

# Creative impulse driven by desire for sex, survival

By JONAH LEHRER  
Washington Post

The list of cultural universals — those features that recur in every human society, from remote rain forest tribes to modern America — is surprisingly short. There's language, religion and a bunch of traits involving social structures, such as the reliance on leaders.

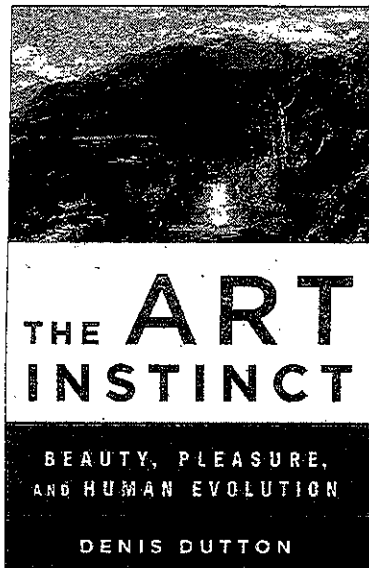
Denis Dutton, a New Zealand philosopher, would like to add one more item to this list: art. As he observes in his provocative new book, "The Art Instinct," people the world over are weirdly driven to create beautiful things. These aesthetic objects are utterly useless — W.H. Auden pointed out that they make "nothing happen" — and yet we enshrine them in climate-controlled museums and pay millions of dollars for a silkscreen of a soup can. What began with a few horses on the walls of a French cave has blossomed into a human obsession.

The premise of Dutton's work is that this instinct for art isn't an accident. Instead, he argues that our desire for beauty is firmly grounded in evolution, a side effect of the struggle to survive and reproduce. In this sense, a cubist painting by Picasso is no more mysterious than the allure of a Playboy centerfold: Both are works of culture that attempt to sate a biological drive.

Dutton frames his argument as a scientific response to the idea that art is a "social construction," driven by the fads of society. He begins the book by describing a series of paintings by the Russian artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, who in the early 1990s surveyed people in 10 countries on their preferences regarding color, subject matter and painterly style. These poll results were then distilled into a series of realist landscapes. The American painting, for instance, featured a foreground of sun-dappled grass, a lake, a few adorable children and the figure of George Washington. It's an absurd pastiche, the visual equivalent of combining all of America's favorite foods in the same dish. We might enjoy pizza and ice cream, but that doesn't mean we want pizza-flavored ice cream.

While Dutton appreciates the irony of Komar and Melamid, he's more intrigued by the striking similarity of their paintings. Although the 10 national landscapes differed in their details — the Russians wanted a brown bear, while the Kenyans preferred a hippo — the basic layout was identical. In each case, people craved a painting that featured a large body of blue water, some open grass, a human figure and a few animals.

Why the cross-cultural similarity? According to Dutton, the survey results reveal our hard-wired prefer-



## PHILOSOPHY

**"The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution"**  
by Denis Dutton; Bloomsbury; 278 pages; \$25

ences, which developed when we were Pleistocene hunter-gatherers roaming the African savannah. The landscapes we find most beautiful are simply those from which we evolved. If we like paintings with a foreground of short grasses, it's because that habitat contains more protein per square mile than any other, which is a crucial perk for a meat-eating primate.

There's an alluring logic to such arguments, which promise to rescue aesthetics from the fog of post-modernist theory. Who needs Jacques Derrida when there's evolutionary psychology? Why talk about "texts" when we can talk about "genes"? Like Steven Pinker, whose writing inspires much of "The Art Instinct," Dutton reserves his harshest criticisms for the modernists, whom he holds responsible for things like "pure abstraction in painting, atonality in music, random word-order poetry, 'Finnegans Wake,' and readymades," such as the upside-down urinal made famous by Marcel Duchamp. Such unpleasant works of art are inspired, Dutton says, by a "blank-slate view of culture," which assumes that the mind can learn to appreciate just about anything. As a result, modern artists have delighted in being difficult: They've given us works of abstraction when all we really wanted was a grassy landscape with an eminent figure such as George Washington.

The problem with such "evolutionary aesthetics" is that, in the end, they excel at explaining kitsch. Our Pleistocene preferences might justify the work of Komar and Melamid, or the neo-impressionist art of "painter of light" Thomas Kinkade, but when everything in the Museum of Modern Art violates your theory of aesthetics, then it might

be worth revising the theory. Just because the laws of human nature as presently understood can't explain the allure of Mark Rothko doesn't mean we should stop looking at his paintings. It just means we don't understand human nature very well.

Dutton is also interested in the origins of the art instinct. Shouldn't those cave-dwellers have been busy hunting instead of drawing on the wall? Why do we squander so much time and energy on art? Dutton has two distinct theories. The first is that fictional narratives, from the "Iliad" to "The Sopranos," provide people with a "low-cost, low-risk surrogate experience." Because I watch HBO, I'll be prepared the next time I'm in New Jersey.

His second explanation, which leans heavily on the work of Geoffrey Miller, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of New Mexico, involves sexual selection. Like Miller, he sees the arts as a tool of seduction, an intellectual version of the peacock's tail. Consider poetry, which for Dutton is little more than a way of showing off to potential mates. (He cites Cyrano de Bergerac as an example of poetic courtship, although he fails to note that Cyrano doesn't get the girl. His eloquent genes are never passed on.) According to Dutton, this process of mate selection — chicks dig big vocabularies — is responsible for the propagation of genes that lead to "the most creative and flamboyant aspects of the human personality," including artistic expression.

On the one hand, this explanation of art is just common sense. It doesn't take an evolutionary psychologist to know that a lot of poetry is written to impress the opposite sex, or that Lord Byron and Elvis Presley seldom slept alone. However, arguing that the sex lives of poets explains the origins of poetry makes about as much sense as using the bedroom exploits of Wilt Chamberlain to construct a biological explanation of basketball. Yes, poets have sex, perhaps even more sex than normal. That still doesn't explain Shakespeare.

Dutton is an elegant writer, and his book should be admired for its attempt to close the gap between art and science. It really is time that art critics learn about the visual cortex, musicologists study the inner ear and evolutionary psychologists unpack Jane Austen. Unfortunately, like so many other aesthetic theories, Dutton's ideas are ultimately undone by what they can't explain. This is the irony of evolutionary aesthetics: Although it sets out to solve the mystery of art, to explain why people write poems and smear paint on canvases, it ends up affirming the mystery. The most exquisite stuff is what we can't explain. That's why we call it art.