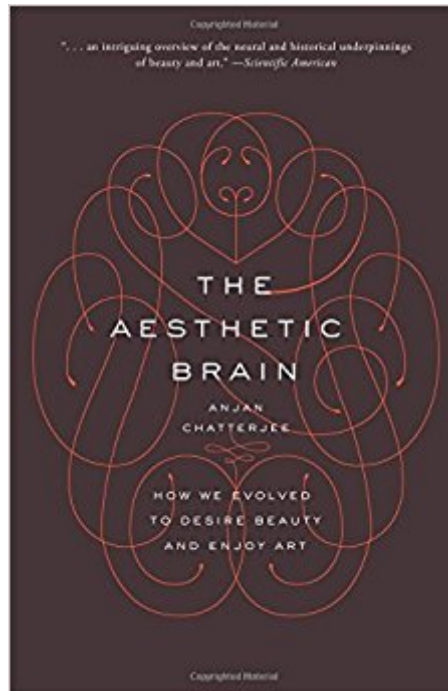




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The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved To Desire Beauty And Enjoy Art



Synopsis

The Aesthetic Brain takes readers on an exciting journey through the world of beauty, pleasure, and art. Using the latest advances in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, Anjan Chatterjee investigates how an aesthetic sense is etched into our minds, and explains why artistic concerns feature centrally in our lives. Along the way, Chatterjee addresses such fundamental questions as: What is beauty? Is it universal? How is beauty related to pleasure? What is art? Should art be beautiful? Do we have an instinct for art? Early on, Chatterjee probes the reasons why we find people, places, and even numbers beautiful, highlighting the important relationship between beauty and pleasure. Examining our pleasures allows him to reveal why we enjoy things like food, sex, and money, and how these rewards relate to our aesthetic encounters. Chatterjee's detailed discussion of beauty and pleasure equips readers to confront essential questions about the nature of art, the problems of defining it, and the challenges of interpreting its modern, non-traditional forms. Replete with facts, anecdotes, and analogies, this lively empirical guide to aesthetics offers scientific answers to fundamental questions without deflating the intrinsic wonders of beauty and art in an affordable paperback edition.

Book Information

Paperback: 248 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; Reprint edition (September 1, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 019026201X

ISBN-13: 978-0190262013

Product Dimensions: 8.5 x 0.6 x 5.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 11 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #122,350 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #25 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Philosophy > Aesthetics](#) #72 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Aesthetics](#) #114 in [Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Basic Sciences > Neuroscience](#)

Customer Reviews

Is the appreciation of art instinctual in humans or is it socially determined? That's the underlying question posed by University of Pennsylvania professor of neurology Chatterjee in his short and uneven book. While addressing that question, he presents some of the basics of neuroscience and

investigates how we can define and observe the difference between pleasure and desire. He also describes how the brain responds to beauty, asking if there are some universal patterns that all humans agree are beautiful. Throughout, his analysis is consistent, for as he says, I will gaze at beauty, pleasure, and art through the bifocal spectacle of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology. The work is not fully satisfying, however, because Chatterjee is unable to give a comprehensive definition of art, and his discussion of natural selection is misleading, placing too much emphasis on survival and not enough on reproduction. He makes it clear that there is no art module in the brain, and that art, however it is defined, is free to vary in response to environmental constraints. His main conclusion, though, is as simplistic as it is obvious: The more the arts are released from selective pressures, whether they are state oppression or economic deprivation, the more the arts in that culture are free to vary. (Nov.) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Chatterjee is a neuroscientist, so readers might expect a mechanistic treatise on beauty constructed from PET scans and clinical trials. But he offers no simple marriage of roses and neurons. To begin filling in the blanks left by neuroscience, he draws from anthropology, evolutionary biology, philosophy, and personal anecdotes. As Chatterjee reminds us, insight is the goal of science and art. His work succeeds by combining both toward a greater appreciation of the human experience." --Bryan Bello, Science News "Overall, The Aesthetic Brain offers an intriguing overview of the neural and historical underpinnings of beauty and art." --Scientific American "[Chatterjee] makes a compelling case that although art and beauty may seem nonessential, they epitomize our search for pleasure and meaning in life." --Scientific American Mind "[Chatterjee] succinctly outlines the areas of the brain that are active in appreciating facial and body attractiveness and the implications for the evolution of our species. He makes the case for those aspects of liking and wanting that relate to art and beauty. In his cogent review of the long history of human artifact-making art, he carefully considers the many definitions of aesthetics, art, and beauty. He examines all the major definitions of these and considers how many of them are found wanting in the wide world of art as it is currently comprised." --Journal of Clinical Psychiatry

