

what is art leo tolstoy

what is art leo tolstoy is a profound question that invites exploration into the Russian author's philosophical reflections on aesthetics and the purpose of art. Leo Tolstoy, best known for his literary masterpieces such as "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina," also made significant contributions to the philosophy of art. His essay "What is Art?" written in 1897, critiques traditional art and offers a distinctive definition centered on moral and spiritual communication. Understanding Tolstoy's perspective sheds light on broader debates about the function of art, its social role, and how it connects human experience. This article delves into Tolstoy's philosophy, the key elements of his theory, his critique of established art forms, and the lasting impact of his ideas on aesthetics and cultural discourse.

- Leo Tolstoy's Background and Context
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Leo Tolstoy's Background and Context

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) was a Russian novelist, philosopher, and social reformer whose works profoundly influenced literature and thought. Though primarily known for his epic novels, Tolstoy's later years were marked by a turn toward religious and philosophical inquiry. His essay "What is Art?" was written during this period and reflects his quest to understand art's true essence beyond aesthetic pleasure or elitist appreciation. Tolstoy's context—Russia's social upheavals, his spiritual awakening, and moral concerns—deeply shaped his critique of art and culture.

Historical and Cultural Background

During the late 19th century, Russia experienced significant social change, intellectual ferment, and artistic innovation. Tolstoy's writings emerged against a backdrop of debates about the role of art in society, nationalism, and the rising influence of Western European culture. The dominant art forms were often associated with aristocratic tastes and disconnected from the common people, a point Tolstoy would later emphasize in his criticism.

Tolstoy's Spiritual and Moral Development

In Tolstoy's later life, he underwent a profound spiritual crisis that led him to reject materialism and embrace a Christian anarchist worldview. This transformation influenced his views on art, which he believed should reflect universal, moral truths and foster genuine human connection rather than mere aesthetic enjoyment or commercial success.

The Central Thesis of "What is Art?"

Tolstoy's essay "What is Art?" presents a central thesis that art should be understood primarily as a means of communication that unites people through shared feelings and spiritual experiences. He argues that true art is sincere, accessible, and conveys clear moral messages, distinguishing it from what he considers pseudo-art or decadent art forms.

Definition of Art According to Tolstoy

Tolstoy defines art as "a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them." This definition emphasizes the transmission of authentic emotions from the artist to the audience as the core of art's value.

Art as Universal Communication

For Tolstoy, the effectiveness of art depends on its ability to transcend cultural, social, and linguistic barriers. Art must communicate feelings that are universally understandable, fostering empathy and a sense of unity among diverse audiences. In this way, art becomes a powerful social and spiritual force rather than a tool for individual prestige or mere entertainment.

Key Concepts in Tolstoy's Art Philosophy

Tolstoy's philosophy of art revolves around several key concepts that differentiate authentic art from false art. These concepts clarify his criteria for evaluating artistic works and explain his skepticism toward contemporary aesthetics.

Sincerity and Authenticity

One of Tolstoy's central criteria for art is sincerity. He insists that true art must arise from genuine feelings experienced by the artist. Without this authenticity, art fails to inspire or communicate effectively. Sincere art evokes a shared emotional response, fostering a direct connection between creator and observer.

Accessibility and Inclusivity

Tolstoy criticizes art that is exclusive, esoteric, or overly intellectualized. He believes that art should be accessible to all people regardless of education, class, or background. Art that alienates the majority is deemed morally and socially deficient because it fails to fulfill its communicative purpose.

The Didactic and Moral Purpose of Art

According to Tolstoy, art should serve a moral function by promoting values such as truth, compassion, and spiritual growth. Art divorced from ethical content or social relevance risks becoming empty or corrupt. He argues that the highest art inspires improvement in human character and society.

Tolstoy's Critique of Established Art

Tolstoy's essay offers a rigorous critique of traditional art institutions, canonical works, and dominant artistic trends of his time. He challenges the prevailing notions of beauty, artistic skill, and cultural elitism.

Rejection of Aestheticism and Formalism

Tolstoy rejects art that prioritizes beauty, technique, or originality for their own sake. He views such art as superficial and disconnected from the deeper purpose of communicating genuine human experience. Formalist approaches that emphasize style over substance are dismissed as harmful distractions.

Criticism of Religious and Classical Art

Despite the spiritual dimension in much classical and religious art, Tolstoy finds many examples lacking true communicative power or moral clarity. He argues that much of what is traditionally considered great art is inaccessible to ordinary people and often serves elitist or commercial interests.

Condemnation of Modern Art Movements

Tolstoy is skeptical of avant-garde and experimental art forms emerging in the late 19th century, which he sees as obscure, self-indulgent, or deliberately provocative. He warns that such art alienates audiences and undermines art's social role.

The Moral and Social Function of Art

Tolstoy's understanding of art is inseparable from its ethical and social dimensions. For him, art is a tool for human solidarity and moral awakening rather than mere decoration or amusement.

Art as a Unifying Force

By transmitting shared feelings, art creates bonds between individuals and communities. Tolstoy emphasizes that art should bridge social divides and promote understanding across different groups, fostering peace and cooperation.

Art's Role in Spiritual Development

Tolstoy sees art as a vehicle for spiritual enlightenment, helping individuals recognize universal truths and live more virtuous lives. Art that elevates the human spirit aligns with his Christian ethical framework.

Practical Implications for Artists and Audiences

Artists, according to Tolstoy, bear a responsibility to produce sincere and morally uplifting work. Audiences, in turn, should seek art that enriches their emotional and spiritual lives rather than indulging in superficial or sensational content.

