The Necessity of Living Happy and Free

Art, Aesthetics and Humanity

by

Robert Edward Gordon

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"Utsusemi, though she had so fiercely steeled herself against his love, seeing such tenderness hidden under the words of his message, again fell to longing that she were free, and though there was no undoing what was done she found it so hard to go without him that she took up the folded paper and wrote in the margin a poem in which she said that her sleeve, so often wet with tears, was like the cicada's dew-drenched wing."

~The Tale of Genji *(11th century)*

Table of Contents

List of Figures viii

Preface xv

Chapter 1: A Human Necessity 1

Chapter 2: The Aesthetics of Value 18

Chapter 3: The Language of Art and Culture 37

Chapter 4: The Bio-Aesthetics of Visual Art 85

Chapter 5: Art and Activity 139

Chapter 6: Aesthetic Well-Being 192

Acknowledgments 229

List of Figures

Figure 1: Eastman Johnson. *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* (recto), ca. 1862. Oil on paperboard, 55.8 × 66.4 cm. Brooklyn Museum, New York (40.59a–b). Public domain.

Figure 2: Dogon blacksmith. *Equestrian*, 16th–18th century. Wood and metal, H. 69.9 cm. Dogon peoples (Mali). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection (1979.206.85). Public domain.

Figure 3: Marc Chagall. *America Windows*, 1977. Stained glass installation, overall 244 × 978 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. Photograph: "Chagall's America Windows, Chicago Art Museum," Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chagall's_America_Windows_Chicago_Art_Museum_1.JPG

Figure 4: Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino). *The School of Athens*, 1509–1511. Fresco, 500 × 770 cm. Stanza della Segnatura, Apostolic Palace, Vatican City. Wikimedia Commons (faithful reproduction of a public-domain work).

Figure 5: Yoruba artist. *Mother and Child* figure, early 20th century. Wood. Yoruba peoples, Nigeria. Bode Museum, Berlin (acquired 1912). Photograph by Ji-Elle, Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yoruba_mother_and_child_(Bode-Museum).jpg

Figure 6: Wu Zhen. *Fisherman*, ca. 1350. Ink on paper handscroll (detail shown). Image: 12 1/4 × 21 3/16 in. (31.1 × 53.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of John M. Crawford Jr., 1988 (1989.363.33). Public domain.

Figure 7: Sir Frank Dicksee. *Juliet on the Balcony*, 1884. Oil on canvas. Southampton City Art Gallery, Southampton (Southampton Museums & Art Gallery Trust). Public domain.

Figure 8: Thomas Cole. *The Architect's Dream*, 1840. Oil on canvas. 134.7 × 213.6 cm. Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio (1949.162). Photograph from Google Art Project. Public domain.

Figure 9: Euphronios (painter) and Euxitheos (potter). Side A: *The body of Sarpedon carried by Hypnos and Thanatos, with Hermes watching*, ca. 515 BC. Attic red-figure calyx-krater. Terracotta. Height 45.7 cm; diameter 55.1 cm. National Archaeological Museum of Cerveteri. Photograph from Wikimedia Commons (public domain; released by photographer Jaime Ardiles-Arce).
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Euphronios_krater_side_A_MET_L.2006.10.jpg

Figure 10: Jules Lavirotte. Entrance door of the Lavirotte Building (*Immeuble Lavirotte*), 29 avenue Rapp, Paris, ca. 1900. Art Nouveau architecture with sculptural ornament by Jean-François Larrivé. Paris, 7th arrondissement. Photograph by Pline, Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AXDSC_7288-29-av-Rapp-paris-7.jpg

Figure 11: Upper Paléolithiques *Venus* figurine (Kostenki 1, Venus 4), ca. 23,000–21,000 BCE. Mammoth ivory. Kostenki-Borshchevo archaeological complex, Voronezh Oblast, Russia. State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. Photo by Silar, Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Venus_4_from_Kostenki_RU_left.jpg

Figure 12: Ain Sakhri Lovers (figurine depicting embracing couple in low relief), ca. 9000 BC (Natufian period). Calcite cobble. Height: 10.2 cm; width: 6.3 cm; depth: 3.9 cm. British Museum, London (1958,1007.1). Photograph from Wikimedia Commons (licensed CC BY-SA 4.0; photographer: Geni).
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lovers_9000BC_british_museum.jpg

Figure 13: *Kritios Boy* (Ephebe of Kritios), ca. 480 BC. Parian marble. Height: 1.17 m (preserved; originally ca. 1.86 m with base). Acropolis Museum, Athens (inv. no. Acr. 698). Photograph from Wikimedia Commons (public domain faithful reproduction / CC BY-SA 3.0).
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:009MA_Kritios.jpg

Figure 14: John Trumbull. *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*, 1786–1820. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Trumbull Collection (1832.3). Public domain.

