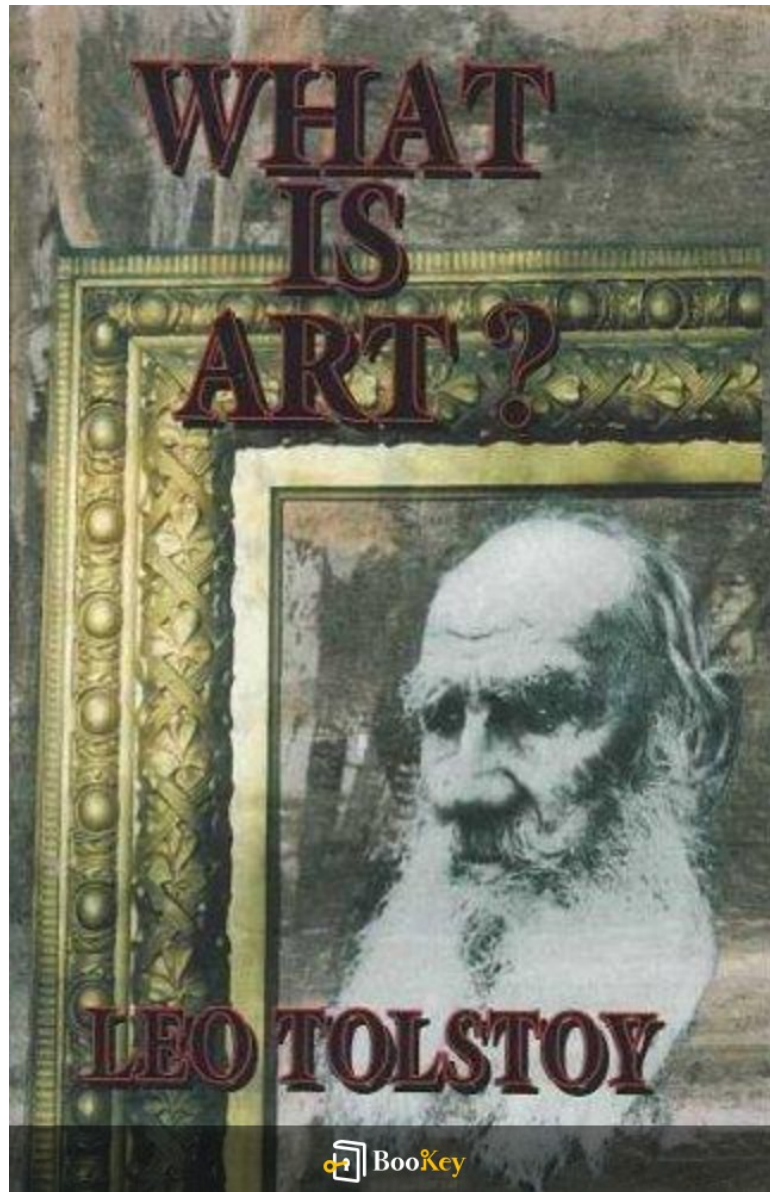


What Is Art? PDF

Leo Tolstoy



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About the book

Exploration of Art by Leo Tolstoy: A Reformatory Journey

In his captivating work, "What Is Art?", Leo Tolstoy embarks on an enlightening journey to unravel the essence of art and its significance in society. He challenges the mainstream views of his era, which often leaned towards elitism and superficiality in artistic expression. Tolstoy's vision attempts to reshape the understanding of art, positing it as a vital force grounded in moral and emotional depth. He argues that genuine art possesses the power to unite people, disseminate ethical principles, and cultivate empathy among all of humanity. Through a critical lens, he prompts readers to reflect on the true nature of artistic endeavors and their societal implications. This timeless philosophical exploration remains strikingly pertinent in today's world, filled with artistic intricacies and cultural discussions. Engage with Tolstoy's transformative insights and rediscover the profound meanings and significance of art in our lives.

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About the author

Profile: Leo Tolstoy

Birth Date: September 9, 1828

Nationality: Russian

Professions: Novelist, Philosopher, Social Reformer

Overview:

Leo Tolstoy is celebrated as one of history's greatest writers, renowned for his monumental novels "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina." His literary work delves into the intricate facets of human existence, addressing deep-seated themes such as morality, spirituality, and societal structure.

