

Abstraction And Empathy PDF (Limited Copy)

Wilhelm Worringer



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Abstraction And Empathy Summary

Exploring the Intersection of Art, Emotion, and Society through
Abstraction.

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About the book

Wilhelm Worringer's influential work, "Abstraction and Empathy," published in 1908, has significantly shaped the understanding of modern art and continues to reverberate through the fields of art history, literature, and philosophy. In this text, Worringer introduces the central idea that the appreciation of beauty is intricately connected to our capacity for empathy towards objects. He argues that representational art—characterized by its depiction of recognizable subjects—provides comfort by mirroring a stable, familiar world, much like the art of the Renaissance period.

In contrast, Worringer examines abstraction, which he sees as a crucial artistic response to human insecurity and existential distress, particularly during tumultuous historical periods. Abstract art—evidenced in styles from Egyptian and Byzantine to modern expressionist forms—reflects a desire to impose order on the chaotic nature of existence by creating fixed, transcendental representations. This movement towards abstraction is not merely aesthetic; it also has sociological implications. Worringer links the rise of geometric abstraction to the cultural dislocation and identity crises that often accompany industrialization and the challenges posed by a rapidly changing, often hostile mass society.

The introduction by Hilton Kramer provides essential context, helping to situate Worringer's arguments within the broader discourse of art and

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culture. This exploration of the complex relationship between abstraction and empathy not only deepens our understanding of artistic practices but also sheds light on the psychological and social dynamics that shape human perception of beauty. Thus, Worringer's work remains a vital reference point for discussions surrounding art's evolution and its role in reflecting and shaping societal values.

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About the author

In "Abstraction and Empathy," Wilhelm Worringer articulates a profound exploration of two fundamental modes of artistic expression: abstraction and representation. Worringer argues that art serves as a reflection of psychological states and cultural contexts, acting as a bridge between the artist's emotions and the viewer's experiences.

The chapter begins with a historical overview of representational art, emphasizing its roots in the desire to depict the external world as accurately as possible, which is often linked to feelings of empathy. Worringer explains that representational art seeks to create a connection between the viewer and the subject matter, fostering emotional engagement through recognizable forms and figures. This reliance on the familiar and tangible resonates with viewers, as it mirrors their own experiences and emotions.

Transitioning to the concept of abstraction, Worringer posits that it emerges from a different psychological need—the desire to escape the chaos of the external world. Abstraction, in contrast to representational art, does not depict the world as it is but rather reflects the artist's internal landscape. Worringer argues that this mode of expression allows for a deeper exploration of emotions and ideas that may be too complex or nuanced to be captured through representational means. He suggests that abstraction is liberating, offering a sense of freedom from the constraints of reality, and

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providing viewers with a unique way to engage with the art on an emotional and intellectual level.

Worringer contextualizes these artistic modes within broader cultural movements, suggesting that shifts in art reflect the psychological needs of society. For instance, he connects the rise of abstract art to modernist sentiments that sought new ways of understanding human existence amidst the rapid changes of the 20th century. The tension between abstraction and empathy captures the evolving relationship between the viewer and art, as contemporary society grapples with its own complexities and emotional depths.

Ultimately, Worringer's work not only delineates the characteristics of abstract and representational art but also invites readers to consider their own responses to different artistic expressions. By situating his theories within historical and cultural frameworks, he enriches the discourse on aesthetics and art theory, asserting the enduring significance of understanding the psychological dimensions of art in both creation and appreciation. Through this exploration, Worringer establishes himself as a key figure in 20th-century art criticism, whose insights continue to resonate in contemporary art discussions.

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Chapter 1 Summary: 1. Abstraction and Empathy 3

Summary of Chapter 1: Abstraction and Empathy

Objective of the Work

This chapter seeks to delve into the aesthetics of art, particularly in the realm of plastic arts, and delineates its uniqueness from the aesthetics of natural beauty. The author emphasizes that art functions as an independent entity governed by its own principles, distinct from the beauty found in nature.

