

Occasional Essay 2

Art as Therapy

Alain de Botton & John Armstrong, in Art as Therapy (Phaidon, 2013), consider the psychological baggage we bring with us into our experience of works of art, and argue that that experience – in ourselves and in our galleries – can be so adjusted and improved as to ‘help us with our most ordinary and intimate dilemmas.’ Now read on...



William Etty (1787-1849), *Toilet of Venus*, circa 1840, York Art Gallery: would this suit a section of the Gallery entitled ‘Love’ (or ‘Fear’)?

Over the last year or so, as the BBC flexes its new policy of luring all and sundry – especially The Young – into contact with classical music, regular listeners to Radio 3 have been growing accustomed to having pieces of music recommended to them as tonics or sedatives – as uplifters, inspirers, calmatives, rib-ticklers, and anaesthetics. This is music, we are assured, that will Do Us Good. It will have a beneficial effect on our moods. It will enable – nay, empower – us to live a fuller,

fruitfuller life in all directions. Quite apart from these present promptings, of course, classical music has always been reputed to do its hearers good, in ways too various and numerous to be easily described – and there have always been puzzling cases, as for example the kind of goodness that Beethoven's string quartets did to German officers who enjoyed relaxing to them in Auschwitz.

In the olden days, before our personal wellbeing was so explicitly invoked in musical appreciation, the ruling assumption had been that those of us who were likely to want to listen to classical music would no doubt welcome a little focusing information from time to time – the style, the period, the composer, the performer – but that the music itself would make its own case and engage the listener's mind and emotions in whatever ways we and its composer managed to concert between us. This was a transaction that needed no, or only the discreetest, go-between. Any moods we found ourselves in were our business, not to be prescribed or specified in advance as the likely effects of the experience we were due to have. There were of course vast stores of relevant and enlightening information available for all who made it their business to seek it; but it was not to be obtruded between the work and its experimenter. It waited upon the experience, and became part of it, if called for, afterwards, and on renewed hearings.

Let us liken the Art Gallery to Radio 3. To the extent to which the normal experience of a visitor to it is similar to the above sketch of what used to be the normal listener's, our authors would advise us that much or even most of the good that Art can do is not being done there. But aid and comfort are at hand, though not immediately.

De Botton and Armstrong invite us to ask the old questions, what is Art for? What does it do? Or – a slight adjustment – what would we like it to do? Their answer is one of the old answers. Art is for doing certain things in and for us – having certain effects on us, developing and intensifying certain capacities in us. The trouble with our capacities, however, is that for most of us, for much of the time, they are mostly *incapacities*, little short of psychological weaknesses, requiring constant strengthening and sharpening – exercise – if they are to fit us for the lives we would like to lead. They need help. Art is the help they need.

Before we visit the gallery our authors suggest that we should review the several broad routes by which the information and experience loaded into the works of art on display there reach us. We 'read' them, they say,

in four main ways: technical, political, historical, and as/for their ‘shock-value’. *Technical* considerations – including paints, perspectives, drawing, colouring &c. – relate to the question: how does the artist achieve these effects? And this is where art history moves in. *Political*: by which they (strain to) mean whatever works of art might tell us about the nature, behaviour, beauty &c. of our fellow human beings. *Historical*: news from the Past; the way we lived Then. *Shock-Value*: this is when, e.g., we are driven to consider whether this or that rebarbative object, presented to us as a work of art, might possibly be so. (There would appear to be no assigned space in this list for essentially aesthetic intentions and responses – one thinks of landscapes, flower-paintings, and pictures of horses and dogs. Perhaps they are supposed to be continuously present, to a greater or lesser degree, in all of the above. One can’t specify everything... .)