Figure 15: Anonymous Nahua artist(s). Codex Magliabechiano, folio 70r (page 141): *Aztec ritual human sacrifice* (heart extraction by a priest on a temple platform, with sacrificial victim and elements indicating dedication to Huitzilopochtli, god of war), Mid-16th century. Ink and color on European paper. Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence. Detail photograph from Wikimedia Commons (public domain; faithful 2D reproduction of public domain artwork).

Figure 16: Burial chamber J (with vaulted astronomical ceiling and painted reliefs from funerary texts) in the tomb of Seti I (KV17), Nineteenth Dynasty, ca. 1290–1279 BC. Valley of the Kings, Egypt. Photograph by Carole Raddato (Flickr/Following Hadrian), licensed CC BY-SA 2.0 (via Wikimedia Commons).

Figure 17: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. *Princesse de Broglie* (Pauline de Galard de Brassac, Princesse de Broglie), ca. 1851–1853. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Charles Wrightsman, 2019 (2019.256). Open Access image (CC0, public domain).

Figure 18: Francisco de Goya. *The Little Prisoner*, c. 1810–15. Etching on laid paper with watermark. Sheet: 26.2 × 17.7 cm (10 5/16 × 6 15/16 in.); platemark: 10.6 × 8.4 cm (4 3/16 × 3 5/16 in.). Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Louise S. Richards, 2005.280. Open Access / public domain (CC0).

Figure 19: Andrew Wyeth. *Christina's World*, 1948. Egg tempera on panel, 81.9 × 121.3 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art. Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

Figure 20: Albert Bierstadt. *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*., 1865. Oil on canvas. 64 × 96 1/2 in. (162.6 × 245.1 cm). Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama (1991.879; Gift of the Birmingham Public Library). Public domain faithful reproduction (Wikimedia Commons).

Figure 21: Rembrandt van Rijn. *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (also known as The Storm on the Sea of Galilee), 1633. Oil on canvas. 160 × 128 cm (63 × 50 3/8 in.). Formerly Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (P21s24); stolen March 18, 1990 (whereabouts

unknown). Public domain faithful reproduction (Wikimedia Commons).

Figure 22: Emanuel Leutze. *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851. Oil on canvas. 149 × 255 in. (378.5 × 647.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of John Stewart Kennedy, 1897 (97.34). Open Access / public domain image (CC0).

Figure 23: Henri Matisse. *Le bonheur de vivre (The Joy of Life),* 1905–1906. Oil on canvas. 176.5 × 240.7 cm (69 1/2 × 94 3/4 in.). Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia (BF719). Public domain faithful reproduction (Wikimedia Commons).
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bonheur_Matisse.jpg

Figure 24: Limestone bas-relief (painted with red ochre), height 46 cm, Gravettian period, c. 25,000–23,000 BCE. Discovered in the Laussel rock shelter (Dordogne, France); now in the collection of the Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux.

Photograph: 120 / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0 (https://creative-commons.org/licenses/by/3.0/). Original file: https://commons. wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Venus-de-Laussel-vue-generale-noir.jpg

Figure 25: Grant Wood. *American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on beaverboard, 78 × 65.3 cm. Depicting a farmer and his daughter (often misidentified as wife) before a Carpenter Gothic house. Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection. Public domain.

Figure 26: Edward Hopper. *Nighthawks*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 84.1 × 152.4 cm. Iconic depiction of nocturnal isolation in an all-night diner, with four solitary figures illuminated by fluorescent light. Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection. Public domain (U.S.).

Figure 27: *Ludovisi Gaul (Galatian Suicide)*. Roman marble copy (2nd–1st century BCE) after a Hellenistic bronze original (c. 230–220 BCE), attributed to the Pergamene school. Palazzo Altemps, National Roman Museum, Rome. Public domain photograph via Wikimedia Commons.

Preface

It is usually helpful to begin a book by setting the scene and explaining the author's perspective.

