

5 NOVEMBER 2016—
—17 APRIL 2017



MUSEUM OF OLD
AND NEW ART

ON THE ORIGIN OF ART

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INTRODUCTION

We've worked hard to open your mind at Mona – to get you to think about art for yourself. You don't need art theory and the cultural elite to tell you what to think about a painting.

Now we're telling you what we think.

We want you to look at art without a cultural filter. Art has a basis in biology. It is possibly adaptive – just as your opposable thumb is adaptive, something that helped you survive and to procreate, and to pass your genes into future generations. Yes, art is also cultural, profoundly so; we're not saying the cultural is not important, simply that it has been made out to be the only way of looking at art, the only explanation for why artists do what they do, why we find it beautiful (or not), and why we care. Why we keep making and looking at this stuff, in all known human societies, now and in the past – even though (biologically speaking) it doesn't actually advance our interests in any obvious way. Usually, human universals – such as pleasure in food and sex, or willingness to care for one's children – are clearly linked to behaviour that is 'good for us', in terms of helping our genes cycle into future generations. What about art? How does it work for the maker and the viewer, in a deep, biological sense? This means looking beyond conscious motivations: 'He made the painting because he had a creative urge' or 'I like looking at pretty pictures'. What is at the heart of that urge, and that pleasure?

This is where our guest curators come in: Brian Boyd, Mark Changizi, Steven Pinker, and Geoffrey Miller. Four bio-cultural scientist-philosophers working at the forefront, the cutting edge – or whatever other spatial metaphor you choose that implies they are asking the biggest and most exciting questions about the origin of art. These questions matter, because they go to the heart of what makes us human. We're cultural beasts, of course we are. But we're flesh and blood, too, and knowing this – really knowing it, not just filing it away somewhere in the back of your mind, along with our uncomfortably close kinship to other animals, and the equally uncomfortable notion that our bodies make decisions that our conscious minds can't really understand – can change the way we live our lives. For the better, we believe.

Maybe that ambition is a little lofty; maybe it lacks modesty. Humour us. If nothing else, you'll get to see some pretty pictures.

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Each curator will create ‘an exhibition within an exhibition’ in separate spaces across the museum, selecting works to support his position.

Ancient and contemporary artworks from multifarious cultural sources will include antiquities, paintings, works on paper, ceramics, textiles, audio visual and contemporary installations, selected from Mona’s collection and elsewhere. Loans are currently being sought from the national Australian and various state galleries as well as public and private collections in the UK and Europe, the USA and Japan; several important new commissions are also planned.

David Walsh has said this exhibition, more than any other at Mona since its opening exhibition, is ‘for him’: a chance to explore ideas of long-standing significance to him. He writes:

Foreigner’s hit ‘I Want To Know What Love Is’ is one of the worst songs I’ve ever heard. It was replaced at the top of the Billboard charts in February 1985, ironically, by another bad one, Madonna’s ‘Like A Virgin’. Foreigner’s title must have been rhetorical, as no conclusion is reached in the lyrics, except that they ‘want you to show’ them.

I’ve wanted to know what art is for some time. I’ve made some progress. For example, I’m pretty sure it isn’t a cultural phenomenon, despite what post-modernist theoreticians might have me believe. And I’m pretty sure it’s universal – both Foreigner and Madonna make art. I did too, when I drew in the sand as a child, or when I tunelessly parodied ‘I Want To Know What Love Is’ in the shower this morning (‘I want to know what art is, I want you to blow me’). There are some people who have insight into what art is, but they aren’t artists. Artists work in a narrow band of creativity. Though they may make great things, they make specific things. They also make them without reference to their motives – they may say things like ‘I want to create beauty’, or, ‘I want to know what love is’, but they don’t say ‘I’m compelled by my biological history to seek mates, and painting pretty pictures helps’, or, perhaps, ‘Creating narrative fictions helped my ancestors to learn to plan and thus those with a propensity for fiction were selected through differential survival rates’. And until very recently no one thought, ‘The tools I use to navigate my physical environment might have been co-opted to enable my exploitation of social environments to achieve the sort of goals that my biology compels me to attempt (survival, reproduction etc.)’.

