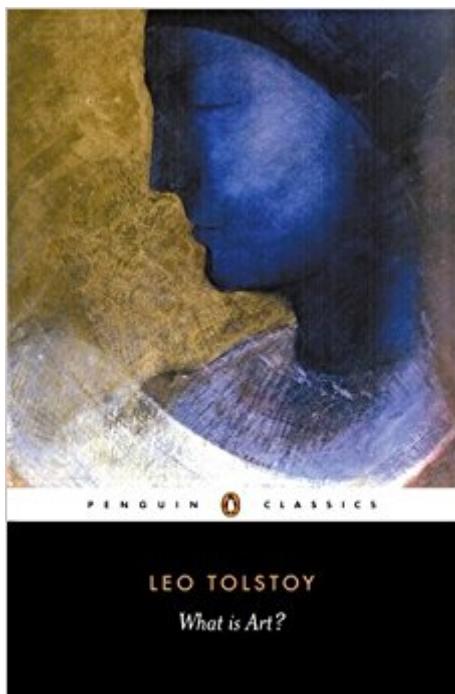


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What Is Art? (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

This profound analysis of the nature of art is the culmination of a series of essays and polemics on issues of morality, social justice, and religion. Considering and rejecting the idea that art reveals and reinvents through beauty, Tolstoy perceives the question of the nature of art to be a religious one. Ultimately, he concludes, art must be a force for good, for the progress and improvement of mankind. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A major and provocative work of criticism by the author of *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*.

--This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Text: English (translation) Original Language: Russian

I'm surprised that nobody (so far) has commented on the physical aspects of this book, Because the original is so old - written in 1899 after sixteen years of thought-it is now a rare book This then, is printed using a patented Print on Demand technology. It is printed using a robot that turns and

photographs each page. Since the book has been re-typeset, page numbers change and there is no index or table of contents. Also, there are a number of typos. However, none of this really matters as far as the actual content of the thought is concerned and the typos are not too distracting. "What Is Art" is an interesting read with many aspects applicable to today. For example, in discussing the definition of "beauty", Tolstoy observes, "As is always the case, the more cloudy and confused the conception conveyed by a word, with the more aplomb and self-assurance do people use that word, pretending what is understood by it is so simple and clear that it is not worth while even to discuss what it actually means." Along with gems of insights, Tolstoy betrays his own prejudices as he is against nudity ("female nakedness"), even referring to a ballet as a "lewd performance". He dislikes Wagner, all of Beethoven's later works and the whole Impressionist movement - which, of course, was new back then. However, he is also against realism, "When we appraise a work according to its realism, we only show that we are talking, not of a work of art, but of its counterfeit". He also dislikes art schools- but not art education in public schools-, critics, art about art, and the idea of grants to artists. He believed that artists should earn their living in the real world, so as not to lose a connection to regular life. For this, he conveniently overlooks the fact that his inheritance of vast tracts of land worked by peasants enabled him to pursue his own career. He has great hopes for the role of art creating brotherhood among man. "Art should cause violence to be set aside". Tolstoy's main point is that art is real art if the artist was sincere in his feelings about the subject and that viewers were then "infected" with the feeling. "The chief peculiarity of this feeling is that the receiver of a true artistic impression is so united to the artist that he feels as if the work were his own and not some one else's- as if what it expresses were just what he had been longing to express". This brings us to deeper thinking about just what it is that we are trying to convey in works of art. For any artist who likes to think about conveying feeling, I would also recommend a more modern outlook on this subject- Creative Authenticity by Ian Roberts- 16 Principles to Clarify and Deepen your Artistic Vision

I am not a philosophical person by nature- something about epistemology, semiotics, ontology blah blah.... all this make me want to blow my brains out. Nevertheless, I wanted to know more about what is this thing we call art - sure as hell a genuine artist has written something on it - so this is what I picked up. The writing is clear and crisp: most of the time you can exactly make out what he is saying. This sounds basic but when you are trying to confer multi-layered emotional/philosophical/informational content it is extremely difficult. Every big time philosopher has wholes and areas of confusion, even in their major works - while this happens in What is Art?, a

couple times, you never feel as though you have lost the thread. This is, I assume, because the translators and Tolstoy's readability. The text itself is a bit dated, so certain issues develop when you try to place this in modern context (for instance the question of authorship, his long ramblings on God) - but even still it has a lot to show us. Basically: Art is a matter of public interest because the upper class is the audience of it. The upper classes have yoked all of these artisans and artists - causing them to suffer. Art is conveying emotion using predefined stuff for an audience. Good Art is Christian art, not the Church the sentiment. Art has been replaced by counterfeit art, and so people don't even know what art is. This is institutionalized by Art critics, art professionals and art schools. There are three things I don't like about this book: 1. They translated it in such a way that you have to flip to the notes in the back a lot if you want to understand everything. (Aside from the appendix). So for instance he has a whole chapter on French Poetry (all the poetry is in the original French) - so you read a little bit of Tolstoy, flip to the back to read the translation, read a bit of Tolstoy, flip to the back... It's ridiculous - translate the poems. 2. Tolstoy doesn't completely agree with me. And occasionally rants about Christianity and our relation to god. He also makes these embarrassing points that make me blush for him. (For instance, he talks about artists needing to basically be proletarians.... "Lord Tolstoy, could you please explain?") 3. There is, basically, a literature review of Western Aesthetics that is unreadable. Tolstoy, meant for it to be unreadable - but it is awful to read little one paragraph summaries of Kant's philosophy and its relation to aesthetics. It's a decent read - but don't expect Tolstoy to tell you anything you want to hear.

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