

L'arte è per il filosofo quanto vi ha di più alto, perché essa gli apre quasi il santuario, dove in eterna ed originaria unione arde come in una fiamma quello che nella natura e nella storia è separato, e quello che nella vita e nell'azione, come nel pensiero, deve fuggire sé eternamente.

F.W.J. Schelling, Sistema dell'idealismo trascendentale (1800).

A "David" is no better than a pen

Art is considered one of the highest expressions of human beings. It has always been part of our culture. Most of what we know about our past comes from art itself. Men have been creating art since prehistorical times, through the stylized beasts and figures of hunters they painted with their fingers in the inside of their caves. Later came the Renaissance, a time in which art got to its finest, thanks to artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, whose hands created wonders that are still admired by tourists from all over the world. Art seems to be at the basis of our lives. But we might wonder, is it actually so important?

Men have been overestimating art. It is wrong to consider it the highest aspect in our lives. Art has long been treasured for being a form of knowledge and for enhancing our well-being, though it is not. In this essay, I will demonstrate firstly, how art is not a means to understanding reality, as it only provides an illusion of it. Secondly, how it is useless to our own self-fulfilment.

To begin, art cannot be considered an instrument of knowledge. Indeed it does not provide us a knowledge of beauty, harmony or perfection any more than any other ordinary object. Plato supported a dualistic vision of the world, made of single objects, that are what we see, and their ideas, that are perfect and can be found in Hyperuranion. All worldly matters are to be dismissed in favour of ideas. Even if art seems beautiful, it is not true Beauty but just a copy of it.

As a consequence, we cannot learn what beauty, perfection or harmony are from material things, since they are just mere copies of these ideas.

Differently, Aristotle refused this way of perceiving reality and believed that the concept could not be taken apart from the object itself, meaning that if an object appears beautiful and harmonious, it is because it contains the concepts of beauty and harmony. As artworks appear beautiful, it is possible to affirm that they are beauty itself. So, by observing them we could understand what beauty, harmony and perfection are.

Nevertheless, it is not like we can be sure that our perception of reality is how it truly is. Indeed, even though art might appear beautiful to us, it might not be so. In fact, phenomenism makes a distinction between phenomena, what we see, and noumena, reality itself. According to John Locke, we cannot know noumena, because our senses are our only instrument of knowledge and the way our mind elaborates our perceptions is subjective. As a consequence, we can only say that the outside world exists but not what it looks like.

Because of this, we cannot say that art is beautiful because we do not truly see it. Even art itself is an illusion and as a result, it is of no use to our knowledge.

Furthermore, art is not useful to our self-fulfilment. On one hand, it does not make us happy. Men can find happiness only in satisfying its most basic needs, not in following every desire that they have. This concept was affirmed by Epicurus, who believed in the existence of two kinds of happiness: one stable and one transitory, that might generate suffering. He thought that happiness depended on the evaluation of our needs. He divided them into three categories: artificial needs, natural unnecessary needs and natural necessary needs. As it can be understood, the first two groups lead us to an unstable happiness, while the

last one to a stable happiness.

Because art is not a natural need, but an artificial one, it surely does not generate a stable happiness.

On the contrary, Schopenhauer believed that art could actually be our way to happiness. He thought that life was desire. As desires come from the lack of something and lack generates pain, life itself was pain. Art was a way of escaping life, because art is the representation of a concept, of something general, and as a result, we cannot feel any desire towards it. So, as long as we admire art we forget ourselves, our needs and our worries. Even though everything might be an illusion, while admiring art we are happy.

However, it is not possible to be satisfied if we are not conscious of ourselves. It is of no use to be at ease and with no worries if we are not aware of our own person. Indeed Hegel believed that the pleasure we could get from an object, even an artwork as in this case, was just a negative experience, given by a mere consumption of it. There is, in fact, no recognition we can get from an object we did not create because it is not a product of our work and creativity. Because of that Hegel stated that men would then look for recognition in other men. For instance, unless we are artists who create their own paintings or statues, we will never find a deeper knowledge of ourselves in an artwork.

To conclude, art is overrated. For one, because it is not a key to knowledge. It does not make us aware of what beauty is, since even though it might look beautiful, we actually do not see it in its true form, given the fact that we cannot conceive reality how it really is. In this case a "David" by Michelangelo would not help us to grasp such concepts of beauty and harmony any more than an ordinary pen could.

Moreover, art does not make us feel better, since it does not provide us any happiness and it also does not lead us to a better knowledge of ourselves, because the only way to reach self-awareness is by interacting with other people.