All that might not be clear, and it isn’t meant to be. I’m setting up a framework for asking interesting questions like ‘Why do we make art?’ and I’m asking these questions of people who aren’t usually engaged in an art setting (evolutionary biologists, social scientists, neurologists).

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I'm not asking art academics—they have been asking themselves and each other for some time, and the answers rarely extend beyond the cultural. Art has a cultural component of course. It is often made and judged by people, and people are cultural. But art is universal, and modalities of art cross cultural boundaries. That's an indicator that the roots of art lie beyond, and possibly before, culture. Art also often engenders emotional responses, and anything that engages emotions has an evolutionary component.

I recently explored the definition of life. I eventually alighted on 'A system that can undergo Darwinian evolution'. That's succinct, and it gives evolution the primacy it deserves. Of course, it has a touch of finality about it. Future discoveries might provide new insights. But science is relentlessly tentative, error-correction is part of the definition of learning. I've learned some new stuff concerning life. I'll get back to that. For now, let me point out that as we sought to understand life, we reached other tentative definitions. One used the characteristics that life exhibits: response to stimuli, growth, reproduction, and some others. The problem was that not all living systems exhibit all of those characteristics (priests don't reproduce, emperor penguins get smaller) and non-living systems are not necessarily excluded (crystals grow, computer viruses reproduce). One of the Wiki definitions of art uses this sort of characteristic definition: ritualistic and symbolic functions, communication, entertainment and others. This decision suffers from the same problems.

A Catholic mass has ritualistic and symbolic functions but few contend that mass is art. And a Foreigner song is definitely art, but is it entertaining?

I contend that defining art suffers from the same problems as defining life because they are similarly scaled problems (vast and heterogenous); but unlike the evolutionary-based definition of life, no overarching principle that encompasses all art has, as yet, emerged. To understand what art is, we first have to understand why it is that we make it.

Earlier I said I've learned some new stuff concerning life. Erwin Schrodinger and Pascual Jordan had a few insights in the 40s that are worth taking note of because they predicted some of the properties of genes. Prediction is a worthwhile test of merit. Jordan noted that things built out of molecules derive their properties by the statistical inputs of those molecules. Water is made from, mostly, H²O molecules, and it behaves in a way that the majority of its components do. Life isn't like that. A tiny fraction of the molecules of a living system generate most of its properties.

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My eye colour is the result of genes (about fifteen have been identified) that were present in the ovum and spermatozoon that combined at the beginning of my history. Jordan called this asymmetric (non-statistical) way that life accrues its properties amplification, and it provides a mechanism by which variation is induced, and that variation is crucial to the evolutionary mechanism that life is predicated on, and defined by.

Is an analogue of amplification a property that art has, that craft, for example, does not? Non-art derives properties statistically, plates might be decorated differently but they derive their characteristics by statistical similarities with other plates. When a plate is art, and few dispute that a Picasso plate is art, the differences from other plates are amplified asymmetrically.

I'm not trying to show that art is this or that thing. And I'm not trying to show that we make art for this or that reason. For the moment I'm just trying to show that art is a complex thing and its characteristics multifarious. Curators, typically, weave a cultural web. But the web of art, like the web of life, has evolution at its genesis. Let's see if those who have insights into evolution can tease out something about the nature of art. If they can, we should see a good show. Because sometimes newcomers to a field, virgins if you will, make it feel shiny and new.

—DAVID WALSH

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GUEST CURATORS

STEVEN PINKER

Canadian-American psychology professor and experimental psychologist, cognitive scientist and linguist, whose influential publications include *The Language Instinct* (1994), *How the Mind Works* (1997) and *The Blank Slate* (2002).

Pinker takes issue with 'lame and flabby' theories for art that confuse questions about its worth and value at a social level, with questions about its function in a Darwinian sense. The proper question to ask is: 'Is art a heritable trait that enhanced the reproductive rate of our ancestors?' The answer, he finds, is that art is a by-product, a kind of side effect of other adaptations, such as the desire to obtain status via 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen) of sumptuous goods, and to identify oneself as a member of the fashionable elite.

Art is also a vehicle for engagement with our evolved aesthetic sense. There are adaptive explanations why certain faces, bodies, patterns and habitats give humans aesthetic pleasure: 'they are cues to understandable, safe, productive, nutritious, or fertile things in the world.' Artists can choose to play with or flout the audience's preference for such sensory stimulus, or to create 'supernormal' doses of it. Art is, in this way, akin to cheesecake: a 'pleasure technology' we have invented for no other reason than our own enjoyment and satisfaction.

