

Meaning in Art - Deborah Stern Response

In his essay, "The Meaning of Art," David posits that art, across various mediums, "pushes... (us) to interact with the performer and, ultimately with the artistic work on a foundational level, intellectually and emotionally," an "interaction, (that) expressing as it does the abstract, dynamic reality of human experience, is the vital aspect of expressing art." David writes from the vantage point of the artist. Because I am not an artist, I respond, instead, from the perspective of the consumer, the viewer, the object of the artist's engagement.

Art is the product of those talented and often restless individuals who are driven by a heightened need to create, to express, to interact, to be heard and to be recognized. They are, not surprisingly, among those most sensitive to the social and political issues of the day. Their work literally gives color, texture and dimension to the text of history. I believe that to understand the history of a time period, one must look to the art of that period. Conversely, to understand the art, one must understand the events that affected the societies in which the artists lived.

Were I to take a course in the French Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment, I would hope that it would include, alongside the historical narrative of the period and the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke, Beethoven's Third Symphony, *Eroica*. In it, Beethoven expresses his belief in the coming of a better society unshackled from the burden of monarchy, and his identification with the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, brotherhood and self-governance (originally dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte, Beethoven revoked the honor after Bonaparte crowned himself emperor). Musicians may have a deep appreciation for the Symphony's innovations in form, harmonic dissonances and rhythmic tensions, but those of us in the lay audience have a deep appreciation for the emotion-soaked experience of simply listening.¹

From the 17th through the 19th centuries, opera was a form of entertainment frequented by the emerging European merchant class. As the new burgers and bourgeoisie, they had the time and inclination to examine the social and political issues of their changing world, and the composers and librettists were ready to write for them.² The one opera that Beethoven composed, *Fidelio*, told a story saturated in political and social commentary. It was first performed in 1805, and audiences were drawn by the story of Leonore's ruse to disguise herself as a jail guard and free her husband Florestan from imprisonment after he is unjustly sentenced for his revolutionary political views. The emotional, social and political impact of *Fidelio* has been so enduring that it was the first opera Arturo Toscanini chose to conduct in New York after immigrating from Italy in flight from Mussolini's fascism, it was the first opera

¹ ("Beethoven's Third Symphony, "Eroica": The Music of Revolution", <https://thelistenersclub.com/2020/12/14/beethovens-third-symphony-eroica-music-of-revolution/>).

² See, Mitchell Cohen's "The Politics of Opera, A History from Monteverdi to Mozart" (Princeton Univ. Press, 2017), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691175027/the-politics-of-opera>

performed in Berlin in September 1945 after the defeat of the Nazis, and in 1989 it was the opera conducted by Leonard Bernstein to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany.

Looking to this side of the pond, where would our understanding of the Depression be, were it not informed by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evan's photographic capture of the human toll of economic poverty and geographic displacement, one of the many photo projects sponsored by the Farm Security Administration?³



To understand the Black experience of the Depression, a subject that has been relatively overlooked, I would visit the work of Jacob Lawrence who in the 1930's, through the medium of tempera paint, communicated through vivid color and powerful graphics the mass migration of Black communities from the tenant farms of the agrarian south to the factories and mills in the northern industrial centers of Detroit, Pittsburgh and Chicago.⁴



³ (<https://artsandculture.google.com/theme/dorothea-lange-s-moving-photographs-of-the-depression-era/UgKSzBM63VVaJw?hl=en>); (<https://thegreatdepressionphotos.wordpress.com/photographers-2/walker-evans/>)

⁴ <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1495>

Most recently, the murals of George Floyd seen by viewers around the country and the world communicated the political and social trauma of his tragic death with a haunting resonance that went beyond the impact of nightly news reports and the shocking videotapes.⁵ And finally, after these turbulent years and the horror of the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, how comforting and encouraging it was at the Biden-Harris Inauguration, just two weeks later, to see Amanda Gorman stand on those same steps and recite her poem "The Hill We Climb" and express the hope that we "lift our gazes not to what stands between us but what stands before us."



In closing, I would submit that the purpose and meaning of art is, as David expresses, to convey "the abstract, dynamic reality of human experience" -- and that fundamental to that reality is art's function as an exceptional vehicle to communicate and reflect upon the social and political questions that drive the times that we live in, and, most significantly, to preserve the memory of that experience for future generations.

⁵ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/lifestyle/lifestyle-buzz/16-powerful-george-floyd-murals-seen-around-the-world/ss-BB15YXI>