

# Art, Identity and Everyday Experience

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Traditionally, art has been considered to be a form of expression, or something that is pleasing to our senses. But is this it? Is there any more significance to art besides placing it behind glass or hanging it on our walls? This paper considers the following question: What is the relationship between art, identity and everyday experience? I believe that art is born out of and in everyday experience; that art can be an expression of the artist who creates it and that he/she can observe the work of art and identify himself with it. Art, identity and everyday experience have an intrinsic relationship. The work of art not only allows the artist to identify himself with his work, but in so far as art is born out of and in everyday experience the work of art also reflects the community to which the artist belongs. This interpretation of art allows for the simultaneous creation and preservation of the individual artist's and the community's identity.

In order to develop my argument I work with John Dewey's theory of aesthetics from his book *Art as Experience*.<sup>1</sup> I draw from the classic American Pragmatist tradition and in order to make the theories concrete I use flamenco as a primary example of how art, identity and everyday experience are interrelated.

The body of this essay will take the following form: It is divided in three main sections. The first section establishes and explains Dewey's theoretical background in order to argue that art is a double-barreled word. From here, I move on to the subject of identity, both the individual's and the community's, and how each affects the other. The

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey John, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934).

third and last section will be concrete examples of the theories used throughout the essay. I will use the art form of flamenco to point out how the theories in my argument coincide with the actual work of art.

## I. Dewey's Art as Experience

The following is a brief background of some of the leading aesthetic theories. This background will allow us to better understand the value of Dewey's theory of art as experience.

Briefly then, there is the classical Greek idea of art as imitation of reality. Plato believed that the purpose of art is to imitate or copy the real things in life. For example, the way a portrait is supposed to be a copy of someone's face, or the way still life is a copy of a bowl with fruit in it. Since art is a mere copy of the physical object, Plato naturally disliked art. He believed we should contemplate the true Form of Beauty instead of being distracted by art. Aristotle on the other hand believed that appreciating the beautiful in the particular work of art allows us to have an insight into what the Form of Beauty might be.

There were the Romantics, influenced by Kant's concept of noumena. They believed that there is a part of the universe that is not accessible to humans through reason or the senses. If it is accessible to us at all it would have to be through intuition or the imagination. The poets Coleridge, Byron, Shelly, were among them.

A more recent theory of aesthetics is Clive Bell's theory that art is something with Significant Form, which he defines as

Lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and

colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call 'Significant Form'; and 'Significant Form' is the one quality common to all works of visual art.<sup>2</sup>

Bell wants to point to the "something" that makes art what it is; he believes this is "Significant Form." For example, the Eiffel tower, or Duchamp's bottle rack are both works of art because though they are not representations of something else, and though neither are products of our intuition, both share in "Significant Form" and are thus considered works of art.

There is also George Dickie's idea that art is nothing more than what the art world says art is.

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artefact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld).<sup>3</sup>

According to this theory anyone that forms part of the art world (critics, artists, consumers, etc.) decides what art is. Dickie's idea is straight forward, if it is deemed by the people who make up the art world to be art, then it is art.

These were simply a few theories on aesthetics to frame the rest of the argument and serve as background to help us find the relationship between art, identity, and everyday experience. Unlike the previous theories, Dewey believes art is born out of and in everyday experience, that art is a reflection of the artist who creates it and to a degree, also a reflection of the community where it is born. Hence, if this is the case, the artist and his community can observe the work of art and be able to identify themselves with it, on some level.

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<sup>2</sup> Bell Clive, *Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1914).

<sup>3</sup> Dickie George, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

Here, we must distinguish what is meant by someone identifying with a work of art. To identify oneself with a work of art (assuming one is not the artist) does not mean that the work of art causes us to have an aesthetic experience. I can identify with many things that artists from my culture have created; however, this does not mean that they touch me aesthetically. Perhaps I can identify with them for other reasons such as a sense of cultural pride, or because I remember my grandmother liking a particular song. Yes, it could be argued that national pride and fond memories are aesthetically felt. However, I could also not care the slightest bit about polka music and still admit, I mean identify with it in so far as it is part of my culture. We do not have to be moved aesthetically by everything within our culture.

