

Significant Form Theory



Clive Bell (1881-1964)

The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. All sensitive people agree that there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art. I do not mean, of course, that all works provoke the same emotion. On the contrary, every work produces a different emotion. But all these emotions are recognisably the same in kind; so far, at any rate, the best opinion is on my side. That there is a particular kind of emotion provoked by works of visual art, and that this emotion is provoked by every kind of visual art, by pictures, sculptures, buildings, pots, carvings, textiles, etc., etc., is not disputed, I think, by anyone capable of feeling it. This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion; and if we can discover some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke it, we shall have solved what I take to be the central problem of aesthetics. We shall have discovered the essential quality in a work of art, the quality that distinguishes works of art from all other classes of objects.

Clive Bell, *Art* (1915)

Bell's Definition of Art

Bell believed that genuine art would produce a distinct "Aesthetic Emotion" in the "Sensitive Critic".

If, when looking at a piece, the sensitive critic experiences this special kind of emotion, then the piece is said to be art.

Note that only the sensitive critic can experience this emotion. It is only the sensitive critic that can say whether something is art or not.

Obvious Problems

1. The definitions of "significant form" and "aesthetic emotion" are notoriously circular. They can only be defined in relation to one another.

Significant form is that which causes aesthetic emotion.

Aesthetic emotion is that which is caused by significant form.

2. The theory is not particularly helpful.

If I am confronted with a piece of work and do not experience the aesthetic emotion, there could be 2 reasons for this:

- a) I am not a sensitive critic
- b) The piece isn't genuine art

Which option is correct?

3. What happens if one sensitive critic experiences the aesthetic emotion and the other one does not?

4. Is the theory elitist? Only a select few can tell us what counts as art?