

Perspectives on the value  
of art and culture



**Alain de Botton**

—  
Bestselling philosopher and author  
of *Art as Therapy* talks about how  
art could do more for us

You've restored philosophy to a lay audience and helped your readers to think for themselves. Can all the arts encourage us to think for ourselves?

The purpose of art isn't always necessarily to help people to think for themselves. It might be to console or to enliven, to reopen eyes or rebalance character. But the underlying point is that the arts should be able to do something – however minor or diffuse – for you. And this is the point so often missed in our culture, which still clings mistakenly to an 'art for art's sake' mantra – and refuses to accord to art the power it so patently possesses to guide and inform our lives.

There's a great deal of interest in 'bibliotherapy' – not so much self-help books as what literature does generally for the individual. What is the magic of reading and writing?

We read because what's truly important is so rarely spoken about: perhaps it sounds too shameful or too weak, too cynical or too inflammatory. Most of us become big readers in adolescence, when the gap between what we feel and what we hear expressed around us reaches its pitch. Books become like ideal friends, confirming what we know already and opening up new areas of thought we had only barely intuited.





We increasingly use ‘excellence’ as a standard in public and private services, including the provision of art and culture. How would you define excellent art? How can ‘excellence’ accommodate what is new and disruptive?

The problem with across-the-board definitions of excellence is that they fail to take into account the peculiar quirks of our relationship with art. We might be deeply touched by a so-called ‘minor’ work and entirely indifferent about a ‘masterpiece’. Some disruptive art is excellent for us; other kinds may make us yawn. The answers are going to be fascinatingly subjective. That shouldn’t mean we give up on the attempt to create a canon, it’s just that every one of us will have to build up their own canon to take into account their own psychological needs and deficiencies. Most of what makes a book ‘good’ is that we’re reading it at the right time for us.

Raymond Williams observed that our modern notion of art was driven by romanticism and was a reaction to the industrial revolution. In this largely post-industrial age, do you think that our idea of the artist should change?

The main problem with our notion of the artist is that it has been cleverly stripped of all real impact on society. The artist is a luxury that capitalist society affords itself to distract people from the issues. What we need is not a society with more artists in it; we need a society informed – in streets, daily conversation, the media – by the values to be found in the best works of art.





**‘It would be great if TV producers found a way of making very popular programmes that at the same time were marked by the values found in, say, Tolstoy’**

How do you think we could use art more publicly?

Is the meditative power of art lost in the melee of the street?

The most public form of art is the mass media. Therefore, what we need is extreme care about what the mass media reflects back at us. It would be great if TV producers found a way of making very popular programmes that at the same time were marked by the values found in, say, Tolstoy. We don't need more BBC Four; we need BBC One and The Sun to talk to the nation in different ways. That would be public art worth fighting for.

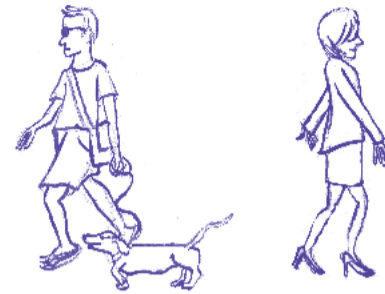
You have written about culture and its importance to individual identity. Do you think that a strong idea of shared culture is equally important to the development of a community's identity?

Absolutely, national identity has a huge influence on what bits of ourselves we feel able to develop and admit to in public. Nationalism has a terrible name, but really, the business of settling on what national identity should be is a proper task for artists – and in a sense, the great artists have always known it.

How valuable are museums to our society's future?

How should we use the lessons of the past?

Museum curators have a big interest in getting us to see 'originals' of works that we'd often enjoy almost as much from the comfort of a computer screen. Of course it's great to have these big 'libraries' filled with art and other works, but it's even more important that the values in these works live in the day-to-day world. A culture shouldn't be judged on the basis just of how many museums it has; the real test is how close day-to-day life is to the ideals of great art.



What role do you see libraries playing in our lives?

There is an intense need for community centres – places that people can have pride in, and go and meet others and feel a part of. Churches used to be these places; then libraries. Many people now rely less on libraries strictly for books (though this goes on for many of course), but that still leaves an enormous need for community centres and that should be the galvanising idea in my view.

You have articulated the relevance of art for us. The value of such interpretation is often overlooked. How can we teach better interpretation?

The normal paths are books, TV programmes, great websites... That should cover it!

What is the most persuasive argument for promoting the arts in schools?

I wouldn't promote 'the arts'. I would promote wisdom and self-understanding, and then introduce the arts as the vehicle for this. In other words, I'd teach classes in love rather than a class in Shakespeare and Thomas Hardy (it comes to the same thing, for these two great artists knew a lot about love – but the title on the tin changes and can bring new energy to the teaching).



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**‘To come across something, anything – perhaps a text or some music, a film or a piece of architecture – to help put the suffering in context and bring a measure of relief to our troubled self’**

Every day, people have to make difficult decisions about funding the arts versus funding other public services. What would you ask them to remember?

The most important thing is for the arts to convince people of their value not through guilt or special pleading, but for the most sincere and effective reason: because some of the arts truly make a difference to our lives.

If you had to pick one work of art that would persuade people of the power of the arts to change lives, what would it be?

I would start with that hunger, almost a craving, that one might feel after a loved one has died to come across something, anything – perhaps a text or some music, a film or a piece of architecture – to help put the suffering in context and bring a measure of relief to our troubled self. It’s that kind of need that make the arts not just an entertainment, but part of the health service.

What is your idea of happiness?

Happiness doesn’t interest me; what matters is a project that you feel is properly worthwhile. Then all the pain is always worth it.



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