Dewey's aesthetic theory claims that our aesthetic experiences are found in our lived experience. Within our lived experience we can have many different types of experiences, some better than others, some are aesthetic, some are emotionally charged such as the feeling of sadness, some are frightful, some cognitive, some religious and all of them are types of experiences that make up our lived experience.<sup>4</sup>

Dewey believes that art is born out of and in and because of our everyday experience. To use his words: "organism and environment," "doing and undergoing," "transaction," "inception -> development -> consummation," "resistance -> growth." All of these words represent aspects of Dewey's philosophy. He believed it would behoove us to think of ourselves as organisms in an environment, as organisms that do and undergo experiences. The doing and undergoing being a constant transaction between us and our environment, including everything in that environment, other people, grass,

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps right now you are experiencing boredom, but lucky for you, Dewey will tell you this experience will eventually come to a conclusion and a new and different one will begin.

animals, numbers, feelings. This constant transaction between us and our environment is Dewey's metaphysics of process. According to this view of metaphysics both the environment and the organism are constantly transformed by the transactions they have with each other. Since one experience bleeds into the next experience, Dewey believed experiences took the following rhythm: "inception -> development -> consummation," which would then develop into other experiences ad infinitum. Dewey also believed that growth came out of experience, which he sees as intrinsically resistant to human ease. To experience is to suffer change, and change can be pleasant, or painful, or both. We do fall out of step with our environment, but perhaps we might find balance again and thus experience growth.

In order to argue that art is born out of and in everyday experience, I will make the claim that art is a double-barrelled word. Incidentally, Dewey obtained this idea from William James who claims that some words are double-barrelled.

I maintain, does a given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, play the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of 'consciousness'; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective 'content.' In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing. And, since it can figure in both groups simultaneously we have every right to speak of it as subjective and objective both at once. The dualism connoted by such double-barrelled terms as 'experience,' 'phenomenon,' 'datum,' 'Vorfingung.'<sup>5</sup>

Life and history are two examples of what James calls double-barrelled words. By this he means that life is both that which allows us to live our life as well as our life being the life we live; or history being that which we shape, but also that which shapes us. Dewey has a couple of examples as well:

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<sup>5</sup> James William, "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) 172.

It is no linguistic accident that 'building,' 'construction,' 'work,' designate both a process and its finished product. Without the meaning of the verb that of the noun remains blank.<sup>6</sup>

Double-barrelled words are then words that allow themselves to take place. The words signify the context within which they take place. Art has a double-barrelled function as well. Art is that which the artist creates, namely, the work of art. Art is also that which creates the artist. Really, art creates much more than the artist, but to start, let us begin with the idea that art is a double-barrelled word because it is born out of everyday experience and in turn, it helps to create the everyday experience context from which it originates.

There is a difference in connotation with the phrase "everyday experience." This can be interpreted at least in two ways. The first one is the meaning that implies the mundane, the common, the boring. This is not what Dewey means by "everyday experience." Dewey means this is the context within which our different experiences take place and give shape to our everyday experience. Everyday experience is that which allows for and fosters the creation of art. This is the context, the basis out of which the creation and transformation of the artist, communities and cultures arise.

If art is a double-barrelled word it serves two functions. First, it is that which is created by the artist, namely, the work of art. Second, art creates the artist. The claim is that the artist is affected by his transactions with his environment in his everyday experience and goes on to transform these experiences through the creative process of making a work of art. The work of art is to a degree a reflection of the artist and his everyday experience. The artist may look at his work of art and admit that he was

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<sup>6</sup> Dewey, 51.

affected by elements within his everyday experience. These elements could be the woman he loves, the loss of a friend, the "war on terror," or his dog chasing a stick. As an artist, he has the sensibility to be aesthetically affected by any and all of the elements within his everyday experience. As an artist, he also has the ability to express what affects him through the creation of his art. Therefore, the art which is created by an artist emerges out of and in his everyday experience. He might write a poem to his beloved, paint the grief he feels over the loss of a friend on the canvas, he may write a song of protest against the government, or photograph his dog leaping in the air.