We are not yet quite ready to enter the gallery. To fit us for it we need to make another list: of those unfitnesses or inadequacies for which we might hope that the gallery will offer us some solace or tonic. The list of characteristic shortcomings proposed by de Botton and Armstrong is as follows: 1) *sorrow* – by which they mean an inability to cope with it, or to turn it to positive account, or to identify the need for it in contexts and causes not strictly personal; 2) *remembering* – not merely our tendency to forget, but our inability to select and hold in memory what is really useful and significant for us; 3) *hope* – our tendency to be ‘oversensitive to the bad sides of existence’ (especially during lockdowns and other crosses) and, correspondingly, our failures properly to appreciate its good sides; 4) *balance* – our inability to come to terms with, and to make constructive use of, the several drives and needs of our natures; 5) *self-understanding* – goes with 4; 6) *growth* - our tendency to suppose that ‘many experiences, peoples, places, cultures and eras’ have little that is relevant or usable to offer us – that they are ‘foreign’ to us, not likely to contribute anything significant to our life’s scope and quality. All of which leads to 7) *appreciating* – what we are far less adept at than we want to be. Now make your own lists. Most of them will have much in common with this one. (Come to think of it, the Auschwitz puzzle can probably be solved if we suppose that some works of art – although I am most reluctant to believe that Beethoven’s string quartets come into this category – can actually exacerbate the inadequacies listed above instead of healing them.)

Now at last we can get into the gallery. Our lists are at the ready, and we are about to experience some paintings. (Unaccountably, there is nothing in this book about experiencing pots. There are Friends among us who could provide us with that missing how-to chapter.) As we begin to attend to the paintings we cannot help noticing that they are arranged, grouped, in certain ways and that they all have descriptive labels attached to them, generally of the old-style Radio 3 sort. In both these respects, as de Botton and Armstrong point out, many galleries present their collections in large part in accordance with the interests and expertise of art historians – which most curators are: as examples of genres, styles, techniques, periods, schools, individual artists, donors' tastes and collections &c. (This is not to omit the essentially aesthetic considerations that often come into play here, where works are grouped together in order to bring out features in one another which might otherwise pass unappreciated.) The layout and the captions take the viewer into a world that art historians have prepared for us, and it is with their maps and boots that we go exploring in it. The good that this Art is due to do for us is, at a decent remove, the good that it does for art historians.

The gallery we are in, however, is not, alas, York's. We must allow de Botton and Armstrong to take us to New York, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. York's pictures are perfectly accessible, but not – so far as I can discover - the labels accompanying them; and those are what our authors are after. (After the lockdown I'll repeat this exercise, if there's sufficient popular demand, with our own pictures and labels.) The painting they want us to view is Juan de Flandes' [*Christ Appearing to His Mother*](#) (1496). It shows Christ, wearing his wounds, presenting himself to his mother, who registers surprise and wonder – the last time she saw him, of course, he was dead. He is dressed in his winding sheet, she as a nun. In the background, in miniature, there is a depiction of the moment when he rises out of his tomb, with an attendant angel and a prostrate guard.

Other, more eloquent and atmospheric descriptions of this work can easily be imagined, which would do justice to the many details in the setting of the central scene, to the cunning of the perspective, the artfulness of the colouring, and so forth; and possibly, if we were carrying one of those audio devices, we would hear much more about it. But there, on the spot, when we turn to the label, what are we told? We are told that 'workshops routinely produced copies of paintings that were

prized for their spiritual power or for the status of their authorship and/or ownership' and that 'such factors prompted Queen Isabella of Castile to order a copy of Roger van der Weyden's *Mary Altarpiece* (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), which was given by her father, King Juan II, to the Carthusian monastery of Miraflores, near Burgos, Spain, in 1445.' As to, at last, this picture, it is 'the right panel of Isabella's triptych and can tentatively be attributed to her court artist, Juan de Flandes, on the basis of documentary and technical evidence. The centre and left panels remain at Isabella's burial site, the Capilla Real, Granada, where she bequeathed the triptych upon her death in 1504.' (If you go to the Met site you can call up this picture. The accompanying information is as above, in a slightly different order.)

It is obvious that this picture/caption match has been specially selected in order to advance our authors' argument, but, although it can't be accepted as an entirely typical example of its class, it will at any rate remind the ordinary traveller in galleries of what is often to be met with in them. If one happens to want art-historical information about this work, three of the four main routes into what it has to offer can start from this caption. The art historian has here begun to undo his corded bales. But if one has come for help with our (seven types of) shortcomings, it falls by a long way short.