There is a well-known "crisis" in the academic world having to do with the usefulness of certain academic disciplines. It is one that I have professionally witnessed while teaching in the university. Basically, far more students today are choosing to pursue degrees in the sciences (and other practical subjects like business and law) rather than English, literature, art history, philosophy, and the other humanities.[1] This decline in humanistic education has led to questions about the purpose of a university education. Is it just about getting a job and making money? Or are some subjects valuable over and above their utilitarian significance? Given the present state of the humanities, practical concerns seem to be winning the debate.

Yet, some believe that this situation is changing. These people point to prominent leaders in technology and business who have degrees in the humanities (in companies such as PayPal, Palantir, Alibaba, and others). The humanities aided in the commercial success of these entrepreneurs and CEOs, we are told, since technology stems from human needs.[2]

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[1] Much has been written on this. A good place to start is Alvin B Kernan, William G Bowen, and Harold T Shapiro. *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[2] Jiang Wu and Robert Edward Gordon, "Buddhism and Humanities Education Reform in American Universities," *Humanities* 2022, 11(2), 46. https://doi.org/10.3390/h11020046

The opposite is true as well. Many in the arts and humanities have reacted favorably towards the products of STEM. The Digital Humanities utilize science and technology to help humanist scholars cross interdisciplinary boundaries. In art, contemporary artists regularly incorporate digital, virtual reality, and AI technologies into their works. Blockchains and NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) integrate technology, art, and finance, and open up new avenues of creative possibility.

Still others believe that the arts and humanities are important for their own sake. The argument here is that art, philosophy, literature, etc., address vital issues central to human life: the humanities exist because the meanings, morals, and emotions they deal with define us as human beings. On this view, judging the value of such cultural subjects in practical terms misses the point of their importance to society entirely.

Certainly all of these positions can be true at the same time. One can promote the intrinsic value of the arts and humanities, but believe that cultural artifacts can have practical (or real-world) usefulness as well. This is where the philosophical and art historical analyses in this book fall—an approach that in the end holds that earnestly engaging with meaningful subjects like art and philosophy is useful in living a meaningful life.

I agree with the distinguished humanities scholar Michael Bèrubè, who has stressed for decades that "Our struggles to grasp *how* things mean as well as *what* they mean...is where the Humanities are uniquely

useful."[3] Bèrubè says this process is about "interpreting" the world: deciphering and deconstructing events to see what we can know about human affairs. This is a good start. But it does not go far enough.

Instead, I want to convince you that aesthetic thought and cultural knowledge are important ways to know the world and *yourself* within it. By the end of this volume, I want you to understand that finding meaning in an artistic/cultural experience is just a small scale instance of how you can find meaning in all aspects of life.

For in the widest and most optimistic terms, I hope to convince the reader that we live in a world of ideas. This means understanding that arguments and beliefs are built into the fabric of a society and of nature; that the things, relationships, and vitality in everyday life embody concepts, thoughts, and purposes we are able to understand and identify with in some way; and it means learning to bring one's human abilities to empathize and idealize to the forefront of life and living. Put most directly, I am advocating for the forward presence of art and aesthetic thinking in our lives.

The benefit of this perspective—of living the life of the mind as well as the heart—is that in doing so the world suddenly opens up as full of meaningful possibilities, or at least a place where the opportunity exists to find them.

To be sure, for many philosophy and art seem secondary or irrelevant to the real world. While Rembrandts may be nice and Socrates may be interesting, they do not appear to have anything to do with things that directly relate to our lives and well-being (employment stability, economic decisions, child rearing, medical conditions, etc.). However,

[3] Michael Bèrubè, "The Utility of the Arts and Humanities" *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 2 (2003): 37.

my analysis illustrates that creative artifacts actually play a large role in creating societies where such decisions and concerns are important to human welfare. This book demonstrates how human creativity (art) and fundamental ideas of being (philosophy) lie behind the psychic complexities of everyday life.

Another word for the methods and aspirations expressed above is "wisdom." We use the phrase "pearls of wisdom" to communicate the idea that truly valuable and special things are hidden to some extent. When revealed, they can enlighten the mind and illuminate the darkness of a path or soul. Pearls—luminescent orbs like the stars of heaven that symbolize fertility, purity, wisdom, and wealth—are generated by living things (mollusks) concealed in an earthly shell. We might likewise think of culture as a living thing with the ability to generate such valuable things of hidden worth, such as art and philosophy. As a mode of finding meaning in things, art is an excellent mechanism through which one can extract philosophy, which means "love of wisdom," concealed in everyday life. And in so doing, such wisdom can help reveal something about who we are personally within the wider realm of creation.

