

The Social Functions of Art

In a sense, all works of art perform a social function, since they are created for an audience.

These social intentions and the actual character of response which works of art evoke from various publics. That is, art performs a social function when;

- 1) It influences the collective behavior of people;
- 2) It is created to be seen or used primarily in public situations; and
- 3) It expresses or describes collective aspects of existence as opposed to individual and personal kinds of experience.

In all three cases, the individual responds to art with the awareness that he is a member of a group, a group which is in some way characterized or urged to act by the works of art he is witnessing.

Many works of art are deliberately designed to influence group thinking. Artists may try to make us laugh at the same phenomena; to accept economic, religious, or social ideologies; to identify with a class or ethnic interest; or to see our social situation in ways which had not previously been apparent.

The visual arts, like the other arts can function as languages of praise and celebration, anger and protest, satire and ridicule. In other words, art can influence the attitudes of people in groups, affecting the way they think or feel and, ultimately, the way they act.

Advertising art is a common illustration: its purpose is to influence collective purchasing behavior.

During a war, through posters, governments attempt to arouse hatred of the enemy, or to stimulate enlistments, or to increase

production levels. In peacetime, art is used to affect almost every conceivable kind of group goal, attitude, or desire.

Some persons, including artists, regard art which influences social behavior as impure, as “mere” propaganda, as applied sociology, as debased art. And

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given certain prior assumptions about the “appropriate” functions of art, they are right. Art has always influenced collective behavior.

Some artists are interested in the freedom to solve the special problems of style or technique which fascinate them. Others seek the freedom to use style and technique to express their views about society and political processes. They speak of “Artistic Responsibility.” For them, art does not exist merely to entertain and gratify the senses; it must edify (which means, to provide instruction and improvement, especially in morality).

It must play a role in the improvement of our collective existence. Art must participate through visual education and persuasion in the development of popular attitudes which can lead eventually to a better society.

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