For our authors the central image and subject of the painting is a mother-son relationship. (The Christian viewer might think the Resurrection ought to be at the heart of any account of it but the caption doesn't go there either.) Face-to-face with this subject, they assert, the viewer is absolutely in the therapeutic moment, but the caption absolutely misses it! Here is a sovereign opportunity for the patient to bring his/her psychic life into communion with this work of art: to meditate on what it might suggest about such a relationship and to relate his/her experience of it to it. There are at least seven sorts of inadequacy ready and eager for exploration here. Indeed, the list – sorrow, remembering, hope... - might have been devised with that relationship in mind. (If the viewer is actually taking refuge in the gallery from the mother-son relationship, another picture should be sought.) Jocularly – and 'patient' – aside, de Botton and Armstrong are on to something valuable here, even though their own suggested caption, which rings the changes on the joys and woes of motherhood, must have a veil drawn over it in this bulletin. There are indeed many paintings (and pots) that can be brought into closer contact with the lives

and feelings of the amateur gallery-goer with more help, even a couple of well-chosen sentences' worth, than captions like this one provides. If Radio 3 can do it, so can we. When we are next in our gallery we might look for examples of helpful/helpless kinds. (If the York Gallery had this painting, what would we – if persuaded by de Botton and Armstrong – put into its caption, apart from basic art-historical pointers? Try your hand at this. E.g. 'The painter shows Jesus, still in his winding-sheet, coming immediately after his resurrection to bless and console his mother. The mother-child relationship is central to much Christian art and virtually all religious feeling. Many of our profoundest emotions are rooted in it.')

Obviously, some paintings (and pots) lend themselves fairly directly to the suggestive and stimulating uses that our authors propose, and some do not. 'Nameless and Friendless', for example, when Dorothy Nott shows us how to unpack it, can give five or even six of our failings a proper workout. Others – some still lives come to mind, as well as quite a few works/objects in the *Shock Value* category - are much harder to galvanise into lively connection with the passing viewer. Our authors have a plan to deal with this. This far into the book they have the bit between their teeth: they call on curators to redesign and reorganise their galleries, or parts thereof, on therapeutic principles. Collections should be arranged 'in line with the concerns of our souls, bringing together those objects which, regardless of their origins in space and time, address the troubled areas of existence. Each gallery would focus not on dates and provenance, but on the important rebalancing emotions encouraged by particular works.' This would dispose viewers, 'aided by wise and forthright labels', to see the works thus offered to them as commentaries on their lives. They suggest that there might be, as examples, a gallery of love, a gallery of suffering, a gallery of compassion, a gallery of fear, a gallery of self-knowledge...

We might not wish to follow them so far. This, I hear you cry, would be to turn galleries into psychiatric wards. Many of our visitors, in many of their moods, might be driven out of a gallery which had such evident designs on them rather than being encouraged to go on, in a questing spirit, into it. Even an odd corner here and there devoted to one of these conditions – a Fear corner, or a Love one - might lead to incidents requiring the attention of trained staff. But of course we do not need to go so far. Even if we stop well short of it, however, we still need to weigh the questions de Botton and Armstrong have put to us. We all know from our own

experience that there certainly are pictures and objects that sensitise us to important aspects of our lives. Knowing this, do we feel that it is sufficient to have such works up on a wall or in a vitrine, date/artist attached; or – in a mood induced by current trends in Radio 3 – that an extra degree of signalling, sensitising or special pleading in their captions would be appropriate? If we all know that ‘Art is good for us’, our authors suggest that we should take an interest in how, psychologically considered, the experience of it can be made better. Special themed exhibitions can contribute to that, but wider, more pervasive strategies can be imagined. If we reject the strategy proposed by de Botton and Armstrong, why do we reject it? Our answer to that question will reveal the strengths and weaknesses of our conception of the proper function of art galleries.

We all know that art galleries gather and display their collections in the hope and belief that they will delight, inspire and acculturate visiting viewers. These authors want to go higher: to challenge them ‘to take up the conception of the transformative, redemptive power of art...’. It’s a big ask, but we all know art is up to it.

As a postscript, it is worth adding that the National Gallery has taken de Botton and Armstrong's counsel to heart and is applying it - see on their site Christine Riding's [‘Curated Look at Kindness’](#)!

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