Yet, this sort of analysis is not without its risks. In *A View from Nowhere* (1986), the philosopher Thomas Nagel contends that understanding the interplay between life and the world—the internal and external, the objective and subjective—can be "a problem." It is an inherently disconcerting one given our human abilities of thought and reflection, as he confesses: "From far enough outside my birth seems accidental, my life pointless, and my death insignificant, but from inside my never

having been born seems nearly unimaginable, my life monstrously important, and my death catastrophic."[4]

Can the arts and humanities tell us if our existence is pointless and insignificant, unimaginable and catastrophic? Perhaps. But the exercise is an important one. For I think we all tend to step back at times and look at ourselves from the higher plane of extrospection. Every so often we feel the need to take a wider view of things, to look down upon our lives from outside and above and see if we can ascertain any truths from that perspective. This is certainly how philosophy as a discipline began. In doing so, we traverse the invisible but porous line between persona and personality; we contemplate who we are and what we have become within our surrounding culture—the water in the fishbowl, so to speak. And it is during these moments of critical self reflection that so much of our identity gets etched within our psyches, which is a major factor in what we call "our lives" in the context of society.

The term "etched" stated just above with respect to such self reflection is pointed and intentional. It is an artistic process that I speak of in using the word. As occurrences of how we as a species intuit and understand, art and philosophy offer a way to understand what it means to be human by reflecting on one's own experiences. For, as we will see, one of the effects of art is that it provides a form of self-knowledge—*aesthetic* knowledge that is thus meaningful.

Finally, this book's fundamental premise and metaphor is that culture has a voice that speaks to us of meaningfulness, which is at the heart of being happy, living well, and being human. The combination of these is what is generally called "well-being." Because the artifacts of

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[4] Thomas Nagel, *A View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 201.

culture deal explicitly with meaning, I show how art is meaningful with its ability to speak to ideas, values, and beliefs. And because philosophy deals with such meaningful content as knowledge, it is a natural partner with art in the realm of culture. Together the two are a powerful combination.

In terms of the "real world," we might ask: if engineers create technologies, lawyers create laws, and entrepreneurs create businesses, then what do the humanities create? The answer is clear: humans. This book explains one of the ways this takes place with art's ability to embody meaning and illuminate wisdom. To do so, we will need to learn how works of art "work," what we mean by "meaning," and what these two aspects of culture have to do with the somewhat complex notion of "being human." For it is my position that as humans we all strive to live meaningful lives, and that living happy and free is a major factor in coming to understand that necessity.

Chapter 1
A Human Necessity

Humanity's recent past has seen the world experience wars and global contagions with significant death tolls. We have witnessed horrific violence recorded for constant viewing on social media. Social polarization, civil disorder, and widespread mental health issues are escalating at an alarming rate. The ability for governments to monitor, punish, or control their citizens through digital technologies is an ever-increasing threat to civil liberties.[1] These developments raise questions about the type of world we are living in and what the future of human well-being portends. Regardless of one's political and national identity, it is clear that staying alive, finding happiness, and being free is as relevant today as it has ever been. This book explores what art and aesthetics can say about the concepts involved in this perennial human necessity—about living happy and free.

Of course, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are central values of the United States, whose eighteenth-century founding first proclaimed these principles politically. However, the yearning to live happy and free is not relegated to any one particular country, but is perforce a desire common to all humanity. As the American Founders believed, "the cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances have, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all lovers of

[1] Gergely Gosztonyi and Elena Lazăr, eds., *Media Regulation During the COVID-19 Pandemic : A Study from Central and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Ethics International Press Ltd, 2023).

mankind are affected..."[2] This book therefore extends the concepts involved in this universal humanistic desire beyond its nationalistic confines. The move is guided by the cultural power of art and its corresponding universal presence in human societies across time and space.

Evidence for the widespread endorsement of these ostensibly American values exists among various governmental structures and religious traditions. For instance, the Constitution of Japan states "All of the people shall be respected as individuals. Their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness shall, to the extent that it does not interfere with the public welfare, be the supreme consideration in legislation and in other governmental affairs."[3] Although instituted during the American occupation after World War II, these values have remained widely supported in the country ever since.

