

When and for whom do works of visual art matter in our time? Where do they matter, and why?

I never thought of those questions when I was in school because I was surrounded by people for whom works of visual art—defined in those days as “painting and sculpture”—mattered and so of course they mattered for me. That the people around me for whom art mattered were the circle of my teachers and fellow students I took for granted without noticing that we were maintaining a solipsistic and escapist club; and that art did not matter for people outside this circle I also took for granted—outsiders were all philistines like my relatives and neighbors who lived in the suburbs stretched from here to forever.

The question of why art matters began to come to mind after I had been out of school about a year because the college group for whom art mattered was gone. I had a job working among people for whom art did not matter; and I noticed that art—my kind (our kind)—did not matter in any way that I could see to my neighbors, to the people on the street or standing in line at the grocery or the movies—nor did it matter to the people in the movies, neither the actors nor the characters they played. Because art mattered to no one around me the question about why art mattered to me and not to all those other people began to bother me a lot. After all, it had been only three or four years before that I had determined to give my life to art; and now everywhere I looked I met people who thought my goal was not worth a life—was not worth anything at all.

I still knew a few people for whom I thought art continued to matter: my wife and a couple of friends I sometimes saw from college. I think art mattered for my wife because she had been brought up in a European-background family that had a dead great-uncle who had been a sculptor in the old country, and a third cousin (also dead) in this country who had been both sculptor and painter. And as for the rest of us, art mattered for me and my friends because we had to hold each other up.

One of those friends had always awed me with his intellect, his experience of life and his Brooklyn-British accent. He was learned in philosophy; and I used to visit him every few months to demand—in the midst of a conversation about painting or wine, literature or existentialism—“Why does art matter?” I never heard if he answered because my ears were always ringing from the desperation of my question.

So, here we are almost 40 years later. And as for why art matters to me now, well, “How do I love thee...let me tell the ways:”

Art matters to me for its color, for its beauty.

Art matters to me for its whisper of another land.

Art matters to me because in despair for the life we’ve got, it offers a hope—illusory illusion, fanciful fiction—for a better one... and even out of horror art catches exaltation.

Art matters to me for its triumph over and transcendence of this world.

Art matters to me because it's made of the dust of paradise lost and paradise to come, of the ashes of love forgotten and the seeds of love to come.

Art matters to me because it's the only place we can cry in public, the only place we can show our crotches and not go to jail.

Art matters to me because through it we can loose our primal scream at the horror of the world.

Art matters to me because it's the only way we can die today but live tomorrow.

Art matters to me for its gentleness and peace.

Art matters to me for its eternity.

Art matters, then, to me for so many of the reasons that it has mattered to so many men and women for so long.

Yet, wherever I go, wherever I look, I seem not to see people today for whom art matters for those reasons that it has mattered for so many for so long. I see people for whom art matters for fashion—fashions of dress, fashions of acquisition, fashions of ideas, fashions of status—and then, because I am no stronger now in my convictions than when I was 22, I begin to doubt that art matters, and when I doubt art matters I doubt the goal to which I gave my life now too long ago ever to turn back, and when I doubt that goal I doubt my life itself, and when I doubt my life I lose my soul.

And when I feel my soul failing, I feel so wrenching a pain that I know my soul is real (despite the anatomist's never seeing a single soul in any of 10,000 cadavers), and because I know my soul is real, I know that to which I gave it so long ago must be also real... real enough that when my soul on its journey through life lets go that staff of art, my soul dies. And so the pain which sweeps my soul when I deny art is the confirmation that art matters, just as the pleasure which sweeps my soul when I accept art confirms in me the knowledge that art is.

That works of art do not matter for many people cannot matter much to me, because in truth most of people's concerns don't matter much to me. That works of art do matter for them only on museum or gallery or collector's walls of fashion cannot concern me very much because for me works of art matter only in the studio, the bedroom, the dining room, the living room, drifting in the light of clouds of every time of day and season, glowing in muddy gutters or shining in dusty grass like pearls fallen from the necklace that was broken in eternity.

Where do works of art matter? They matter for me in the heart. That they do not so matter for most other people I used to think meant those other people had no hearts. Now I know better. It

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is only that their hearts are distracted to other subjects, mislaid or else satisfied in fact with the satisfactions of this world... this world which is I think nearly never enough for us artists.

And so why does art matter for artists? Art matters because the world cannot satisfy us.

We demand our reward in heaven, but we insist it be given us now, in the sensuous, the actual, the immediate physical presence of the object of art with all its echoes of the eternity beyond, echoes which our senses tell us and our intellect knows will last for not so very long, but which our hearts hope always will last forever.