art since it cannot be viewed as religious art nor does it unite people in one feeling; rather, the fifth symphony is, "long, confused, artificial". Goodness! Most everyday Joe work-a-day type people who are concert-goers would be thrilled if Beethoven's fifth was on the

program. What else is bad art? He writes: "In painting we must similarly place in the class of bad art all the Church, patriotic, and exclusive pictures . . . "What then does Tolstoy regard as good art? In a word, art that is clear, sincere, and individual (as opposed to copying other art) as well as creating religious feelings and engendering the brotherhood of man. As examples, Tolstoy cites Dickens, Hugo, Dostoevsky and the painter Millet. You might not agree with Tolstoy on every point, but that is no reason to pass over a careful study of his views (after all, he is one of the world's great writers) on the question, 'What is art?'.

In this piece Tolstoy asks the hard questions about art by going back to basics: What is art? What is beauty? What is truth? His education and, more importantly, his experience and thought on the subject, force us to realize that we don't have any easy answers. And these are definitely questions that are not satisfied by easy answers. They are also questions that are more important than the answers themselves. These questions take us beyond the answers by forcing us to be sincere with ourselves. Sentas and solas aren't enough. For his part, Tolstoy makes it clear that this is a subject where he knows the thought of the important thinkers on art (all of them, apparently, of any significance), knows the history of the philosophy of art itself, and knows how to think (which he urges us to do). He also makes it clear that the question of what is art is, for him (and should be for us), more than an intellectual exercise. So if we want to be educated about art we have to let go of our non-ideas, open our minds to the thoughts of others, and admit to ourselves that we probably don't know much about art— and may not know much more about it even after reading Tolstoy's thoughts on art. But at least we'll know that much, and that's a pretty good place to start. We can all draw our own conclusions about what art is and what it means to us, as well as to Tolstoy. I don't want to be the one that tries to sum up the Count's thinking on the subject, but I don't think he would argue too much if I suggest that Keats has summed it up pretty well in his Ode on a Grecian Urn: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, " That is all that Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

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