The Constitution of the Republic of Korea vows "to help each person discharge those duties and responsibilities concomitant to freedoms and rights, and to elevate the quality of life for all citizens and contribute to lasting world peace and the common prosperity of mankind and thereby to ensure security, liberty and happiness for ourselves and our posterity forever."[4]

The African country of Namibia oriented their Constitution toward "the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family which is indispensable for freedom, justice and peace." These principles and rights were formulated in

[2] Thomas Paine and Ronald Herder, *Common Sense* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1997), 10-11.
[3] https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html
[4] https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?lang=ENG&hseq=1

specific antagonism to their history of "colonialism, racism and apartheid."[5]

The basic principles enumerated in the Ecuadorian Constitution guarantees "its inhabitants the right to a culture of peace, to integral security and to live in a democratic society free of corruption" as part of its desire to "achieve the good way of living."[6] The Constitution of nearby Bolivia states that "the dignity and freedom of persons is inviolable," and promotes various "moral principles of the plural society: *ama qhilla, ama llulla, ama suwa* (do not be lazy, do not be a liar or a thief), *suma qamaña* (live well), *ñandereko* (live harmoniously), *teko k*avi (good life*), ivi maraei* (land without evil) and *qhapaj ñ*a*n* (noble path or life)."[7]

On the spiritual plane, in 2009 Pope Benedict XVI asserted that "the cultivation of the values of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' can no longer be seen in predominantly individualistic or even national terms, but must rather be viewed from the higher perspective of the common good of the whole human family."[8] The papacy oversees more than a billion people on every continent on earth, ubiquitously utilizing art to educate and inspire its followers.

According to the Hindu *Bhagavadgītā*, life for "seers whose stains are washed away win the freedom that is God's. Their doubts are ended. They have dominion over themselves. They delight in the well-being

[5] https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Namibia_2014
[6] https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/21291
[7] https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bolivia_2009
[8] Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to His Excellency Mr. Miguel Humberto Días, New Ambassador of the United States of America to The Holy See, Apostolic Palace, Castel Gandolfo Friday, 2 October 2009. Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI, V, 2 p.322-325.

of all beings."[9] Similarly, a passage from the Buddhist *Dhammapada* extolling the virtues of non-attachment proclaims "Let us live happily then, free from greed among the greedy! among men who are greedy let us dwell free from greed! Let us live happily then, though we call nothing our own! We shall be like the bright gods, feeding on happiness!"[10]

Stories of Native American life convey analogous lessons: "Our journey consumed quite a while. But we stopped when we wanted to and stayed as long as we pleased. There was no great rush. But finally we reached our destination, and our camp was soon settled. Then a scout was picked to go out for buffalo. When the scout returned, the hunters started out, camp was moved near to the place where the buffalo had been located, so the work would not be so hard on the women by being a great distance from camp...Such was the life I lived. We had everything provided for us by the Great Spirit above. Is it any wonder that we grew fat with contentment and happiness?"[11]

At a minimum, this cross-section of examples tells us that 1) the concepts of life, happiness, and freedom are valued as universal human principles around the globe, and 2) investigating the desire to live happy and free from a broad, aesthetic, and humanistic perspective—rather than an aspect of a singular national tradition—is much more in keeping with the topic's wide ranging scope.

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[9] Kees Bolle, *The Bhagavadgita* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1979), 69.
[10] Max F Müller, *Dhammapada, a Collection of Verses; Being One of the Canonical Books of the Buddhists* (Salt Lake City, UT: Project Gutenberg, n.d), Chapter 15, verses 199-200.
[11] Luther Standing Bear, *My People, the Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 25-27.

Peter Callero states that "America's distinctive faith in self-reliance and independence is a deep-rooted cultural conviction...But the truth is, Americans are like people everywhere, naturally social, interdependent, and shaped by social forces."[12] Indeed, artistic artifacts are found in virtually every place humans inhabit (including in Muslim environments and Judaic culture). As such, utilizing art and aesthetic thinking to investigate the universal values of life, freedom, and happiness is a compelling prospect. Doing so sheds light on various perceptions, anxieties, and tendencies that help explain *why* living happy and free is such a compulsory human aspiration.