Development of Aesthetic Theory

The critique begins with a focus on modern aesthetics and particularly questions Theodor Lipps' empathy theory, which emphasizes the viewer's emotional response as pivotal to the appreciation of art. Worringer contends that this viewpoint is myopic and does not adequately address the richness of artistic expressions that span various historical and cultural contexts, especially those outside of the Graeco-Roman and Western artistic traditions.

Empathy vs. Abstraction

This section contrasts two fundamental artistic drives: the urge for empathy

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and the urge for abstraction. Empathy is described as "objectified self-enjoyment," characterized by a desire to connect with organic forms. In contrast, abstraction, which prioritizes inorganicity and abstract principles, forms a different basis for aesthetic appreciation. Worringer posits that true aesthetic enjoyment arises from a dynamic interaction with life and energy, though such experiences vary significantly across cultures and eras.

Concept of Aesthetic Enjoyment

Worringer introduces two forms of aesthetic experiences:

- **Positive Empathy:** This occurs when an individual's natural preferences harmonize with the demands of the artwork, creating a pleasurable experience.
- **Negative Empathy:** In this case, a discord between personal inclinations and the requirements of the artwork leads to discomfort.

Artistic Volition and Historical Context

Building on Alois Riegl's idea of "absolute artistic volition," Worringer argues that the creation of art is rooted in a primary instinct to form, rather than practical or material motivations. He emphasizes that different historical periods valued artistic expression in varied ways, shaped by the unique psychic needs and worldviews of the time.



The Role of Imitation in Art

Worringer distinguishes between the urge to imitate nature and the intrinsic artistic impulse, asserting that the latter transcends mere imitation and possesses its own aesthetic significance. Historical examples reveal that many civilizations have simultaneously grappled with both the desire to imitate and the need for original artistic expression, leading to diverse aesthetic results.

Dread of Space and Abstraction

The chapter examines how humanity's understanding of the cosmos has influenced the creation of abstract art. It suggests that as cultures evolved from a fear of the vast and alien universe, they developed a yearning for tranquility through abstraction, which offered a sense of order and necessity distinct from the chaotic nature of organic existence.

Conclusion: The Need for Self-Alienation

In concluding thoughts, Worringer presents a philosophical dichotomy regarding aesthetic experience, positioning the pursuit of abstraction as a more profound form of self-alienation compared to the self-affirming nature of empathy. He contends that all aesthetic enjoyment ultimately stems from a fundamental human aspiration for self-alienation, whether from



individuality or the complexities of organic life, leading to the quest for transcendent forms of beauty.

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Chapter 2 Summary: 2. Naturalism and Style

Summary of Chapter 2 from "Abstraction and Empathy" by Wilhelm Worringer

In this chapter, Worringer delves into the aesthetics of art, particularly in the realm of plastic arts, and asserts that art functions as an independent entity alongside nature. He argues that while art has historically evolved to incorporate natural beauty, it does not depend on it intrinsically.

Worringer critiques the prevailing modern aesthetic theory of empathy, largely championed by Theodor Lipps, which posits that aesthetic pleasure arises from human subjectivity and emotional engagement. He contends that this perspective is insufficient to explain the breadth of artistic creation throughout history. Instead, he introduces the concept of abstraction, which values the inorganic and the principles of form, offering an alternative motivation behind artistic expression.

Central to Worringer's argument is the idea of aesthetic experience as a form of self-realization, where individuals engage with art objects through a dynamic process of empathy that requires cognitive and emotional investment. This engagement can lead to differing experiences of harmony or conflict, influencing the nature of empathy itself.



Addressing the limitations of materialist art theories, Worringer proposes the notion of "absolute artistic volition." This concept emphasizes intrinsic psychological impulses driving artistic expression beyond mere utility or technical skill, shifting the focus from mere imitation of nature to the deeper motivations of the artist.

