

A discussion of Leo Tolstoy's, "What is Art."
By Douglas B. Holmes

In his article "What is Art," Leo Tolstoy discusses not only the distinction between art and its counterfeit, but also to qualify the necessity or value of the artwork. He first points out some principals that are incorrect with the contemporary definitions of art. He focuses on those definitions that exclude the concept of beauty as a qualifier. Tolstoy's definition of art, when devoid from the concepts of beauty must be assessed by dividing the model into parts. These divisions are the subject matter and the emotional or humanistic qualities. He feels one must fulfill certain expectations in each of these divisions in order to qualify a work first as art, and then as good or bad. Tolstoy feels that religious perception is the benchmark that should be used to examine the sub-characteristics that are necessary to qualify what is a good or bad work of art. The qualification of art and counterfeit to Tolstoy is related to the workings of infectiousness.

The ability of art to infect people with emotion, to him, is seen as a thread of progress through history connecting human conscious through emotional likeness that communicates the essence of man. This connectivity includes all that have a similar reaction to the material presented and thus becomes a powerful social and psychological motivator. One must see in this connection of humanity a powerful tool and how it may effect and aid man's progress through time. The universal connection and positive progression of mans knowledge and emotion is emphasized throughout Tolstoy's article. With the necessary elements in agreement to his concepts of equality and universality in place, one

can qualify the work as art or counterfeit. Only once the art is qualified, can it be discussed as good or bad, and whether it should be encouraged, discussed and exemplified or banished, feared and discouraged.

The contemporary definitions of art that are discussed by Tolstoy include the Physiological-Evolutionary, Experimental and Active-Pleasure definitions. The Physiological-evolutionary model describes art as an activity spinning from sexual desire and or propensity to play. The definition focuses on the excitation of the nervous center and is labeled inexact by Tolstoy. He feels that the theory does not deal with the activity of art itself, and will only include things that have a psychological effect on the being. With the Experimental definition that describes art as an external manifestation of emotions through the use of sound, color, line, movement and text, he feels the manifestation of emotion is not a focused enough concept to qualify art. Furthermore, the Active-Pleasure definition, in which an object or a passing action causes an active enjoyment to the producer and to many viewers, is also incomplete. Tolstoy feels that this definition is vague and therefore must allow parlor, magic and other trickery to qualify as art. He also states that each of the above concepts focuses on the pleasure that the thing can bring but not the purpose of the work.

This purpose must be included in a definition. The purpose of art can be viewed as a means to pleasure, unity and intercourse between man. This purpose involves a relationship between all that have experienced the work. The unification and progress of man's consciousness is transmitted by the use of words with which man's thoughts are passed and by art with which man feelings are displayed. Art is an activity in which man receives through his senses like-emotion transmitted through another man's expression of feeling. By

using movement and sound one can express emotion. The ability of others to receive these expressed emotions, from both the creator and from other individuals who have experienced the work, is the basis of the activity of making art. To qualify as art, however, it is not enough just to cause a like-emotion in another; one must set out to join others to oneself in the activity. Tolstoy feels that the expression of emotion does not have to come from a true experience. However, the producer must experience the emotion as true and valid. These experiences, or the activity of art, must be presented to the receiver by means of form, movement, sound, and a momentum created by performance or exhibition. The strength and significance of this infection on the receiver is determined by the quality of activity in the artwork. Only after considering the purpose and activities of art, can one separate true art forms from their counterfeit.

Tolstoy feels art is not a mysterious idea like God or beauty, a game to let off energy, an expression of emotion through an external sign, or the production of a pleasing object and most of all art is not pleasure. To Tolstoy, art is “a means of union among men joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress towards well-being of individuals and humanity.” Humanity would not have developed as surely without this ability, being unique to man, enabling him to pass and share, to express thoughts, feelings and emotional ideas to latter generations. Art, as well as speech show man’s communications and is present in our everyday life. Cradlesongs, architecture and jewelry can all be artistic, yet the term art, implies a higher importance that must be judged by significance. Tolstoy suggests that religious perception is of a special significance and it has been present throughout history.