Moreover, while the human need to live happy and free seems "self-evident," as America's founding document states, less understood is why this is the case. Enlightenment-era thinkers held that this desire derives from Nature, God, and Reason. On the other hand, by the twentieth century others thought that declaring life, liberty, and happiness as unquestioned moral and political truths was shallow, unphilosophical, or a "leap of faith."[13] There are definitely senses in which each of these contentions can be understood as accurate. But if we look at these values anthropologically, as expressive of human being and not justifications for a political perspective, then a sharper picture of living happy and free comes into focus. Something is "evident" if it is clear to the sight or understanding, while the "self" refers to a person's essential identity—or "soul"—that constitutes their subjectivity, their humanity. This matters because these same faculties underlie art and aesthetic experience: the ways in which we assign

[12] Peter L. Callero, *The Myth of Individualism: How Social Forces Shape Our Lives* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), viii.
[13] Michael P. Zuckert, "Self-Evident Truth and the Declaration of Independence," *The Review of Politics* 49, no. 3 (198): 319–3.

individual and cultural value to creative works as they move and shape our inner lives.

Thus, this study argues that art and aesthetic thinking are vital ways of knowing what living happy and free entails. It approaches this universal human desire through a blend of pictorial analysis and philosophical inquiry. Using examples from Western and non-Western art, the discussion reveals how art and aesthetic thought are meaningful conveyors of the values of life, happiness, freedom, as well as various humanistic ideas connected to them. Finding meaning in our lives is an indispensable aspect of being human. And the arts are a central and persistent part of the human experience precisely because they are created *as* meaningful artifacts of aesthetic and cultural significance.

Although it may not seem obvious at first blush, there is actually a profound relationship between art and the human desire for life, happiness, and freedom. For like these values, artworks are also grounded in our shared humanity. They are creative artifacts of sense and significance that embody our inner need to live together in a productive, unencumbered, and purposeful way. Art both illustrates beliefs and ideas just as it reveals our collective humanity through aesthetic faculties that pull us together emotively. The art historian Bernard Berenson claims that "art does not humanize by precept but by example. The artistic creation, beyond the ideated sensations it may convey, penetrates into the depths of our organism through the proneness to identify ourselves with objects, and to imitate them."[14]

The deep mimetic association between humanity and art that Berenson points to constitutes my argument's main premise: that

[14] Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1948), 146.

fundamentally *art is the language of values*; that aesthetic artifacts by their very nature embody and communicate humanistic principles (those which speak to being human). The term "aesthetics" refers to sense perception (Gk. *aisthēsis*), and art is the quintessential perceptual experience in the cultural sphere. So, if there is a relationship between art and living happy and free, as I assert, then it must certainly derive from our aesthetic sensibilities.

There are of course different levels of imitation and exemplification involved in this aesthetic ability. Some artistic artifacts—such as flags, currency, anthems, and political monuments—are specifically designed to embody the principles they proclaim. They draw upon our strong desire to identify with other humans through shared values. Other creative artifacts tend to imply certain worldviews and moral values through heritage, custom, or their formal properties. We see this most distinctly in the humanistic use of Greek and Roman classicism in political and religious environments as a way to radiate beauty, lineage, order, and rationality. These values link humanity to the past aesthetically.

Referring to this "profound relationship between art and the human desire for life, happiness, and freedom" as a necessity is key. For if we *need* to live happy and free, then we *need* to know as much as we can about ideas surrounding life, happiness, and freedom. And if this is a distinctly human need, then we also need to know something about being human. The arts are an important aspect of this human knowledge. Art has been with humanity for thousands of years and involves some of the most far-reaching and enduring concepts of the human condition. Therefore, signs of a universal human necessity to live happy and free should be evident in the artifacts of culture.

This is indeed the case. Art history tells us that the quest for happiness requires the freedom nature bestows upon human life; it tells us that

the need for meaning and purpose (i.e. happiness) and independent self-determined thought and activity (or freedom) exists so robustly within us that they are fundamental constituents of life itself. In fact, the intimate connection among the concepts of art, life, freedom, and happiness suggests that living happy and free is as much an aesthetic necessity as it is a political one.

In this book, we can begin to understand this necessity by first exploring how artworks communicate "ideas, attitudes, and traditions" through aesthetic thought and the embodiment of values.[15] This allows the discussion to then delve deeply into the concepts of life, happiness, and freedom individually using examples from the history of art. Artistic objects from prehistory onward are shown to contain conceptual affinities with these humanistic values in various ways. The dialogue engages powerful cultural currents and themes embedded in human life, such as trust, psychology, religion, divinity, nostalgia, honor, sacrifice, self-knowledge, economy, and others.