The work of art created by the artist reflects and transforms the elements of his everyday experience, he in turn can look at his work and see himself in it, he can identify with it; he can see who he is reflected in his work. An artist is most intrinsically connected to his work. His work is a palpable extension of his identity into the world. In terms of Karl Marx, the artist is one with his work; he is far from being alienated from his labor. Even if we do not want to read the relationship of an artist to his work through a Marxist lens, we can acknowledge that the artist is able to look at his work and observe his personal development over time. Each work of art created by the individual artist reflects a time period, a context, a stage in his life. Thus in his works of art, the artist can see the development of his identity through time.

This, however, is only what takes place between the artist and his works of art. Since art is born out of and in everyday experience, and the art created by the artist reflects and transforms elements of this everyday experience, other people besides the artist can also identify with the work of art. Other people can identify elements in the work of art that are common to the artist and people who share a similar everyday

experience. The artist is doing more than merely expressing his thoughts and feelings through his work. In so far as the artist transacts with his environment, is affected by his everyday experience and transforms this experience by creating art, he is also displaying to people in his community the elements of the everyday experience that they have in common. A community of people may experience similar thoughts and feelings of let us say political outrage. The artist creates art that contains these elements of outrage and people who share this experience can observe common elements of their experience represented by the work of art.

## II. Identity

Art allows for the simultaneous creation and preservation of personal and communal identity.

Esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization. For while it is produced and is enjoyed by individuals, those individuals are what they are in the content of their experience because of the cultures in which they participate.<sup>7</sup>

The work of art not only reflects the identity of the individual artist who creates it, but also of the whole community that shares the everyday experience of the artist. People within the community can then look at the work of art and see their experience reflected on the canvas, lyrics, etc. and identify themselves with the work of art. In this sense art is a double-barrelled word. Art is created by an artist, but it also creates the artist. Art is created by an artist within a community, but it also allows for the creation of a common identity in so far as members of a group see their experience framed by the work of art.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 326.



If we look at art as having a double-barrelled function, art simultaneously creates and preserves both the individual artist's and the community's identity. The creative act, along with its manifestation: the work of art, are the personal development of the artist.

### III. Flamenco

There are many examples of how the artist, through his art creates and preserves his and his community's identity. The example that I have chosen to explore is Folk music. There are of course particular types of Folk music to particular cultures, but widely speaking, Folk music is music of the people. As such, it reflects the everyday experience of the people who create it. Bluegrass, blues, Negro spirituals, gospel are all different types of folk music that are born out of and in the everyday experience of their respective communities.

The argument can be made that if all music (and art for that matter) is a reflection of its people, then opera, or muzak are also types of folk music and we would not be able to draw a line to distinguish between high and low art. If we think of folk music as any music that is created by its people, yes, there is no difference between high and low art. All music is created within a community's everyday experience so that Enrico Caruso and Miles Davis simultaneously create and preserve their individual and their community's identity through their art.

Flamenco is commonly known as Spanish folk music. Most people think of red carnations and ruffled skirts, but as an art form that is intrinsically tied to a particular culture its history is more complex. Flamenco is the music of the gypsies, a community of people who have been marginalized and persecuted throughout Europe. They have been the outcasts of the mainstream European society.

