Expressivism: ‘Good art is moving or captures a mood or feeling’

The numbered artworks referred to in this handout are listed, with links, on the companion website.

EMOTION IN ART

Representationalism and formalism, we can argue, miss the psychological dimension of art. There are two sides to this. First, in making a work of art, an artist is expressing themselves, especially their emotions, not necessarily directly, but in some way. This is true even of the most abstract works. In his work, e.g. 22. Composition C (No. III) with Red, Yellow and Blue (1935), Piet Mondrian said he was trying to express the spiritual sublime.

Second, we are emotionally moved in response to art. We could argue that there is a special, aesthetic emotion that arises in us. But this can seem too narrow. Just as art can express any number of feelings, so it can arouse different feelings. Perhaps, then, we can say that there is a special aesthetic way of experiencing emotions, one that takes into account the ‘disinterested’ nature of aesthetic response, e.g. maybe we feel them ‘in imagination’. For example, Wordsworth to talked of poetry as ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’.

We can argue that this account improves on the two above. First, it is more accurate to say that artworks express emotion than that they represent emotion. Of course, emotions can be represented. But we need to distinguish between the emotion represented in a painting and the emotion expressed by a painting, as in 23. Jan Steen’s The Effects of Intemperance (1663-5). All the characters are in drunken merriment, but the painting as a whole serves as a warning. We are interested in the emotions expressed by the work as a whole.

But, second, this doesn’t make representation irrelevant, because there is a close connection between what is represented, how it is represented, and the feelings expressed, as clearly shown in 24. Grünewald’s The Crucifixion (c. 1502). The tortured body of Christ and the sickly greens and yellows combine to express horror and pathos. However, what is represented need not be something we could actually encounter for the work to express and generate powerful feelings, as in 25. Francis Bacon’s Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion (c. 1944).

Third, non-representational art can equally express or evoke feelings, e.g. through its form. In 26. Mark Rothko’s Red on Maroon (1959), the pulsating edges, the lack of saturation in the colour, the smears in the red are unsettling, yet the way in which the red rectangle sinks gently into the darker background at the bottom is comforting. In music, we find rhythms, pace, and key echo our emotional experiences – a ‘lively’ pace in a major key can have the energy and optimism of joy, a slow pace in a minor key can express sadness.
Furthermore, our understanding of what the artist was expressing is increased by looking at the context in which the work was created, including the personal life of the artist, the tradition in which they worked, the innovations in expression they made, and the broader culture context (as in Duchamp’s *Fountain*). Trying to see the work as the original audience would have seen it, with the ideas and expectations of their time, further deepens our response.

The Russian novelist and critic Leo Tolstoy defended a version of this theory about the value of art. It is not just that the art expresses the artist and evokes emotions in the audience; it is that it connects the two:

> Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands onto others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by those feelings and also experience them. (*What Is Art?*)

The value of art doesn’t lie in the pleasure of individuals, taken as individuals. We are, Tolstoy argued, social creatures, and art connects us to each other. The audience comes to share the artist’s psychological state, establishing a bond between them. We may add that, as the audience comes to share the same psychological state as each other, a bond is also established between members of the audience.

**DISCUSSION AND DEVELOPMENT**

As expressed so far, this theory is open to a number of objections.

First, a work of art can’t be just about transmitting feeling – in that case, anything that transmitted the feeling from artist to audience would serve as well. But artworks are not replaceable in this way.

We can reply that nothing else could convey exactly this feeling, as nothing else expresses exactly this feeling. A central claim of expressivism is that the feeling is not something that takes a precise form before the work is completed. The artist is not ‘copying’ from a feeling to the work. Instead, in creating the work they are working out the feeling more precisely. The artist makes the work ‘just so’, a task that is demanding in its detail. ‘Infection is only obtained when an artist finds those infinitely minute degrees of which a work of art consists’, says Tolstoy. Hence nothing else could take its place as an expression of this feeling.

But, second, it is simply false that the artist needs to experience the emotions that they are trying to arouse in the audience. A composer commissioned to write a rousing, patriotic piece may not feel patriotism. This is true, but they do need to be acquainted with emotions well enough to create an imaginative expression of that will arouse those feelings.