Literary Contributions:

- Major Works:

- *War and Peace*
- *Anna Karenina*

- Key Themes:

- Complexity of Human Experience
- Exploration of Morality and Spirituality
- Society's Nature

Philosophical Beliefs:

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Tolstoy was a vocal critic of imperial Russia and championed nonviolent resistance. In his later years, he adopted a life centered around asceticism and simplicity, deeply engaging in philosophical reflection. His quest for understanding culminated in many essays and treatises, notably "What Is Art?" where he evaluates the significance and intent of art within society.

Legacy:

Through his profound writings and lived ideals, Tolstoy has significantly influenced both literary circles and social philosophy, motivating countless individuals globally to reflect on moral and ethical questions. His enduring impact continues to resonate with readers and thinkers alike.

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What Is Art? Summary

Written by Listenbrief

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What Is Art? Summary Chapter List

1. Understanding the Nature and Purpose of Art: An Introduction
2. Exploring the Criteria of True Art and Artistic Value
3. The Role of Emotion in Art and Its Connection to Humanity
4. Art as a Means of Communication and Social Understanding
5. Reflecting on the Impact of Art on Society and the Individual

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1. Understanding the Nature and Purpose of Art: An Introduction

In his profound exploration of art, Leo Tolstoy addresses the fundamental nature and purpose of art, arguing that it is rooted in human experiences and emotional expressions that bring about a shared connection among individuals. Tolstoy contends that art serves a crucial role in society, acting both as a mirror reflecting the reality of human emotions and as a bridge uniting people in their common feelings and aspirations.

At the crux of Tolstoy's thesis is the belief that art is intrinsically linked to the communication of emotions. He posits that true art should resonate universally, allowing both the creator and the audience to communicate feelings that transcend personal experiences. According to Tolstoy, the purpose of art is to convey emotions with clarity, enabling the artist to express their inner sentiments while simultaneously allowing the audience to feel and understand these emotions. In this sense, art becomes a conduit for empathy and connection, fostering a deep sense of awareness among people.

Tolstoy critically distinguishes between genuine art and mere entertainment or superficial decorative art. He emphasizes that true art should fulfill a vital function; it must not only be aesthetically pleasing but should also serve as a tool for moral and emotional enrichment. For example, consider the powerful impact of literature that addresses social injustices; works like



Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities" offer readers a stark portrayal of human suffering and resilience, compelling them to confront the harsh realities of life and consider the broader societal implications of inequality.

Moreover, Tolstoy argues that the purpose of art extends beyond individual enjoyment or profit. He highlights how art can lead to collective feelings of love, compassion, and understanding, encouraging individuals to participate in societal issues. In this light, public performances, community murals, and inclusive art projects serve as remarkable examples of how art can galvanize communities. Instances like the 'Human Library' initiative, where people share their stories and experiences as living books, illustrate how art can facilitate dialogue about diversity and foster connection between disparate groups.

Another essential aspect Tolstoy discusses is the relationship between art and morality. He proposes that art becomes true art only when it inspires a genuine moral response, urging individuals to reflect on their moral compass and fostering a sense of responsibility towards oneself and society. This notion is powerfully embodied in Pablo Picasso's "Guernica," which depicts the horrors of war and serves as a poignant anti-war statement, demanding not only awareness but also action against violence.

Tolstoy's reflections also extend to the accessibility of art, arguing that for

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art to fulfill its purpose, it must be available to all people, irrespective of their socio-economic background. He championed the idea that art should bridge societal gaps rather than reinforce them, arguing for the democratization of artistic expression. This perspective is echoed in the growth of community art initiatives around the world, where local artists collaborate with communities to create expressions of collective identity that promote inclusion and shared understanding.

In summary, Tolstoy's inquiry into the nature and purpose of art reveals its profound impact on the human experience. Art is not merely a pursuit of beauty or aesthetic pleasure; it serves a much deeper purpose—communicating emotional truths, fostering social cohesion, and enhancing moral consciousness. Through these lenses, art transforms into a significant force in shaping individuals and societies, calling for introspection, understanding, and ultimately, action. Thus, understanding and appreciating the nature of art is essential in recognizing its potential to influence and connect humanity across various dimensions.