Worringer identifies two key psychological processes in artistic creation: the need for empathy, which seeks organic beauty and connection, and the need for abstraction, which emerges from feelings of alienation and confusion in a chaotic world. The latter impulse reflects a desire to find comfort in clear, regular forms.

He differentiates between naturalism—an artistic style aimed at capturing organic vitality—and style, which signifies abstraction through a deliberate suppression of space and individuality. Throughout history, art has oscillated between these two extremes, with cultural attitudes influencing the nature of artistic expression.

The interplay between empathy and abstraction suggests varying relationships with nature and representation across cultures. Worringer asserts that understanding these dynamics sheds light on the psychological states of individuals in relation to their art and spirituality, ultimately affecting their worldview.



In summary, Worringer concludes that the essence of art is characterized by a duality: the urge toward empathy, which celebrates life and organic beauty, and the urge toward abstraction, which seeks stability and a respite from life's imperfections. This chapter lays the groundwork for exploring how these aesthetic principles manifest and evolve in artistic history.

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Chapter 3 Summary: 3. Ornament

Summary of Chapter 3: Abstraction and Empathy

In this chapter, the author delves into the intricate relationship between ornamentation, naturalism, and artistic evolution, arguing that the essence of ornament is fundamental to understanding art's development.

Essence of Ornament

The discussion begins with the assertion that ornamentation encapsulates the artistic spirit of a culture. Rather than prioritizing figurative art, which often dominates traditional aesthetic discussions, the author posits that ornament should be recognized as the essential starting point for evaluating artistic expression. This perspective invites readers to reconsider the role of ornamentation in cultural and aesthetic narratives.

Prevalence of Geometric Style

The text then introduces the geometric style as a primary form from which other artistic expressions emerge. However, it challenges the idea of a linear progression of styles by noting that Early Stone Age artifacts displayed a more naturalistic approach. This observation raises questions about the



chronology of art forms and suggests that art's evolution may not follow a straightforward path.

Naturalism vs. Authentic Art

The chapter critiques the tendency to equate early naturalistic works, like those found in the Aquitanian caves, with authentic art. The author emphasizes these works as demonstrations of technical skill rather than indicators of artistic refinement. By questioning the focus on realism as the benchmark for artistic advancement, the author redirects attention to the importance of ornamental expression as a vital component of art.

Psychic Roots of Artistic Development

Art is positioned as a product of abstract thought, with a culture's aesthetic demands shaping its journey toward decorative complexities. The author also addresses misguided anthropological interpretations that attribute geometric designs to chance rather than to an intrinsic artistic drive, countering these views with a thesis of purposeful creative evolution.

Differentiating Regularity and Uniformity

A crucial distinction is drawn between regularity, which aligns with abstraction, and uniformity, which hints at empathy in artistic expression.

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The author argues that advanced geometric art achieves a harmonious balance between these two aspects, exemplified in classical Greek art, such as the Vitruvian scroll, which marries structured abstraction with an emotional resonance.

Comparative Analysis of Ornament Styles

Through a comparative analysis of Mycenaean and Egyptian ornament styles, the text reveals the differing artistic intentions at play—Mycenaean art leans towards naturalism while Egyptian ornamentation is grounded in abstraction. The evolution towards ornamental forms in Greek art signifies a decisive move away from earlier naturalistic tendencies, leading to an enriching blend of abstract and organic elements.

Acanthus Motif and its Artistic Process

The chapter highlights the acanthus motif, illustrating its evolution as a testament to the creative journey of stylization. Rather than merely simplifying natural forms, this process is portrayed as an abstract phenomenon driven by artistic intent, further emphasizing the necessity of conscious creativity in the development of ornamentation.

Conclusion: Balance of Abstraction in Artistic Heritage

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In closing, the author underscores the importance of tracing the lineage of artistic styles to comprehend the interrelationship between abstraction and naturalism across various cultures, particularly noting the influences in Greek and Saracenic art. This interplay signifies broader artistic principles and encapsulates the evolution of art from its origins in pure abstraction to forms that engage human empathy and perception, enriching the narrative of art's progression throughout history.