Repudiate views towards art have been held by members of many great societies including Plato and his concepts of society, Early Christian and Mohammedan. Views against the use of art in society hold contrary to the modern view of pleasure and art. They felt that art is highly dangerous and because of its power to infect people against their will, the banishment of art is beneficial to society. Tolstoy points out that those societies who abandon this powerful tool, ultimately lose a means of communication, which is a quality of art. He feels that these qualities are needed for man to exist and to progress positively through time. Tolstoy points out that the contemporary art of his day, aim towards beauty and of pleasure as an end. He states that this patronage of the arts is grotesque and harmful. Furthermore, he feels that art has been perverted, mixing the good and the bad until the meaning of art becomes lost.

Separating art from counterfeit art is one distinguishing sign. The infectiousness of the work, how it unites man with man, and how well the individual emotions are experienced by man without altering his own truths should be used to make judgement. It is true that a poem or craft can be interesting, striking, vivid and exciting, yet, one must not mistake these emotional responses with actual infection. Infection is an internal indicator and should not be mistaken with aesthetic feelings or other stimulation that can be the effect of a counterfeit. The result of a strong infection on the receiver is a truly artistic impression, and the receiver feels as if the work were his own and that it needed to be expressed. Tolstoy feels the receiver is infected with the author's condition of soul. This condition is additive and it is supplemented by every person who has received the work. This degree of infectiousness is the

most important measure of excellence in art; however, this view is indifferent to the value of the feelings transmitted.

The degree of infectiousness depends on three things. The strengths of the individuality and clearness of the feelings transmitted, these are greater or lesser in value, and the degree of sincerity. Sincerity is judged by how well the artist feels that the information and content will be received. All three degrees or qualities of infectiousness must be present to qualify a work as art, says Tolstoy. This does include subject matter as a qualifier. Variation on strengths in the three qualities of infection has a direct effect on the work. If a strong individuality is seen, the receiver will have a stronger reaction. The stronger the receiver's soul, the more pleasure they will receive. The clearer the expression, the more satisfying the material is to the receiver. Sincerity is the strongest quality of infection. The receiver can sense immediately how much the author was infected by his own work. On this stimulus, the receiver will make a judgement on the validity of the work, be it good or bad. Sincerity is a summation; "That is, that the artist should be impelled by an inner need to express his feelings." Clarity, Tolstoy feels, is highly inductive to the infectiousness of a work. He feels that in peasant art it is abundant, yet lacking from upper-class art. The absence of any of the three levels of infectiousness qualifies the work as counterfeit. If all are true the work is art, even if only weak art.

The subject-matter of a work, on the other hand, will be used to qualify art as good and therefore encouraged, or bad and discouraged. The value of subject matter in art as in speech should focus on the ability to spread human knowledge in a progressive and positive direction while creating a link between

the past and present. The feelings that are expressed are of contemporary and historical consciousness and the knowledge is passed and interpreted under these influences. "Truer and more necessary" knowledge should be filtered so truer and more necessary knowledge will displace and replace the less positive information. This truer knowledge serves mankind. Tolstoy feels the more an artwork fulfills the above criteria the better the work of art. He feels that the appraisal of these feelings, for each era and each time, is effected by religious perception.

Religious perception is the meaning of life and represents the highest level to which man holds himself. A few advanced men, held in esteem by the general populous, define this concept of life. At all times, through history, religious perception has been present. With religious perception, the various centuries of men are able to interpret historical works by choosing and evolving the good qualities of these works. The old and miss-conveyed ideals of the past are discarded. Tolstoy says that a work of art that makes religious perception operative in real life has always been highly valued by the society while works contrary to this perception are distrusted and discouraged. Any works that do not transmit ideals contrary to religious perception have not received any special importance, but they have normally been tolerated. Tolstoy further discusses religious perception as being a universal meaning of life and therefore not restricted to one cult's view. He feels that the universal religious perception should be used to judge art. Art should be highly valued and encouraged when the subject is in harmony with religious perception and it should be discouraged and despised when not in harmony. The work of art should neither be discussed

nor discouraged if the subject matter is indifferent to the current religious perception.