Great book! Focusing on three overarching questions--What is beauty? What is pleasure? What is art? --Chatterjee guides the reader across a wide range of topics, including the perception of faces, bodies, and landscapes; the enjoyment of food, sex, and money; and the analysis of both ancient and modern art. These domains appear to be quite diverse, but Chatterjee deftly shows how they are all interrelated, and he does so by drawing extensively on recent

advances in not only evolutionary biology and psychology, but also cognitive neuroscience. He never goes overboard with these forays into the scientific literature, however; on the contrary, he always keeps the discussion at a level that is very accessible to nonspecialists and often highly entertaining. Moreover, I appreciated the fact that all of the chapters were pretty short and tight, since this enabled me to read the book very gradually over the course of about 6 weeks, while still feeling like I was sufficiently rewarded by each 15-minute dip into its contents. I would have liked more consideration of the musical and verbal arts, but Chatterjee's treatment of the visual arts turned out to be so brilliant that I ultimately came away from the book very satisfied. Neuroaesthetics is a new field of study that is slowly gaining momentum, and I strongly recommend this book as an introduction to some of the deep issues that are being explored.- David Kemmerer

I was looking for a book about the nature of beauty and aesthetics and this was perfect! As an artist it was informative and as a human hugely eye opening. It is written well with a nice balance of theory and practical examples. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

extremely enlightening!

Anjan Chatterjee has a talent to write about complicated, scientific matters in a way which is not only perfectly comprehensible but also catchy and amusing for non-scientific readers. Actually, this book brings you great insights in the way our brain works. What I particularly like is "the Humanities approach" to this natural science subject, as the themes of the book are how the brain functions with beauty, pleasure and art. I can recommend it to everyone with an interest of arts subjects or humanism, as it gives new perspectives into these fields.

The author's conversational style makes this book a great one for the non-science reader. It confirms the value of music and art in our schools--just as they're being eliminated! It's a fascinating read for anyone, but I especially recommend it to those teaching children.

Why we like beautiful things is a question that have been intriguing me since my high school days. I remember building an electronic gadget in early seventies that could produce numerically determined musical notes, and I would try it on my friends to see if they found it melodious or not. I developed my own ideas about the evolutionary roots of aesthetic appreciation, but could not find any books that would satisfy my curiosity. Many decades have gone by since my personal attempts

to find an answer until I read Eric Kandel's "Age of Insight" and V.S.Ramachandran's "The Tell-Tale Brain". Both of these books had sections that discussed the neurological (the "how") and evolutionary (the "why") basis of visual aesthetics. The ideas in these books also inspired me to create a series of art pieces that dealt with these questions. Therefore, I was really ready to read Anjan Chatterjee's book -- an entire book dealing with this very question, and I was not disappointed. He has been able to present a wonderful summary of all the past work in this field, while making it accessible to non-specialists like us. I am also very glad that he didn't exclude the philosophical and social scientist's view of the topic. However, the most enjoyable parts are where he describes his own ideas about the subject and how he extended the frontier. I was truly surprised that Anjan Chatterjee didn't only deal with "beautiful" art, but also included purely conceptual art in his discussions. It is a very exciting time for this nascent field, and I can't wait to see what happens in the next few decades.

Dull writing about a fascinating subject

The author makes a heroic search for the roots of the artistic impulse in the neurophysiology of the brain. It may be reasonable to conclude with the author that a reductionist approach is not entirely satisfactory. Perhaps Clive Bell had it right in his search in art for "aesthetic form". Here we need to ask a daunting question: Using Bell's criterion, what is it that great works of art have in common, whether in the visual, musical, or literary domain. J.R. Leibowitz, author of Hidden Harmony: the Connected Worlds of Physics and Art

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