

Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts

Review of How Art Works: A Psychological Exploration

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Review of *How Art Works: A Psychological Exploration*
Ellen Winner, Oxford University Press, 2018

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The next time someone asks me what the psychology of aesthetics is about, I will lend them my copy of Ellen Winner's beautiful book, *How Art Works: A Psychological Exploration*. Weaving study after study from across the arts with her own extensive research and synthesis of the scholarship of the field, Winner has fashioned a masterful explanation of what we know about the mind and art, and *how* we know it, as well. In *How Art Works*, Winner addresses the fundamental question of "What is art?" followed by a host of corollaries that have intrigued psychologists of aesthetics for over 100 years, including those that are of particular interest to the general public (How about that Mozart effect?). She explores these questions as a scholar, a psychologist, and as a connoisseur. She lets us know when the research findings tug against her heartstrings, but she never dismisses hard-earned evidence in favor of personal preference.

The book comprises 16 chapters, each addressing a central issue of the psychology of aesthetics. Of course, not all questions of the psychology of aesthetics could be discussed, but Winner has made an excellent selection, combining the popular with the more esoteric. We learn that studying music will not make you better at math, but we also find out that there is some evidence that studying acting has a salutary effect on males with aggression issues. We learn why we love sad stories, why music can inspire us or make us cry, and who loves horror movies (as well as who is simply horrified by them). Winner examines how we determine what is good in art and what is bad, and what art can and cannot do for us in other aspects of our lives, both cognitively and affectively. She examines forgeries and fakes, and why we sometimes prefer art that takes little effort and sometimes prefer to see the results of great effort. She considers who makes art and why. Study after study, finding after finding, each carefully considered and discussed in a fashion that is both scholarly and accessible.

Some of the chapters in *How Art Works* covered topics that I am well familiar with, as I study these issues, but others, especially music, covered new and different territory for me. I can honestly say that I learned something in almost every chapter, and in several instances, I found an idea that I can use in my own research, or material that has caused me to modify my thinking on a topic that I am working on. One of the most fascinating ideas that Winner presents is the notion that art is what is *intended* to be art, that a key characteristic of art is the intentionality of the artist. The term intentionality reminded me of Robert Weisberg's (2015) essay on creativity, in which he argued that value is not a useful criterion for judging a work creative or not, but *intentionality* is. That caused me to skip back to 1974 and a class from the great educator, Phillip W. Jackson, who defined teaching as occurring when someone *intended* to teach (see Jackson, 1968). And now I want to think about the generality of intentionality as it works in a number of contexts within psychology. This is just one of the springboards that I found in *How Art Works*, and I can almost guarantee that you will find your own.

In addition to an examination of our field of the psychology of aesthetics, Winner indirectly, but highly effectively, provides a primer on how psychology advances as a field, or at least how it ought to advance. In her discussions, she meticulously combines data with logic, shows how to not overinvest in one-off studies, and demonstrates how to think about where to find the evidence we need to progress our understanding. For me, it was a welcome antidote to a plague of reports about how "nothing in psychology is replicable." For example, Winner tackles the common modern art museum complaint, "My kid could have done that!" (By the way, I have found that a response of, "Too bad he didn't" is an effective

rejoinder.) She recounts a series of studies done on this issue in her Arts and Mind Lab at Boston College. She shows that untrained participants, at a rate of 2 to 1, can identify which works of abstract art are by artists and which are by children (when the works are similar in their surface features). Now to be sure, one wonders about the 1/3 of the choices that are incorrect, but the data clearly show that even to the innocent eye, abstract works are not the same as children's works. But Winner was concerned that there might be alternative hypotheses afoot, so she conducted several additional studies to eliminate those possibilities. And then Winner takes the question a delightful step further to ask, "Which works do children prefer when presented with the same comparison task?" Well, children prefer works by other children, by about the same 2 to 1 margin. One can just imagine a four year old observing: "That de Kooning guy is pretty good, but he's no Liam."

Perhaps part of why I am so impressed by this work is that Ellen Winner never shies away from taking positions that aren't going to win her friends; her findings can require a substantial and sometimes begrudging re-thinking of popular opinion. Her meta-analytic work showing that art doesn't really make us better at other subjects has engendered a serious (and highly beneficial) re-thinking of why we value teaching art in school. Teaching art is vital to us as humans for much the same reason that teaching history or French is: *not* because it helps us learn other subjects, but because it is important *in and of itself*. It makes us better human beings. Her work comparing children's art to abstract expressionists has not endeared her to art historians (actually, annoying art historians isn't that hard to do). And her argument that you are not simply 10,000 hours of practice on the cello away from being Yo Yo Ma, while disheartening, could save you a lot of time. Although she presents her arguments strongly and to my mind, convincingly, she is never disagreeable, coy, or disingenuous. What you get as a reader is: "Here is my take on this and why," and occasionally, "I wish it weren't that way." In a world where bombast has replaced modesty in almost all fields, this is incredibly refreshing.

How Art Works is not the last word on the psychology of aesthetics (thank goodness!), but it is a superb presentation of who we are, what we do, and why it matters.

Jackson, P. W. (1968). *Life in Classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Weisberg, R. W. (2015). On the usefulness of "value" in the definition of creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*, 27(2), 111-124.