BRIAN BOYD

Professor of literature at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and author of books such as *On the Origin of Stories* (2009) and *Why Lyrics Last: Evolution, Cognition, and Shakespeare's Sonnets* (2012).

Boyd argues that to understand the origin of art, you need to look to the 'signaling systems' that all kinds of plants and animals use to convey information to each other. Think of the relationship between flowers and the birds and insects that pollinate them: flowers have adapted to reflect and amplify the preference of their 'audience'. This interplay between audience preference and the artist's desire to satisfy and expand those preferences creates a kind of a feedback loop that propels the trajectory of art history, and that can be seen in the diverse styles and techniques different groups use to express their group identity.

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Underpinning this diversity, however, is the status of art as a form of cognitive play. Play, widespread through the animal kingdom, is a mechanism that evolved to help us practice important life-saving skills in a safe circumstance. Because humans gain most of their advantages via their intelligence, they are inclined towards cognitive play; and in particular, cognitive play with pattern. Humans are natural-born pattern-extractors: reading regularities in the environment is crucial to ensure our survival and prosperity. Art of all kinds uses pattern – on multiple levels, in intersecting, locally relevant ways – to engage the attention of its audience; the audience is rewarded with the opportunity to fine-tune cognitive skills needed to understand the world, and gain mastery over it.

GEOFFREY MILLER

American professor of psychology, and author of *The Mating Mind* (2000) and *Spent: Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior* (2009).

Miller agrees that art is a signaling system – like a bee’s dance, a bird’s song, or a gorilla thumping its chest – but reaches a very different conclusion about the purpose and function of that system. It’s easy to explain the ‘receiver’ end of art, says Miller; we consume it like ‘eye candy’, in the sense that it stimulates our pleasure-responses to certain stimuli, the shapes, colours and patterns for which we have a ‘sensory bias’. But on the ‘sender’ side: why bother? Why invest ‘limited time, energy, and risk in growing ornaments, making sounds, or creating works that receivers might enjoy,’ when such efforts might be better put to more practical ends? The answer, says Miller, lies in Darwin’s explanation of art more than a century ago: that it arose – long before humans – as a mechanism for attracting mates. Art making is one of the many ways animals ‘signal their health, resourcefulness, intelligence, and/or general fitness’ to potential mates, in the same manner as do the splendid (but otherwise useless) feathers on a peacock.

Darwin’s view fell out of favour for much of the twentieth century, but new evidence points to its validity – as does the discovery, very recently, that human art-making sensibilities are much, much older than we thought, and are apparent in Acheulian handaxes up to half a million years old. The ‘carefully exaggerated symmetry’ of such tools point to an emerging aesthetic sense that persists, today, as a signal of ‘good genes, good bodies, and good brains.’ Art has, of course, come to fulfill many secondary functions – on a personal, social, and economic level. These cannot be dismissed. But we are here, after all, to talk about origins.

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MARK CHANGIZI

American evolutionary neurobiologist and cognitive scientist, and author of *The Vision Revolution* (2009) and *Harnessed* (2011).

For Changizi, we don't have instincts for art and other 'stimulus artifacts' like music, language and design. These are inventions of civilisation; but crucially, they persist in (and possibly define) our species because they have been shaped to fit the preferences of our ancient brains. This is 'nature harnessing': the process wherein aspects of our culture mimic nature 'so as to harness evolutionarily ancient brain mechanisms for a new purpose'. Speech, for instance, mimics the sound structures of the environment in which we evolved; alphabet letters, at the deep, unconscious processing level of our brains, resemble the contour combinations characteristic of our natural habitat. Music, arguably the pinnacle of artistic expression, is structured according to the sounds of people moving; we respond with emotion, and movement of our own.

Indeed, says Changizi, the highly evocative aspects of our culture most likely can be traced to the most powerful natural source of all our woe and joy, that which on our prosperity depends: other humans. Herein lies his hypothesis for art: that it exists not because we have an instinct for it, but because it responds to – harnesses – our instinct to engage with other people.

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