

The topic for this month's Philosophy group was 'Art, Aesthetics and Philosophy'

Christine Price January 28th 2025

We first considered the view of the Arts of the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle: Plato found the arts to be mere imitation (mimesis) of the real world and advocated censorship. He said that the arts were potentially a bad influence, appealing to the senses and desire for pleasure rather than 'the highest faculty of the soul': pure reason and the desire for knowledge.

Aristotle, however found arts to be cathartic; allowing a release of emotions which could be beneficial - not unlike the feelings of release we might have when watching a sad film, or even the benefit of laughter provoked by comedy.

The term 'Aesthetics' was reconsidered by philosophers in the 18th century as the study of judgements of taste. The discussion about whether beauty was found within objects themselves or came from the mind of the perceiver was considered by philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke and Kant.

The concept of the sublime, or sublimity was also raised by these philosophers: 'Sublime' refers to a work of art that goes beyond everyday experience and into grand, grotesque, outrageous and overwhelming experiences. Terror was a key component of the sublime and can be seen in paintings such as 'The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum' by John Martin, c1821 or poetry and literature such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

Musical works such as *La Mer* (1905) by Claude Debussy and controversially John Cage's *4'33'* (1952) have been described as being examples of 'the sublime' in music.

This took us into a discussion of more modern philosophical theories of art and the perhaps muddy waters of 'Conceptual Art', and whether contemporary judgement about 'what is art?' have changed the focus, meaning and function of art.

We considered works by Duchamp - 'Fountain' 1917 (a urinal), Warhol's 'Brillo Boxes' 1964, Damien Hirst's 'Mother and Child Divided' 1993, and Catalan's 'Comedian' 2019 (you may remember this is a fresh banana fixed to a wall with duct tape. last sold in 2024 for c\$6.2million).

Peter Cooke and Dudley Moore's sketch 'The Art Gallery' (1965) finally put the Art World to rights!