

Pleasures of art

The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art by Anjan Chatterjee, Oxford University Press, 2013.
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The late English artist Lucian Freud, the grandson of Sigmund Freud, is often considered one of the most important artists of the 20th century. His art consists of uncompromising, mostly naked indoor portraits of men and women in the company of the occasional animal. He demanded absolute compliance from his sitters, who would spend months in often painfully contorted poses in his studio while he would try to capture them on canvas through intense extended cycles of painting, nerves, doubts, and continuous corrections. To the viewer, even those who are willing to pay enormous sums of money for his paintings, Freud's masterpieces are not beautiful in any conventional sense or seemingly conducive to pleasure. Yet, in a new book, the neurologist Anjan Chatterjee of the University of Pennsylvania claims that pleasure is in fact at the heart of 'how we evolved to desire beauty and enjoy art', an intriguing declaration that demands further scrutiny.

The effect of visual art on a person is challenging to analyze because it generally does not evoke the same level of emotional engagement, as would a few bars of music. To approach this problem Chatterjee provides his reader with an accessible survey of neuroscience and aesthetic studies. He begins by parceling the nature of visual art into its essential ingredients (beauty and pleasure) and then puts them back together. Although the book touches on a vast range of topics, from the existence of objective beauty and pleasure circuits, to the array of historical and contemporary art styles and their social implications, it centers on one question: is art an instinct or merely an evolutionary by-product?

Central to Chatterjee's argument is the scientific finding that pleasure is more than a specific reaction to pleasurable sensations; it also acts to regulate decisions and interactions, and can even result from painful experiences. He proposes that the science of pleasure could explain why art has such an enormous hold on our lives.

Evolutionary speaking, all animals, including humans, have to survive and procreate, and pleasure has been argued to be the common currency that makes this happen [1]. Pleasure can be thought of as evolution's boldest trick for sustaining and nourishing interest in the things most important to survival [2]. Seen in this light, food and sex are fundamental pleasures. In addition, it has been proposed that the social pleasures should be considered part of the basic pleasure category because of the strong

need of our species to interact, although this is not something Chatterjee explores in any great detail.

Interestingly, evidence suggests that the same pleasure system that processes the fundamental pleasures also processes the higher pleasures, such as money, music, and visual art. The spatial distribution of this network, as measured with neuroimaging, is remarkably robust across experiments and laboratories. There is also a large overlap between pleasure and pain networks [3], suggestive perhaps of the lure of certain sexual practices and Freud's unsettling nudes; pointing perhaps in part to the decisive role of social context in how pleasure, from sex and food to money and art, is modulated.

Tackling the subject of art in the brain, and especially that of the visual arts is a complex and slippery process with perhaps more twists and turns than can comfortably fit in one short trade book. Nevertheless, Chatterjee finds a way to weave in many fascinating facts while making his way to a final conclusion on the visual arts. It would have helped his argument if he had included other art forms, such as music, which is a great research tool for studying emotions and starting to make the perhaps most powerful contribution to our understanding of pleasure in the arts [4].

Overall, Chatterjee makes a good case for the role of pleasure in art, although focusing more on the importance of the social pleasures in modulating other pleasures would have strengthened this argument. Freud's background, for an example, provides good illustration of social modulation. He lived by Flaubert's dictum 'The more words there are on a gallery wall next to a picture, the worse the picture'. His inner circle of friends and sitters were bound by his wish for Omertà-like silence and secrecy. As a result, little was known about his personal life except for his high-low life frequenting royalty and posh girlfriends as well as bookies and gangsters. Only posthumously has a fuller picture emerged of a complex, inveterate womanizer who found birth control 'squalid', and may well have fathered over twice the number of his 14 acknowledged children. In a recent biography, we learn that Freud confided to a close friend that he needed sex to stay alive, needing to dominate women in certain sexual ways, perhaps related to his difficult relationship with his mother [5]. Although these biographical facts may at first glance seem irrelevant to his art, it is difficult not to start to feel uneasy about his female nudes and to reinterpret his other paintings, overall reducing one's viewing pleasure. Contextualizing paintings is what separates aesthetics from artwork. In addition, art in particular is part and parcel of our complex social networks.

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Such social insights might also have helped make an even more powerful argument of Chatterjee's final thought: 'When free, we relax into art. We are better off for it'. His conclusion draws from studies on the Bengalese finch, a domesticated breed of Japanese white-rumped munia, which Chatterjee claims in breeding this bird '...genetic control over brain function got looser, [and] instinctual constraints on the bird's song got less specific' (p.174). This may be true, but finches are also extremely social animals and perhaps their songs are driven more by their social networks than genetic structure.

We are social creatures and looking into our inherent social habits might provide some insight into the processes

that sent our ancestors into deep subterranean caves to produce magnificent cave paintings, as well as the music and dancing that are other powerful but less permanent expressions of our artful minds.

References

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