Yet, the analysis provided here is not a purely academic exercise, but suggests a situation that is both descriptive of human being as well as a prescriptive theory of art. For there is an ethical dimension involved in the claim that living happy and free is an ongoing human necessity. It contains an element of social obligation that the history of art proclaims aesthetically. This is a critical aspect of how art works in general, which is that its main function is communicative. On the whole, art is created (explicitly or implicitly) to convince or even compel someone to feel, think, or believe something through representation and aesthetic impact.[16] This is even true of purely

[15] Jock Reynolds, "Director's Foreword," in *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: American Art from the Yale University Art Gallery* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery; Yale University Press, 2008), x.
[16] For an elaboration on this idea see, R.E. Gordon, "The Philosophy of Freedom and the History of Art: An Interdisciplinary View," *Philosophies* (5):3.

decorative designs or images. And since most actions are predicated on some feeling, thought, or belief, ultimately the arts engage the human intellect in terms of knowledge, emotion, and morality.

Even a cursory glance over the history of art helps substantiate this claim. For example, Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling asks us to contemplate and believe in God; Mozart's *Requiem* makes us feel the pain, sorrow, and fear of death; a portrait of Frida Kahlo wants us to convince us that the image is in fact Frida Kahlo. In all of these scenarios, our aesthetic faculties redirect us inward as we ascertain what we know or do not know, feel is good or not good, and/or believe or do not believe. This is also true of contemporary art and installations, which often use scale and unusual objects to shock viewers out of conventional norms and to experience the ideas they are constructed to convey.[17] In fact, the religious messages of art, which are overwhelmingly pervasive in human history in various forms, do not merely pictorialize beliefs, but obligate the faithful to act in accordance to their doctrines aesthetically.

Notions of the human

I have used, and will continue to use, the term "humanistic" many times in this volume to denote things that refer to what it means to be human. But the word is somewhat ambiguous or imprecise and requires some explanation with respect to the goals of this study.

Its history in the West has to do with privileging reason and nature in terms of human being and its potential. During the Renaissance, humanism offered a correction, of sorts, to the overwhelming medieval stress on the divine, the immortal soul, and the sinfulness of

[17] Sherri Irvin, "The Art of Rules: Conceptual Art Often Confounds," *Aeon*, May 23, 2023.

man. Thought and education were positively reoriented more towards human nature, where classical writings became the locus of humanistic ideas seen as symmetrical with the beliefs of a broader Christendom. The logic underwriting this revived humanistic perspective can be captured by a conditional statement: if humanity is created in the image of God, then to know more about humanity is to know more about God. Art was a prolific part of this new Renaissance mode of looking and thinking about society and the universe. The visual arts provided a mimetically potent manner to explore humanity on an earthly, rather than an austere religious, plane via the bodily human form. "Humanistic" in this aesthetic setting meant using human nature affirmatively as a prism through which to acquire self, worldly, and spiritual knowledge.

Today, "humanistic" is quite often used to denote fields of study in the humanities, in contradistinction to the sciences and their methodologies. This is in fact one way I utilize the term with respect to the arts. But one problem with this usage is that it seems to suggest that the sciences are somehow *un*-humanistic. Historically, this has not been the case. The Renaissance era (and much of its art) represents the nascence of the modern era in the West for a number of reasons: it signified an epistemological shift toward empirical knowledge through the close observation of nature; it featured realistic or rational/understandable art through anatomically accurate figures and linear perspective; it saw the advent of important technological innovations such as the printing press, telescope, astrolabe, etc.; and it generated an increasing focus on the individual that had both religious and secular implications (*viz*. the Protestant Reformation). This humanist outlook laid the groundwork for the Scientific Revolution and the Scottish and French Enlightenments, which played a key role in the development of contemporary life around the globe. In other words, scientific inquiry speaks to what it means to be human just as

much as the arts and humanities do. So it is productive to be somewhat more expansive when exploring humanistic phenomena.[18]

Nevertheless, in discussing art and aesthetic thought it is necessary to be clear about the distinctions in methods and aims between the arts and sciences. Science's extreme focus on objective knowledge requires removing the subjectivity of the researcher. How one personally feels about the phenomenon, methods, or conclusions under investigation is largely irrelevant. On the other hand, emotional and intellectual response is the primary concern of the arts, since the experiencing subject is the explicit destination of an artwork. Yet as soon as one realizes this, the question emerges as to just who or what the subject is? And the first answer to *that* inquiry is that it is a *human* subject, which forces one to investigate what exactly being human entails and how humans ought best to live (*humanitas*). That is what this book aims to expose to the extent that investigating the relationship between life, liberty, happiness, and the arts can illuminate one aspect of that question.