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2. Exploring the Criteria of True Art and Artistic Value

In his exploration of art, Leo Tolstoy delves deeply into the criteria that define what constitutes true art and its intrinsic value. At the heart of Tolstoy's argument lies the belief that genuine art must evoke a shared emotional response, bridging the gap between the creator and the audience. This conceptualization of art moves beyond aesthetics; it emphasizes the importance of emotion and connection in achieving the status of true art.

Tolstoy posits that true art is rooted in the artist's ability to convey feelings that resonate with others. It transcends mere technical skill or innovation in form and technique, suggesting that these elements alone do not make art valuable. Instead, the essence of art lies in its capacity to express the human experience in a manner that fosters empathy and understanding among individuals. For Tolstoy, the emotional impact of a work is paramount. He asserts that if a piece of art fails to evoke genuine feelings or promote a sense of shared human experience, it falls short of being categorized as true art.

To further elucidate this point, consider the work of Vincent van Gogh. His paintings, such as "Starry Night," may be celebrated for their vibrant colors and revolutionary brushwork, yet it is the emotional weight they carry that historically cemented their status as true art. Viewers often describe feeling a



sense of loneliness, wonder, or nostalgia when contemplating van Gogh's work. This profound emotional engagement exemplifies Tolstoy's assertion that the power of art lies in its ability to touch upon the core of human emotions and experiences.

Moreover, Tolstoy distinguishes between art that serves a higher purpose—such as fostering moral development and societal connection—and art that merely entertains. He claims that true art should not only evoke emotions but also inspire individuals towards positive actions or ethical contemplation. This moral dimension places responsibility on artists to pursue authenticity and depth in their expressive endeavors.

Tolstoy's examination of artistic value also extends to the moral implications of the content portrayed in art. He believes that art should contribute to the well-being of society and elevate the human spirit. This idea can be exemplified through the works of authors and playwrights like Charles Dickens or Anton Chekhov, both of whom illuminate social issues and human struggles through their narratives. Dickens' portrayal of poverty and injustice in works like "A Christmas Carol" showcases how art can inspire societal change and foster empathy, aligning with Tolstoy's vision of art as a means of uplifting humanity.

In contrast, art that lacks emotional depth or moral engagement may be

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described as superficial and devoid of real value. A pop culture phenomenon might serve to illustrate this discrepancy: a viral song that gains widespread popularity yet lacks lyrical substance—despite its catchy beat—could be seen as failing to meet Tolstoy’s standards for true art. The ephemeral nature of such works can lead to conversations about their lack of emotional resonance and connection to the greater human experience.

Tolstoy further articulates that artistic value is not static; instead, it can evolve as societal values and human consciousness change over time. What may have been considered groundbreaking and profoundly impactful at one point in history can become viewed differently as people’s collective feelings and moral compass shift. This evolving understanding of art necessitates not only a continual dialogue around art forms but also a deepening perception of how art interacts with the values of society.

Thus, it becomes evident that for Tolstoy, the criteria of true art encompass emotional validity, moral engagement, and the fostering of human connection. True artistic value lies in the profound ability of art to lead individuals toward empathy, understanding, and social responsibility, ensuring that art remains a vibrant echo of the shared human experience.

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3. The Role of Emotion in Art and Its Connection to Humanity

In Leo Tolstoy's treatise on art, the role of emotion is portrayed as not merely a characteristic of artistic endeavor but as its very lifeblood. Tolstoy argues that true art must evoke genuine feelings in both the artist and the audience, signaling a vital connection that transcends the individual. Art becomes a unique medium through which emotions are expressed, shared, and ultimately understood, establishing a profound link among humanity.

Tolstoy posits that the essence of art is rooted in the emotional experience it elicits. When an artist creates a piece, whether it be a painting, a novel, a symphony, or a ballet, the driving force is often personal emotion. The artist channels their feelings—joy, sorrow, love, despair—into their work, which serves as a vessel for these emotional currents. This intimate process transforms raw emotion into a structured form, inviting others to engage with and reflect upon those feelings. For example, consider Vincent van Gogh's famous painting "Starry Night." This masterpiece encapsulates the artist's own struggle with mental illness and his profound connection to the world around him. The swirling skies and vivid colors express feelings of turbulence and beauty, eliciting a visceral emotional response from viewers who may find themselves resonating with the sense of yearning and solitude depicted in the work.