- Art must be sincere and authentic.
- Art should be accessible and inclusive.
- The moral purpose of art is paramount.
- Art functions to unify humanity.
- True art supports spiritual growth.

Legacy and Influence of Tolstoy's Art Theory

Tolstoy's reflections on art have had a lasting impact on both aesthetic theory and cultural criticism. His emphasis on morality, sincerity, and accessibility inspired debates that continue to shape contemporary understandings of art's role in society.

Influence on 20th-Century Aesthetics

Many later thinkers and artists drew on Tolstoy's critique of elitism and formalism to advocate for art that engages with social issues and human values. His ideas anticipated movements that emphasized art's social responsibility and ethical dimensions.

Criticism and Controversy

Despite its influence, Tolstoy's strict moral criteria have been challenged for limiting artistic freedom and undervaluing aesthetic complexity. Critics argue that his dismissal of beauty and technical mastery overlooks important facets of artistic experience.

Continued Relevance in Cultural Discourse

Today, Tolstoy's essay remains a foundational text for discussions about what art should be and whom it should serve. His insistence on art's communicative and ethical purpose invites ongoing reflection on the transformative power of creative expression.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Leo Tolstoy's definition of art?

Leo Tolstoy defined art as a means of communication that unites people by transmitting feelings from the artist to the audience, emphasizing sincerity and emotional connection.

How did Tolstoy view the purpose of art?

Tolstoy believed the purpose of art was to express genuine feelings and to promote moral and spiritual values, rather than just to provide aesthetic pleasure.

What are the key characteristics of art according to Tolstoy?

According to Tolstoy, art must be sincere, accessible to all, and capable of evoking shared feelings that contribute to human unity.

How does Tolstoy differentiate true art from false art?

Tolstoy distinguished true art as works that honestly express the artist's emotions and connect with others, while false art is insincere, elitist, or fails to communicate genuine feeling.

What is the significance of 'infectiousness' in Tolstoy's theory of art?

In Tolstoy's theory, 'infectiousness' refers to the ability of art to transmit the artist's feelings to the audience effectively, creating a shared emotional experience.

Did Tolstoy believe all forms of art were equal?

No, Tolstoy believed that some forms of art were superior because they were more sincere, accessible, and morally uplifting, while others were superficial or elitist.

How did Tolstoy's views on art influence his literary work?

Tolstoy's emphasis on sincerity and moral purpose influenced his novels and essays, which often explored ethical and spiritual themes with deep emotional honesty.

What role does morality play in Tolstoy's concept of art?

Morality is central to Tolstoy's concept of art; he argued that true art must promote ethical values and contribute to the betterment of humanity.

How is Tolstoy's view of art different from traditional aesthetic theories?

Unlike traditional aesthetic theories that focus on beauty and form, Tolstoy prioritized the emotional and moral impact of art, valuing its ability to unite people through shared feelings.

Additional Resources

1. *What is Art?* by Leo Tolstoy

This seminal work by Leo Tolstoy explores his philosophy of art and aesthetics. Tolstoy argues that true art must communicate sincere feelings to the audience and serve a moral purpose. He critiques the art establishment of his time, emphasizing accessibility and emotional honesty over technical skill or elite approval.

2. *The Philosophy of Art* by Leo Tolstoy

In this collection of essays, Tolstoy delves deeper into his ideas about the nature and purpose of art. He discusses how art influences society and the importance of art in fostering spiritual and ethical growth. The book also examines various art forms and the role of the artist in society.

3. *Tolstoy on Art and Morality*

This book compiles Tolstoy's thoughts on the relationship between art and ethics. It highlights his belief that art should promote moral values and contribute to the betterment of humanity. The text provides insights into Tolstoy's critiques of contemporary art and his vision for a more truthful and socially responsible artistic expression.

4. *The Art of Leo Tolstoy: A Critical Study*

This critical study analyzes Tolstoy's artistic philosophy in the context of his broader literary works. It explores how his ideas about art influenced his novels and essays, and how his moral outlook shaped his aesthetic judgments. The book provides a comprehensive overview of Tolstoy's contributions to art theory.

5. *Leo Tolstoy's Aesthetic Theory*

Focusing specifically on Tolstoy's aesthetic principles, this book outlines his views on beauty, creativity, and the artist's role. It examines his rejection of formalism and his emphasis on emotional communication. The work also situates Tolstoy within the larger tradition of aesthetic philosophy.

6. *Art, Religion, and Morality in Tolstoy's Thought*

This title explores the intersections of Tolstoy's religious beliefs and his theories on art and morality. It discusses how his Christian ethics influenced his conception of art as a vehicle for spiritual truth and

moral improvement. The book provides a nuanced understanding of the ethical dimensions of Tolstoy's art philosophy.

7. *Leo Tolstoy: The Artist and the Prophet*

This biography focuses on Tolstoy's dual identity as a literary artist and a moral prophet. It highlights how his artistic creations were deeply intertwined with his philosophical and ethical ideals. The book traces the development of his thoughts on art throughout his life and career.

8. *Tolstoy's Critique of Modern Art*

This work examines Tolstoy's critical stance towards the art movements and trends of his time. It outlines his arguments against art that is elitist, obscure, or disconnected from genuine human experience. The book also discusses Tolstoy's call for a more sincere and accessible form of artistic expression.

9. *The Legacy of Tolstoy's Art Theory*

This book investigates the lasting impact of Tolstoy's ideas on art and aesthetics in the 20th and 21st centuries. It explores how his emphasis on moral sincerity and emotional communication has influenced various artists and thinkers. The text also considers contemporary debates around the purpose and value of art through a Tolstoyan lens.

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