Third, we can object that it is too restrictive to talk just of ‘mood’ or ‘feeling’. What is expressed is not just emotion. This misses out the intellectual aspects of art, the ideas that the artist is expressing. We can argue, then, that it would be better to talk of good art as expressing a vision rather than a feeling or mood.
We can reply that this misses the important second half of the theory, that good art should be moving. In other words, the vision cannot be just intellectual; it must touch us emotionally, and for it to do this, we can argue, it must also be an expression of emotion.

Fourth, we can argue that the audience need not come to share the artist’s feelings or attitudes. For example, Marat was a controversial political figure who advocated the guillotining of many of his political opponents after the French Revolution and was assassinated in his bath. In *The Death of Marat* (1793), Jacques-Louis David, who shared Marat’s political views portrays Marat sympathetically, as a martyr. In responding to his painting aesthetically, we need not come to share these feelings about Marat or his death. We should accept this, but can reply that to engage with a work, we nevertheless need to try to see it from the perspective that is expressed by it.

Finally, we may object that the theory has not yet explained what is distinctive about emotional expression in art and our emotional responses to art.

**COLLINGWOOD**

In *The Principles of Art*, The philosopher R C Collingwood provides an answer to this last point by developing the point mentioned in response to the first objection above. A work of art is not an outpouring of emotion or an attempt to deliberately arouse emotions, he argued. It is, instead, a clarification of emotion. It is pure expression for its own sake, and the emotion expressed is not known until the work is complete. Art is not ‘the conscious working-out of means to the achievement of a conscious purpose’, but what the completed work expresses unfolds in the process of creation. It invites an exercise of imagination in the audience to recreate this emotion for themselves.

When talking about what an artwork expresses, it would be a mistake to think this was conscious to the mind of the artist as they worked. While the artist may have certain conscious ‘intentions’, much more of their psychology goes into the work than this. In particular, their unconscious mental states, emotions, vision and experience of the world, can play a large role. An artist can be surprised by their own product. Nevertheless, when they view the work, they sense it has expressed something for them.

Collingwood argues that ‘art proper’ is not an expression of emotion for any purpose or entertainment. As such, it should be distinguished from art as entertainment, where the purpose is to arouse and discharge particular emotions in the audience. Horror films are a clear example of this, where the aim is that the audience feels (enjoyably) terrified. Art proper should also be distinguished from art as ‘magic’, where the purpose is to arouse and direct particular emotions, such as patriotism or, in religious art, devotion to God.

**Objections**

We can object that the theory turns the audience into an artist – they must imaginatively reconstruct the emotion of the artist, to discover the precise emotion expressed in the work. This seems implausible, and in fact, Collingwood accepts that it is, at best, only partially successful. But we can reply that art can communicate, not just arouse, emotion – if not by imaginatively reconstruction, then how?

Second, does all art express emotion? Some conceptual art, for instance, expresses an idea; many artefacts, such as vases or rugs, may be beautiful without expressing any feeling; and what of ‘nice’ music, pleasant to listen to, but expressing nothing in
particular? Collingwood’s response is to say that none of this is art proper. We can object that this threatens to make his account circular: “What do we value about art? Emotional expression. What about art that isn’t expressive? It isn’t art.” If what counts as art is that which is emotionally expressive, then of course emotional expression will be what we value. But this isn’t a complete account of what we value if we try to include as art everything that has usually been seen as art.

Third, many things that are emotionally expressive, like saying ‘I love you’, are not art. It must be, then, that there is something else about art that we value or we cannot explain why we value it as art. Collingwood would respond art proper does not seek to arouse emotion directly, as these other expression would. But again, we can object that much religious art, such as 28. Bellini’s _The Dead Christ supported by Angels_ (1465-70), was painted to help arouse religious experience and emotions. People clearly have valued art for this function. To exclude it completely seems arbitrary. So, again, what distinguishes art from other expressions of emotion? We can reply that it is the attempt to clarify precisely a feeling that is unclear.

Finally, on this view, whether something is a work of art depends entirely on its origins in the state of mind of the artist. If it a working-out, a clarification or articulation of their feeling, then it is art; otherwise, it is not. Is this right? Are not other issues of form and success in representation also relevant?

