Universal Features of Art:

1. Source of pleasure; not practical
2. Requires exercise of specialized skill
3. Recognizable styles; rules of form & composition
4. Judged and appreciated
5. Represents or imitates real & imaginary experience of the world
6. Pleasure is intended by the artist
7. Experience is made special.
8. Imaginative experience

A paradox: The biological uselessness of art

- **Explanation 1:** The motive for status.
  - Excellence and sumptuosity.
  - Avant-garde.
- **Explanation 2:** Artificial sources of pleasure.
  - Purification and concentration of sensory fitness cues.
  - Art as cheesecake; art as drug.
• Explanation 3: Sexual selection.
  – Artistic proficiency as a fitness indicator
  – Analogy from peacocks
  – Better analogy from bowerbirds!

Geoffrey Miller:
If you could interview a male Satin Bowerbird for *Artforum* magazine, he might say something like “I find this implacable urge for self-expression, for playing with color and form for their own sake, quite inexplicable. I cannot remember when I first developed this raging thirst to present richly saturated color-fields within a monumental yet minimalist stage-set, but I feel connected to something beyond myself when I indulge these passions. When I see a beautiful orchid high in a tree, I simply must have it for my own. When I see a single shell out of place in my creation, I must put it right. … It is a happy coincidence that females sometimes come to my gallery openings and appreciate my work, but it would be an insult to suggest that I create in order to procreate.”

The Technology of Art:
The first “virtual reality”

• Perception:
  – Scenes reflect light, projected onto retina.
  – Brain interprets retinal image, recovers understanding of scene

• Art:
  – Create object that reflects light in similar pattern to real scene
  – Fools brain into thinking it is in front of the scene
The Gradual Discovery of Perspective
9.00 Introduction to Psychology  
Professor S. Pinker  
Week 14, Lecture 2: Psychology & Life: Art & Religion

The Secret to Perspective

Leonardo da Vinci:
“Perspective is nothing else than seeing a place behind a pane of glass, quite transparent, on the surface of which the objects behind the glass are drawn.”

Visual Esthetics

• Content of representational art:
  – People (children, potential mates)
Visual Esthetics

- **Content of representational art:**
  - People (children, potential mates).
  - Animals
  - Plants, especially flowers
    - Why flowers?
      - Productive environment
      - Future fruit
      - Biological information.
  - Landscapes

Environmental Esthetics

- **Habitat selection hypothesis:**
  - Habitat selection in animals = environmental esthetics in humans

"Imagine that you are on a camping trip that lasts a lifetime. Having to carry water from a stream and firewood from the trees, one quickly learns to appreciate the advantages of some campsites over others. Dealing with exposure on a daily basis quickly gives one an appreciation for sheltered sites, out of the wind, snow, or rain. For hunter-gatherers, there is no escape from this way of life: no opportunities to pick up food at the grocery store, no telephones, no emergency services, no artificial water supplies, no fuel deliveries, no cages, guns, or animal control officers to protect one from the predatory animals. In these circumstances, one's life depends on the operation of mechanisms that cause one to prefer habitats that provide sufficient food, water, shelter, information, and safety to support human life, and that cause one to avoid those that do not."
Optimal human habitats:

1. Optimal ecologically:
   - African savannah
     - Ecosystem of 90% of human evolution
     - Rich in game, water, safety
   - Perceptual cues of savannahs:
     - semi-open grassland
     - clumps of trees
     - bodies of water

2. Optimal for safety:
   - views to horizon
   - changes in elevation
   - multiple paths out
   - “Prospect & Refuge”: Seeing without being seen.

3. Optimal cognitively:
   - Familiar, legible, explorable terrains
     - Frames of reference (landmarks, paths, boundaries).
   - Mystery:
     - bending paths
     - meandering streams
     - gaps in foliage
     - undulating land
     - partly blocked views.

Esthetics of Nonrepresentational Art

- Geometric patterns:
  - zigzags, plaids, tweeds, polka dots, parallels, circles, squares, stars, spirals, color.
- Why do people like to look at geometric patterns?
  - Sign of functioning visual system?
  - Knowable environment?
  - Consequential (information-rich) environment?
Religion

- Near-Universal Religious Beliefs:
  - Soul lives on after death.
  - Rituals change the world and divine the truth.
  - Illness & misfortune caused and alleviated by spirits, ghosts, saints, fairies, angels, demons, devils, gods.
Religion, continued

• Prevalence of religious belief in America:
  – 25% believe in witches.
  – 50% believe in ghosts.
  – 50% believe in the devil.
  – 50% believe that Genesis is literally true.
  – 69% believe in angels.
  – 87% believe that Jesus was raised from the dead.
  – 96% believe in God or universal spirit.

• Psychological benefits of religion.
  – Happiness.
  – Nonselfish motives.

• Nonequivalence of religion and “higher” moral and ethical motives:
  – Stonings, witch-burnings, crusades, inquisitions, jihads, fatwas, suicide bombers, gay-bashers, abortion-clinic gunmen, and mothers who drown their sons so they can be happily reunited in heaven.

• Sophisticated vs. unsophisticated religious beliefs
Why Religion?

1. Benefits for followers versus leaders.
   Some benefits for religious leaders:
   - Ancestor worship: good for future ancestors
   - Food taboos: keep people from straying
   - Rites of passage: eliminate fuzzy cases
   - Initiations, sacrifices, hazing: distinguish true believers from social parasites (cf. cognitive dissonance)

2. Emotional motives:
   - Ruth Benedict: “Religion is universally a technique for success.”
   - People beseech gods and spirits for:
     - recovery from illness
     - success in business, professions
     - success in love
     - success on the battlefield

   *pray*, v. To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.
   --*The Devil’s Dictionary*

   “Intuitive psychology,” “Theory of Mind Module”
   - People attribute minds to other people (even if they can’t know the minds directly)
   - Typical test of theory of minds: “False Belief Task”
Religion & Intuitive Psychology

- Hypothesis: In many religious beliefs, people go too far in attributing minds:
  - To natural objects (rivers, trees, mountains, etc.) = “animism”
  - To man-made objects = “idolatry”
  - Free of physical bodies = “spiritualism”

Pascal Boyer: “Religion Explained”

- People use intuitive psychology to understand religious beliefs, even when they contradict official doctrine
  - e.g., Official doctrine: “God watches over everyone at the same time; can intervene everywhere at once.”
  - Story: God hears, saves two people simultaneously
  - Distortion in memory: God hears one person, saves him; hears the other person, saves him.
Some “evidence” for souls & spirits:

1. Dreams
2. Trances
3. Shadows
4. Reflections
5. Death

Therefore: The soul temporarily leaves the body in dreams and traces, lives in the shadows, looks back at us from reflections, leaves the body at death.