Tolstoy emphasizes that it is through the evocation of shared emotions that art achieves its greatest significance. He asserts that the most impactful artworks are those that encourage empathy and understanding among people, bridging the gap of individual experiences. When a piece of art resonates emotionally, it transcends the artist's own narrative, inviting the audience to see and feel through another's perspective. This emotional engagement fosters a sense of interconnectedness, reflecting our shared humanity. Take, for instance, the poetic works of Maya Angelou. In her poem "Still I Rise," Angelou conveys themes of strength, resilience, and defiance in the face of oppression. Readers from various backgrounds feel empowered through her words, connecting deeply with the struggles she articulates as they find parallels in their own lives, regardless of their individual circumstances.

Moreover, the emotional purview of art acts as a conduit for healing and social consciousness. Tolstoy believed that art should not only express emotion but also promote enlightenment and moral clarity. During turbulent times in history, artworks that evoke powerful emotions can serve as catalysts for change. A poignant instance is Picasso's "Guernica," which captures the horror of war and the anguish suffered by innocent victims. The painting's raw brutality and emotional weight starkly confront viewers with the harsh realities of violence and oppression, challenging them to confront injustice and respond with compassion. In such contexts, the emotional resonance of art becomes a powerful tool for social commentary, mobilizing

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individuals towards collective action and awareness.

In conclusion, the role of emotion in art extends far beyond mere expression; it constitutes a primal connection between the creator and the audience.

Through the exploration of feelings, art emerges as a universal language that speaks to the depths of human experience, fostering empathy and understanding among diverse groups. As Tolstoy elucidates, true art thrives on this bedrock of emotion, asserting its place not only as a form of individual expression but also as a powerful medium for social connection, reflection, and transformation. In a world increasingly fractured by division, the emotional connection born from art becomes essential in nurturing a deeper appreciation of our shared humanity.

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4. Art as a Means of Communication and Social Understanding

In "What Is Art?" Leo Tolstoy presents a compelling argument for the role of art as a conduit for communication and a vehicle for social understanding, proposing that true art transcends mere aesthetic pleasure and serves a true purpose in society. He contends that the primary function of art is to communicate feelings and emotions, facilitating a shared understanding among people.

Tolstoy asserts that art is most powerful when it communicates not just the artist's individual feelings, but universal emotions that resonate with a wider audience. This aspect of art fosters a sense of connection and empathy among individuals, allowing them to grasp the experiences and suffering of others. For instance, consider the profound impact of Picasso's "Guernica," painted in response to the bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. The chaotic forms and somber tones evoke horror and despair, not just for a specific event but as a representation of the universal suffering inflicted by war. Such artworks serve as a universal language, articulating collective feelings that can strike chords across diverse cultures and contexts.

Moreover, Tolstoy believes that the success of art in communication hinges on its ability to eliminate barriers of understanding. He critiques art that is



mired in elitism or obscured by technique, arguing that this can alienate the audience. Instead, he celebrates art that is simple, accessible, and devoid of unnecessary complexity, suggesting that the more straightforward the art, the stronger its emotional impact and social relevance. A classic example of this can be found in folk art, which often embodies clear, straightforward narratives and emotions that speak directly to the experiences of the community, allowing for broader participation and recognition.

Art also has the potential to function as a reflection of society, often illuminating social issues and injustices. Through his own illustrations of peasant life, Tolstoy sought to draw attention to the plight of the lower classes, challenging his contemporaries to reconsider their perspectives. Similarly, the work of modern artists like Banksy uses street art to comment on contemporary social issues ranging from poverty to political corruption, creating a dialogue that prompts viewers to reflect on their own values and the world around them.

Tolstoy further articulates that art influences social understanding by promoting the feelings of love and compassion among individuals, which are essential for the cohesive fabric of society. When art evokes a shared emotional experience, it encourages empathy, prompting individuals to reflect on their societal roles and responsibilities. For example, powerful films such as "Schindler's List" immerse viewers in the humanity of the

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Holocaust victims, stirring emotions that compel audiences to contemplate historical injustices and their consequences on human life.