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Chapter 4: 4. Selected Examples from Architecture and Sculpture from the Viewpoints of Abstraction and Empathy

Summary of Chapter 4 from "Abstraction And Empathy" by Wilhelm Worringer

In Chapter 4, titled "**Essence and Importance of Ornament**," Wilhelm Worringer explores the fundamental role of ornamentation in art as a pure expression of culture and aesthetic values. He argues that while figurative art—art that depicts recognizable figures—tends to dominate the narrative of art history, ornamentation offers richer insights into the aesthetic ideologies of a society. Worringer critiques the prevalent bias that views art primarily as an imitation of nature, which distorts the understanding of historical artistic development.

Worringer introduces the concept of **geometric style**, positing that this abstract form underpins all ornamentation and has its roots across various cultures, especially within Indo-Germanic traditions. The author challenges the notion that geometry is the sole origin of ornament by citing early artistic works from the Stone Age, such as those discovered in Dordogne and Egypt, which exhibit a high degree of naturalism. This historical evidence necessitates a reevaluation of the interconnectedness between artistic styles



and cultural narratives.

The chapter further challenges traditional art historical thought, suggesting that early naturalistic art, often overlooked, fails to capture the true essence of artistic evolution. Worringer asserts that authentic artistic expression arises not from mimetic efforts but from profound psychic needs—emotional realities that shape creative impulses.

A pivotal section of the chapter delves into the distinction between **empathy** and **abstraction** in ornamentation. Worringer examines plant motifs, arguing that artists abstracted the structural laws of vegetation rather than merely replicating its visual characteristics. The geometric style serves as a fundamental algorithm, enabling artists to cultivate an evolved sense of empathy through these abstract forms, enriching the aesthetic experience.

The discussion extends to animal representations, where similar abstraction occurs. Here, animal motifs were stylized without strict adherence to natural forms, reinforcing Worringer's claim that many early artworks were grounded in abstract principles. These perspectives mark a departure from the idea that art's primary function is to imitate life, positioning aesthetic experiences as inherently tied to formal qualities.

Worringer reflects on the thoughts of art historian Alois Riegl, who critiqued the notion of technological determinism in art movements and highlighted

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the influence of underlying emotional and psychic states on aesthetic developments. The distinction between **regularity**, a product of abstract thought, and **uniformity**, a result of empathetic response, underscores a nuanced evolution towards balance in later artistic styles.

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Chapter 5 Summary: 5. Northern Pre-Renaissance Art

Chapter 5 Summary: Artistic Evolution from Antiquity to the Middle Ages

Introduction

This chapter explores the rich tapestry of artistic evolution from the era of antiquity to the Middle Ages, focusing on the dynamic transformations in artistic expression and intent. It begins with a definition of Greek ornamentation, which is marked by an interplay of abstract and naturalistic elements, with a notable preference for the latter as art developed.

Greek Art and Abstract Tendencies

The Greeks experienced a significant evolution in their artistic practices, transitioning swiftly from abstraction to a more organic expression. This shift is prominently illustrated through a comparison of Doric and Ionic temples. The Doric style is characterized by its geometric regularity and adherence to abstract principles, while the Ionic style embraces organic forms, fostering a deeper connection to humanity and the natural world.

Architecture and Artistic Will

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As the chapter delves into architectural evolution, it reveals that Greek architecture initially leaned towards abstract designs but gradually adopted more organic forms, particularly evident in the Ionic style. Critics, such as art historian Julius Lamprecht, often downplay the artistic aspects of architecture, viewing it primarily as a matter of engineering rather than as a form of artistic expression reflecting the psychological desires of its creators.