**CROCE: THE EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION OF ART**

In _The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General_, Benedetto Croce argued that we must organize stimuli in order to create experience of the world that is intelligible (representations). The artist does the same thing. Croce argued that receiving orderless stimuli is frustrating and painful, so we want to organize it, which we do by imposing a form. He pointed to the sense of frustration we can all have at not being able to find the right words to express ourselves, a frustration artists also feel when they can’t quite complete a painting or identify the right chord sequence. It is central to art that one solution after another is tried and rejected in the attempt to find exactly the ‘right’ expression of what the artist has a sense of. When the right expression is found, aesthetic pleasure follows. Our representations are also expressions. (Or at least in such cases as these, we may want to add. Croce thought that all representations are expressions, and there is no determinate reality prior to our representations.)

Croce agrees with Tolstoy and Collingwood that when art expresses emotion, then, this is not simply letting out an emotion, but searching for precisely the right outlet. For this, the artist must be in control of their emotion. When the expression seems ‘just right’, it enables self-understanding: ‘this is how I feel’. To grasp what is expressed, the audience must recreate the expression in themselves. This insight is gained directly, intuitively, not through inference from an analysis of the features of the work, although a great knowledge of the context of the work and what it represents can help us come to understand what is expressed. Only after we have grasped what is expressed can we analyse how each part of the work contributes towards this effect. For Croce, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
ART AND THE ARTIST'S STATE OF MIND

Our last objection to Collingwood was that expressivism seems to place all the value of art in the state of mind of the artist. There is a way in which the artwork is really in the mind, in what the artist seeks to express and its imaginative articulation. Both Croce and Collingwood suggest as much – works of art are fundamentally mental, though expressed in physical form. The product is secondary to the mental process of working through of what is expressed.

But this, we can object, is wrong in at least two ways. First, on this view, it is what the artist is trying to express that makes an artwork successful as art or not. But a work can be good art even if it doesn’t express what the artist intended.

In reply, we could agree that the intention of the artist is not the criteria for the success or value of the work, but it is crucial for interpretation. But this gives way too quickly. We should not confuse what the artist expressed with what they intended to express. In trying to discover what the artist expressed, we aren’t trying to recreate what went on in the artist’s mind when they were creating the work. Their intention may change in response to how the work develops and much of what they are doing may be unconscious to them. References to the artist’s ‘intention’ should be understood in the broadest possible way, to include all the psychological states, that contributed to them making the artwork exactly as they did, though perhaps with special emphasis on the feelings being made precise. On this view, given that the artist’s intention develops with the creation of the work, what they intend to express is what makes the artwork good, if they succeed in expressing it. (We can then add that a good artist is one who succeeds in expressing what they are trying to express.)

Second, it runs against our aesthetic experience, which is so strongly directed by the product itself. This is less true in literature, which is the case used by Croce and Collingwood to support their case. But we should not generalize, as they did, from literature to other types of art such as painting and sculpture, where our visual experience of what (physical thing) we are looking at is so dominant.

Given the way in which neither what the artist seeks to express nor its expression exists clearly in the mind of the artist before the artwork is complete suggests that Croce and Collingwood are wrong to separate and contrast the mental and physical aspects of the work of art. The artwork is not purely physical, because it has been created throughout by a process of thought. On the other hand, that process of thought was not possible except through expression in a physical form. This is shown by the fact that the artist tries and rejects many physical forms (paint marks, chords in sound, words on a page, and so on) in developing the expression of their sense of the emotion (or vision) that needs to be expressed. And they do not get the sense of the right solution until they see it (or hear it).

IS ART EXPRESSION?

We objected above that expression cannot be what we value about art because not all art is expression and not all expression is art. We can now reply using Croce’s idea of finding exactly the right solution to express what we want to. Music that is pleasant to listen to but expresses ‘nothing in particular’, as we put it, does in fact still express something. It expresses the composer’s idea of how pleasant music should sound. At any number of points in the composition, different notes could have been written, different themes
developed. The composer chose what they chose because it was precisely the right thing at the right time. That such judgments are not always challenging does not change the fact that they are of the same kind as the judgments made by a great artist in a masterpiece.

This response has two important consequences. First, it moves away from the view that what is expressed in a work of art is always mainly emotional. The more general view is that the artist expresses a ‘vision’, even that vision is only of how pleasant music should sound.

Second, the response erases any sharp line between what is art and what is not art, because we all make this kind of aesthetic judgment – when we are getting dressed, decorating our houses, or putting together a play list for a party. But then what is it about art that we value? One reply is that it is a matter of degree. In the art we value most, what is expressed may be profound and very difficult to express, yet the solution found is adequate to it.