One of the possible implications of this study is that the *humanitas* endorsed here can be understood as an approach to living as much as touching on something universal in our species. It is a mode of participating in the world that incorporates art and ideas within our individual lives and society at large. Peter Gay's oft-quoted assertion that "For Cicero, *humanitas* was a style of thought, not a formal doctrine" lends some credence to the aspiration. A human ideal first brought to Rome by philosophers associated with Scipio, on this view: "The man who practiced *humanitas* was confident of his worth,

[18] Richard C. Brusca and EBSCO ePDA, *The Divide between Humanities and Science: Why It Matters and How It Can Be Repaired*, ed. by Richard C. Brusca (Bradford: Ethics International Press Limited, 2025).

courteous to others, decent in his social conduct, and active in his political role."[19]

To put the humanistic values of life, happiness, and freedom under an aesthetic microscope is to understand the anthropocentric and idealistic in a similar way. For while the notion of what "humanistic" refers to can be ambiguous or unfocused, the desire for humans to live happy and free is not. It is a yearning that stems from the deepest aspects of our individual and collective souls. The longing and aspiration to be happy and free is as empirical, spiritual, emotive, and human-oriented as the arts have been throughout human history. Eastman Johnson's Civil War era *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* (Figure 1) embodies and personifies this sentiment in the most lucid of ways.

Figure 1
Eastman Johnson, *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves*, 1862

[19] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 107.

During the battles surrounding the town of Manassas, Virginia, an enslaved family makes a sudden and desperate dash towards the Union lines (seen as bright flashes in the distance on the left). The artist reportedly witnessed this event, and was moved enough by the scene to reproduce it in art. At the time of the painting, any southern slave who made it to the Northern forces could be considered "contraband"—something valuable to the enemy, and therefore could be legally protected without being returned to the Confederacy as a slave.

Everything is on the line here for the fugitives: life, freedom, and happiness. If the frantic journey is successful, then they will be free from the dehumanizing and unjust life they are fleeing. If they fail, then their lives will be as wretched and confined as before the attempted escape. This binary fate is apparent in the direction of the riders' faces: one peers forward toward the future; the other gazes back toward the past. The dichotomy is mimicked in the overall dark and light of the composition. The vitality of the horse's speed toward the lights (and the sun) on the left symbolizes the independent self-directed movement that freedom requires, while the lights themselves are a metaphor for the potential of a happier life the escape to freedom signifies. Few other artworks illustrate so starkly the human necessity to live happy and free.

As I continually demonstrate below with other examples, this image embodies such values since it makes tangible the ideas and principles it aesthetically conveys through an artistic work, a medium of communication that is distinctly human. The painting personifies these values in its portrayal of a human family, a subject matter with which any viewer on earth can identify and empathize. For this is ultimately a human drama of life, happiness, and freedom, and not solely an American episode. Historically, only roughly five percent of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade went to the United States, with most

going to the Caribbean and South America.[20] Moreover, the Trans-Saharan and Intra-African, Indian Ocean, Ottoman, and Barbary Slave trades attest to the practice's enduring human injustice across time and space. However, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries most nations around the globe outlawed chattel slavery, signifying an increased recognition of the inherent rights of all human beings.

Eastman's painting also reminds us that "works of art have always engendered rather than merely reflected political, social, and cultural meanings."[21] It is critical to understand that art is not a passive endeavor—pretty pictures that we look at only for pleasure—but an active cultural force of knowledge and ideas. Art historians often use words such as "confronts," "challenges," and "engages" when describing how works of art "address" the viewer. These terms accurately express the operative powers and dynamic energies involved with cultural artifacts: the aesthetic power to generate knowledge, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. An artwork is as equally present as the person viewing the work and its ideas, and has—as James Elkins argues—"a certain force, a certain way of resisting or accepting my look and returning that look to me."[22] Thus, any viewer of *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* is visually asked to take part in the historical context and human plight of the artwork's protagonists.

Indeed, whether or not the artist was consciously aware of it, the horse and rider imagery draws upon a timeless and transcultural phenomenon. The motif goes far back into human history. Examples include artifacts from prehistoric pictographs and ancient Babylon, the

[20] https://www.slavevoyages.org/

[21] Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith P. F Moxey, *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England [for] Wesleyan University Press, 1994.), xv.

[22] James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 70.