Flamenco has its roots in the Gypsy, Moorish and Jewish cultures. The gypsies originated in northern India (Punjab) and made their way through Europe, to Persia, Egypt and Spain. The Moors lived in Spain from 711 to 1492, roughly 800 years. After 800 years of inter-cultural mixing the Arabic influence is very strong throughout Spain, from architecture to music, to the way many Spanish words have their roots in Arabic.<sup>8</sup> In 1478 the Spanish inquisition took effect and its goal was to drive out any non-Christian groups out of Spain. The Moors and the Jews were given an ultimatum by the Spanish Catholic church: either renounce your faith and convert to Catholicism or leave Spain. Faced with this excruciating predicament, thousands of Moors and Jews chose to be true to their faith at the expense of persecution, torture and many times death.

Flamenco was born out of the everyday experience of these communities. Although not all flamenco music is sorrowful, all of what is called "cante jondo" (deep song) and "palos" (rhythms) such as siguriya, martinete, petenera, soleá are dark and mournful. The traditional "quejido" (cry) at the beginning of each song is the singer's lament for the sad fate of his people. The guitar cords played emote seriousness, gravity, edgy emotional urgency. The rhythm soleá means solitude, loneliness. The martinete rhythm is marked by a hammer striking metal. This is the rhythm of the welders. Gypsies were known throughout Europe for their ability to work with metal. The beating of the hammer against the metal marks the rhythm of this song, but it also marks the rhythm of their everyday experience, their labor and the sadness felt by this community as their work is exploited and praised by the mainstream society who aside from their work, wants nothing else to do with these outcasts. Traditionally, only women who are

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<sup>8</sup> Some examples are "ojalá" which derives from "Inshaallah" and means "God willing." Also, "alacrán" which means scorpion, and "jarabe" meaning syrup.

over 40 years old are allowed to dance siguiriyas. Gypsies believe that any woman who is younger than 40 has not suffered through enough of life's experiences to understand the severity of this rhythm and interpret it well. Here is the translation of a flamenco song:

It is now 12 noon / in the audience's clock / who are observing my sentence / My God what will happen? / And all of this because I was born a gypsy / Do not think that I am a bad person / There are some who are bad and some who are good / And we are also Christian.<sup>9</sup>

This is a traditional letra sung by martinete about a man who is about to meet his death sentence for being a gypsy. He tells us that underneath it all gypsies are people who feel pain just like any other person.

Flamenco is the cante (singing), the guitar, the palmas (clapping), the dancing, and most recently the cajón (drum box) has been incorporated into the art form. The cante is at the center of flamenco, with the guitar, palmas, dance and cajón to accompany the cante. As with any other art form, each of these elements requires aesthetic sensibility, talent and training.

We can see how flamenco is born out of the everyday experience of a particular group of people, namely Spanish gypsies. Flamenco is then the aesthetic manifestation of the artist and his community. Through flamenco, the individual identity of the artist is both created and preserved; the same is true for the community's identity. The artist can of course acknowledge a part of himself in his work, but the community can relate to flamenco as its cultural history is continuously recreated and preserved.

Dewey tells us that

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<sup>9</sup> This is a traditional letra por martinete (my translation): "Las doce acaban de dar / y en el reloj de la audiencia / pendiente de mi sentencia / ¿Dio mío que pasará? / Y po que he nacido gitano / No crean que soy malo / que avemo malo y bueno / y también como cristiano."

Every culture has its own collective individuality. Like the individuality of the person from whom a work of art issues, this collective individuality leaves its indelible imprint upon the art that is produced.<sup>10</sup>

Here Dewey is giving us one side of the directive flow of art:

artist's & culture's identity flow into the art that is produced

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This is one side of the equation of the whole argument. This is the individual's and the community's identity produced and found in everyday experience. The opposite is also true, the art produced helps to create and preserve the identity of both the artist and the artist's community. Art is one way in which a community's cultural history is passed down through generations and transmitted to younger generations. The individuals within the younger generations can find out culturally who they are by studying their culture's art. No, not all of one's identity can be reduced to one's culture, but it is a substantial part of our individual identity. This side of the equation is:

art produced by an artist within a community influences his & the community's identity

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Thus far I have argued that this relationship takes place between the creative individual, the work of art and the community. What about other individuals outside of the artist's community? Are they unable to appreciate other culture's art? Do they not "get it"? Does each culture have a monopoly over their art? The answer is no, art is universal.