Greek Sculpture and Reliefs

The chapter discusses how Greek artistic intent favored relief sculpture, which provided a tactile experience that resonated with viewers. In contrast to later developments in three-dimensional sculpture that moved away from abstraction, reliefs remained deeply entwined with the essence of Greek artistic expression, emphasizing materiality and touch.

Monumental Sculpture and Abstraction

There exists a tension in monumental sculpture between the round forms of representation and the abstract tendencies that characterize Greek artistic goals. This struggle often leads to stylization, showcasing how artists balanced the act of representation with their abstract inclinations, thus expressing core values of their artistic intentions.

Egyptian Art Influence

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Understanding artistic evolution also necessitates recognizing the influence of Egyptian art, which prioritizes surface representation and geometric organization. Structures like the pyramids exemplify abstraction in art while highlighting the inherent conflict between functionality and expressive desires.

Byzantine Art and the Abstract

As we move into Byzantine art, we observe a fusion of elements from both antiquity and early Christian art, emphasizing a significant transition shaped by geometric designs and an increased inclination towards abstraction. The period of iconoclasm temporarily halted artistic production, but it later re-emerged, focusing on abstract representations and intricate ornamental details.

Northern Art and Its Origins

The chapter then shifts to early Northern decorative art, defined by geometric linear forms that notably diverge from the organic expressions typical in Mediterranean art. Northern artistic intent is characterized by a unique blend of abstraction and expression, highlighting a distinct focus on ornamental artistry rooted in local traditions.



Romanesque and Gothic Styles

The Romanesque style showcases a confluence of diverse artistic influences, preserving elements from Roman provincial art while signaling a burgeoning Northern artistic intent. In contrast, Gothic architecture, with its emphasis on emotional resonance, represents a pivotal transformation, utilizing mechanical principles to evoke empathy and marking a departure from the more organic aesthetics of classical architecture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter encapsulates the journey of artistic expression from the foundational abstract and organic traditions of antiquity to the distinct styles emerging during the Byzantine and Northern periods, culminating in the Gothic and Renaissance eras. It highlights the ongoing dialectic between abstraction and empathy that has continuously shaped the trajectory of art, paving the way for the more naturalistic forms of the Renaissance.

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Chapter 6 Summary: Appendix: Transcendence and Immanence in Art

In Chapter 6, titled "Abstraction and Empathy," the author delves into the complexities of Late Byzantine art and its influence on the evolution of Western Pre-Renaissance art. While Late Byzantine art has sparked debate regarding its significance, the narrative transitions to focus on the development of indigenous artistic movements in Northern Europe amidst a backdrop of cultural isolation.

The chapter highlights that, despite the absence of a fully formed Northern art, early artistic expressions were characterized by a distinct Celto-Germanic style. This style showcases linear-geometric forms that often lack organic elements, indicating the Northern peoples' estrangement from nature—distinct from both the Greeks' harmonious relationship with the natural world and the mysticism exemplified by Oriental cultures.

The emotional and religious context of the Northern peoples is crucial to understanding their artistic output. Harsh and isolating environments fostered a dualistic worldview marked by inner disharmony and a mysticism that lacked the stability present in Oriental thought. This led to an artistic expression suffused with abstraction and overall anxiety, as they sought to articulate their restless quest for meaning.

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In contrast, Oriental art is depicted as embodying tranquility and passivity, with minimal expressions of dynamic energy. This juxtaposition reveals the Northern artistic drive to encapsulate life and movement, even while relying on fundamentally inorganic forms. The chapter proceeds to explore architectural developments, noting a significant transition from Romanesque to Gothic styles. Romanesque architecture, with its roots in Northern abstraction, lays the groundwork for the dynamic and empathetic nature of Gothic architecture, which boldly seeks a deeper connection with human experience.

The chapter further discusses the evolution of sculpture during the Romanesque and Gothic periods. Early Romanesque figures still bear traces of Antique influences but increasingly adopt more expressive linear forms. By the Gothic era, sculptures evolve into highly abstract representations that resonate with the expressive intent of the surrounding architecture.

