

The Eye Of the Beholder

The term “art” in modern day society is composed of an array of concepts, to name a few: architectural, theatrical, musical, literary, visual, and so on. Each category that the term “art” encompasses, houses individual subcategories that utilize their own methodology to enhance an intended effect, that serves a practical, personal, and/or aesthetic use. So, should all art be held responsible for having a moral purpose, no; Not all art should be held responsible for having a moral element. After all, not all art is created equal. Recall that morals are one’s own personal beliefs of what is right and wrong. So with this in mind we must ask ourselves about what the true meaning of art is. On the one hand, the form of art over time has changed, but still has a moral character. On the other hand, the origins of art are set in stone; but the morals bestowed upon them can, and do change.

Not all art is given the same amount of thought or utility. This in turn causes the factors that create art in each of the above mentioned categories to differ; however, all art still serves a purpose, although, whether it is a moral one is debatable and is highly dependent on the social context of the time. The best demonstration of this is seen within the history of the architectural field, such as modern day architecture like the United States Interstate Highway System, compared to the past like the architecture of the Notre Dame Cathedral in France. Over time, structural use and cost have become greater factors than the symbolic meaning behind or aesthetic of the majority of all architectural projects. This means that various works that can be included under the term art have taken on a utilitarian role, which more often than not, serves a moral function in that they benefit society. From the time of Notre Dame’s construction, which

held the moral responsibility of symbolizing France's cultural, economic, and intellectual prowess for all of France and the world to see, to the construction of the United States Interstate Highway System which served the moral purpose of allowing citizens to evacuate from their cities swiftly during the cold war. A moral purpose has always existed. Yet these moral purposes have changed, and for some, on multiple occasions.

When Notre Dame was built in 1345, it held the moral responsibility of symbolizing France in the aforementioned ways above, while symbolizing Catholicism. During the French Revolution, the moral purpose of Notre Dame changed, and so did its use. It was repurposed for a warehouse, stripped of its religious symbolism. After the French Revolution it was brought back to its original set moral purpose. However, the social context behind the moral purpose did not remain the same; which is why the Notre Dame Cathedral symbolizes more than just what was previously mentioned. A similar change in moral purpose also occurred with the United States Interstate Highway System. The Interstate Highway System was created during the cold war with the moral purpose of providing easy emergency transportation for the citizens of those states and for military vehicles in the event of nuclear war. Now the Interstate Highway System serves an economic purpose, allowing for fast and easy transportation of commerce and for personal use by citizens such as for commuting. While only focusing on the architectural part of art, it becomes apparent how the moral purpose of art, not just architecture, is susceptible to change, beyond that of its intended purpose.

So is it the responsibility of art to have a moral purpose? No, art itself serves a purpose, even when not apparent, and that moral aspect, just like its purpose, can change based on the social context of the time. As you can see with just the architectural field alone; art truly has no

set purpose; and if one was given to it by the artist, there is no guarantee that that moral purpose will stand the test of time; but the art will always have a purpose based on the moral social context of the time in the end. So, if responsibility for art having a moral purpose does not fall onto the art or artist, where does it fall upon? The beholder. It would appear that not only is beauty in the eye of the beholder, but so too are the morals of the art. Despite the morality of art or the moral purpose of all art, being predetermined by the people who are creating and planning it, it does not fall upon them to decide what that moral purpose is. That responsibility falls onto the viewer of art, and not so much the art itself, for a moral purpose. A responsibility that for any viewer of art is a choice, and not a requirement.