One does not need to speak ancient Greek or be Greek to appreciate Greek tragedy or architecture. Surely it helps, however art touches each individual person

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<sup>10</sup> Dewey, 330.

differently. Although some aesthetic experiences are more intense than others, no one is more legitimate than another. When a person has an aesthetic experience, there are elements of the work of art and elements of that person's personal experience and history that form a relationship and it is this communion that one has with and enticed by the work of art that creates the aesthetic experience. Dewey calls this process "doing and undergoing." The aesthetic experience involves a transaction between the organism and his environment. The organism is us and art is part of our environment. At the moment of aesthetic experience we do not put our emotions, thoughts, appetites and history aside. On the contrary, a work of art stimulates a part of us which then pays closer attention to the work of art, which in turn incites another stimulation of another part of our personal experience and thus the process of one experience leading into the next. This doing and undergoing process takes place between the individual person and the work of art throughout the aesthetic experience.

Anyone outside of the gypsy culture is potentially capable of being moved aesthetically by flamenco. Just as anyone outside of Italian culture can have an aesthetic experience while enjoying an Italian meal.

Works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own.<sup>11</sup>

Art allows us to grow, to develop in so far as we are moved by an aesthetic experience.

Who we are as a person undergoes the aesthetic experience and we come out of this experience with a wider appreciation of elements within our everyday experience. As Dewey tells us, art allows us to experience aspects of the world, *other forms of relationship and participation than our own*. You and I did not live in ancient Greece,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 333.

but we are still able to read Homer's epic poems, appreciate Greek sculpture, and study their mythology. The aesthetic experience involving elements of Greek culture is one of the deepest insights we are able to have into their culture, or into the experience of the individual artist who created the work of art that moves us.

An example of how art allows us to have experiences different than our own is how we can appreciate the tragic heroes in Greek mythology. Though in our immediate everyday experience we may not know any tragic heroes, we can understand their character when we learn stories such as that of Prometheus. There is something incredibly empowering (though tragic) about ancient Greek culture that we may not find in our immediate everyday experience - the ability to dare defy the gods. Greeks had a very high regard of human potential. Although ancient Greek culture and their art may be foreign to us, we can enhance our everyday experience and grow if we are touched aesthetically by their art.

## Conclusion

Although my main claim has been to emphasize the relationship between art, and the identity of the individual artist and his community, the role of art is clearly not subject to this relationship only. We have established that other people outside of a culture can be touched aesthetically by that culture's art. To further this point, we must acknowledge that art is a universal language.

Art is a more universal mode of language than is the speech that exists in a multitude of mutually unintelligible forms. The language of art has to be acquired. But the language of art is not affected by the accidents of history that mark off different modes of human speech. The power of music in particular to merge different individualities in a common surrender, loyalty and inspiration, a power utilized in religion and in warfare alike, testifies to the relative universality

of the language of art. The differences between English, French and German speech create barriers that are submerged when art speaks.<sup>12</sup>

This passage points to the ability of art to communicate universally. Art comes further along in communication than the different languages we speak. Art allows us to understand the experience of other people who are remote to us in language, time, space, or culture.

The significance of this paper, of the idea that art is a double-barrelled word is that this interpretation of art allows us to conceive of art not merely as an aesthetic object that is pleasing to the senses, but as a means of communication to understand the experiences of others as well as our own. As it has been noted, art is much more than that which triggers an aesthetic experience, art allows us to understand and perhaps even identify with other people from other cultures whose language, time and history may be different from ours. Art allows us to understand each other and to understand ourselves. As artists we can look at our works of art and see our personal experiences develop and as a culture we can observe the previous and current works of art to understand our cultural history and our current cultural state. In so far as art is born out of everyday experience we can understand part of who we are, part of our identity through the work of art.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 335.