In conclusion, Tolstoy's insights into art as a means of communication and social understanding highlight the intrinsic power of art to bridge gaps between individuals, cultures, and social classes. It empowers a collective emotional experience, drives home crucial societal messages, and cultivates compassion in a fragmented world. Ultimately, true art—rooted in emotional authenticity—plays a transformative role in enhancing our understanding of ourselves and each other, serving as an indispensable tool for social cohesion and enlightenment.

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5. Reflecting on the Impact of Art on Society and the Individual

The impact of art on society and the individual is profound and multifaceted, permeating various aspects of human life and shaping cultural contexts across generations. Leo Tolstoy, in his exploration of art, emphasizes that true art is not just an aesthetic endeavor but a powerful vehicle for moral and social awareness. Therefore, reflecting on the implications of art opens up a vital conversation about its role in shaping individual identities as well as larger societal narratives.

At its core, art functions as a mirror to society, reflecting its values, struggles, and aspirations. Throughout history, art movements have responded to social issues, giving voice to the underprivileged and challenging prevailing norms. For instance, during the Harlem Renaissance, African American artists used their works to express the complexities of their experiences, confronting racism and highlighting the richness of Black culture. This movement not only contributed to a greater appreciation of African American heritage but also fostered a sense of pride within the community, illustrating how art can galvanize social change and inspire collective action.

Moreover, the individual impact of art cannot be underestimated. Personal experiences with art can lead to profound emotional responses, catalyzing



self-reflection and personal growth. For example, a person might encounter a piece of literature that resonates with their internal struggles, fostering a sense of connection and understanding of their own life challenges. This connection is not merely a passive experience but can incite transformative personal revelations that reshape one's worldview and behavior. Through art, individuals are often inspired to engage more deeply with their own emotions and the emotions of others, leading to enhanced empathy and interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, art serves as an essential tool for communication across cultural and linguistic barriers. In a world marked by increasing globalization, art allows individuals to share stories, historical experiences, and cultural nuances in a universally comprehensible way. For example, the film "Roma," directed by Alfonso Cuarón, transcends language, bringing audiences into the intimate world of a domestic worker in 1970s Mexico. Its visual storytelling evokes universal themes of family, class struggle, and resilience, inviting a diverse viewership to engage with a specific cultural narrative. In this sense, art fosters social coherence by building understanding and appreciation among disparate groups, allowing people to find common ground despite differences.

The impact of art extends into the political realm as well. Throughout history, art has played a pivotal role in movements for social justice and

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reform. Consider the use of protest art, such as the murals of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement or the politically charged works of contemporary artists like Ai Weiwei. These artists utilize their craft to critique power structures and advocate for change, highlighting injustice and mobilizing action. The ability of art to engage the populace in critical dialogues about societal issues demonstrates its power as a tool for both individual awakening and collective consciousness.

Additionally, the therapeutic effects of art on individuals further underline its importance in society. Art therapy, for instance, uses creative processes to help individuals address psychological issues and emotional trauma. Many people find solace in artistic expression, facilitating healing and personal development. Whether through painting, music, or dance, these activities provide an outlet for emotion and a means to explore one's identity. This aspect of art fosters resilience and encourages community; as individuals share their experiences, they often find solidarity and support in one another's creative journeys.

In acknowledging the significance of art in our lives, both individually and collectively, we arrive at a deeper understanding of its role. Tolstoy's assertion that art must elevate the spirit of humanity reinforces the notion that art should strive to cultivate goodness, compassion, and interconnectedness among people. Through art, we not only express our

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experiences but also enrich our relationships and refine our ethical compass, ultimately moving towards a society characterized by greater understanding and unity.

In conclusion, the impact of art on society and the individual is both profound and essential. Art not only reflects and critiques societal constructs but also facilitates personal introspection and collective action. Its capacity to foster empathy, build bridges between cultures, and inspire social movements underscores its lasting importance. Thus, engaging with art allows individuals and societies to grow, adapt, and strive towards a more harmonious existence.

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 - Personal development demands loneliness and solitude
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 - Riches are like seawater; what suit us is the most important