The religious perception of Tolstoy's era, he feels, is the widest and most practical application for the consciousness of our well being. This well being includes the material and spiritual, individual and collective, temporal and eternal health focusing on the growth of the brotherhood of man in loving harmony with one another. Tolstoy points out that a diverse stratum of religious figures and men of letters throughout time have expressed this idea of well being. Religious perception helps man to destroy the obstacles in the path of universal brotherhood and therefore must be used to judge and place value on artistic creations. Tolstoy believes that in the Renaissance, as with the society current to his life, society had placed value on the pleasure in which a work can give and therefore encouraged what should have been held as indifferent. Furthermore, with the development of Christianity a change in the validity of universal meaning was created. The Greek, Roman, Jewish and other societies from the pre Christian eras are now separated from Christian society by varying religious perceptions. The earlier values focused on the strength and greatness of the society. Today we must understand there is a great diversity in the world and focus our view of perception on values that are universally accepted in all culture, that unite "absolutely all people without exception" and are pointed in the direction of the universal brotherhood and equality of man. Tolstoy states that these concerns cause the current religious perception to run counter to historical religious perceptions.

Tolstoy feels that a turning point in historical progression is seen with the coming of the Christian faith. A division of thought shown to a point in time

when man's perception of life changes in a new direction. Tolstoy refers to this as the Christian perception. Pre-Christian perception focused on qualities and values of wealth and greatness and of the ruler's strength and the prosperity of the society. These pre-Christian qualities are interchangeable to each culture; that is, each can be applied by each segregate cult. Tolstoy points out that there is with Christianity a change from the icons of society to a focus on individual human qualities that have little to do with wealth. Christian subjects do not focus on the rulers but the individual who submits only to God's authority. This change is progressive and also effects the reception of the feelings of art. Old and antiquated materials created from a strongly differing religious perception have little meaning and therefore little value to contemporary man.

All art has the characteristic to unite people. Art that unites a segregated population should be rejected because, as Tolstoy states, it can cause divisions and even violence. He places in this category: patriotic art, which includes anthems, poems, and movements of society; Church art of cults and their images, statues, processions and local ceremonies. Good Christian art must transmit feelings that can be experienced by each and every man and therefore this excludes art of class or culture that is only understandable with study of narrow discipline. Tolstoy says that Christian art should be "Catholic" in the original sense of the word. The perception should unite all men. Tolstoy describes two kinds of feelings that universally unite men and they are the only expectable subject materials for art. First is one's sonship to god and the brotherhood of all men, which can be expressed with words, paintings and sculpture. And second, are the simple feelings of common life merriment, pity, tranquility and so forth

which are expressed by words, painting, and sculpture but also by dance and music.

In this article, Tolstoy's concepts of art show a reoccurring theme. The acceptance of all men towards the universal brotherhood of men in loving harmony is his focus. He states that the Christian perception of man should be used to place value on the works of art. By removing concepts of beauty from the definition of art, Tolstoy is able to qualify works according to their infectiousness. Individuality of feeling, clearness of transmissions and sincerity of the artist are to effect the infectiousness of a work. With all three present, the work is art and the subject matter will determine its value. With religious perception, one can make judgement of value. An artwork should strive to make the religious perception operative in life and these works should be valued by society. Similarities with philosophies by Plato and Aristotle can be seen in Tolstoy's concepts and views on art. What is interesting is the fact he qualifies art without the value of subject matter. To him, art that is indifferent to religious perception should neither be discouraged nor discussed. Only art contrary to religious perception should be banished or feared.