As the chapter transitions into the Renaissance, a pivotal shift emerges towards organic clarity and rhythmic representation in both form and drapery. This newfound emphasis on the human body marks a departure from previous abstraction, culminating in an aesthetic that celebrates organic harmony and vitality.

A critique of contemporary aesthetics follows where Worringer argues against a narrow understanding of artistic value. He asserts that art should be



evaluated within its historical and cultural contexts, emphasizing the need for examining diverse experiences and artistic volitions. This perspective fosters a deeper appreciation for art as a reflection of humanity's myriad interactions with the world and the myriad challenges faced.

In conclusion, Chapter 6 encourages readers to view the evolution of art not merely as a linear progression but as a spectrum shaped by differing artistic desires and responses to existential challenges. The chapter advocates for a more nuanced understanding of artistic creation, positioning it as a vital reflection of humanity's diverse engagements with its environment and leading to richer interpretations of both art and cultural history.

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Chapter 7 Summary: Notes

Summary of Chapter 7 of "Abstraction And Empathy" by Wilhelm Worringer

In Chapter 7, Worringer embarks on a critical examination of the dichotomy between scientific aesthetics and art history, illuminating their limited applicability to the actual experience of art. He notes that the historical rift between art historians and aestheticians—stemming from their differing methodologies and viewpoints—has led to a fragmented understanding of art. This division often results in a misunderstanding of the term "art," as scholars aim to reduce its multifaceted nature to a singular definition, a task that proves both impossible and reductive.

Worringer argues that the prevailing aesthetic principles derived from Classical art represent a mere fraction of the vast spectrum of artistic expression. Despite modern aesthetics claiming to distance itself from Classical foundations, it frequently seeks validation within Classical works due to enduring psychological continuities across different periods. This struggle becomes apparent as modern interpretations fail to adequately encompass the rich evolution of styles that extend far beyond the Classical ideal.



The evolution of artistic expression is often oversimplified, viewed through a linear lens that places Classical art as the pinnacle of achievement. This perspective risks injustice by failing to recognize each artistic phase as a peak that reflects the unique psychological needs and aspirations of its time. Such contexts must inform our understanding rather than impose contemporary judgments on past styles.

Worringer emphasizes the intrinsic subjectivity of our evaluations of historical artworks, highlighting how present-day perspectives inevitably color our interpretations. He underscores the importance of distinguishing between artistic ability and the evolving volition behind it, which informs how conscience and values are perceived across time. While Classical epochs are often idealized, Worringer insists that they form part of a broader, ongoing artistic narrative.

The transition from Classical to transcendental art marks a significant evolution in artistic intent. Beyond mere aesthetic expression, transcendental art seeks to create new realms of experience that transcend sensory understanding. This marks a departure from Classical art, which is often rooted in organic vitality, urging a purification of forms that escape external limitations.

Throughout history, the interplay between instinctual fear of the world and intellectual cognition has shaped artistic expression. This dynamic reflects



humanity's struggle with existential inquiries and a deep-seated yearning for redemption, illustrating how shifts in artistic forms respond to collective psychological shifts.

Worringer argues that a pivotal transformation occurred when understanding began to prioritize intellect over instinct, giving rise to science and diminishing the role of transcendental art. This marked the emergence of Classical art as a joyful pursuit of creativity, seeking inner happiness through engagement with aesthetic experiences.

He also contrasts Eastern and Western artistic expressions, revealing a profound cultural divergence in approaches to understanding and creativity. This comparison emphasizes that transcendentalism plays a crucial role in shaping both religion and art, thereby contesting Eurocentric narratives and advocating for a broader appreciation of diverse cultural artistic expressions.

In conclusion, Worringer posits that to fully grasp the intricate nature of art, one must move beyond the restrictive framework of Classical definitions. He advocates for an acknowledgment of the multifaceted psychological and historical contexts that inform artistic endeavors, thereby enriching our comprehension of art's essence across time and cultures.

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