The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art

In this book, Dr Anjan Chatterjee, a clinical and research neurologist at the University of Pennsylvania, introduces us to the emerging field of neuroaesthetics and what it has to offer. He surveys fields of art appreciation, neurosciences, PET and MRI scans and clinical trials, anthropology, evolutionary biology, and philosophical constructs. His personal search is for understanding, and in the book he shares his informed quest: “Why is something regarded as beautiful?” and “For what purpose?” Chapters range from considerations of beauty, pleasure, and art through all these disciplines.

He 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 these 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.

Beauty is not a unitary concept. Dr Chatterjee outlines a continuum from hot, as in sexual passion for an object, to cool, as in Euler’s elegant mathematical proof, and describes which parts of the brain are activated by images from this continuum presented to human subjects.

While the various attractions can be localized in the brain by electrode implants and more recently by PET and fMRI studies, there is no one specific area for aesthetic pleasures, which are complex admixtures of emotions colored by our histories.

Focusing on visual art, for instance, with experimental neuroaesthetics, psychologists moved from perception to attention and emotion. It was revealed that we respond to hidden attractive qualities in people that are indicative of unconscious beauty. He, too, references unconscious attractive qualities in people that are indicative of health, good genes, and their neuroanatomic underpinnings, with many examples by Freud, Klimt, Schiele, Schnitzler, and others. On page 441, he quotes Semir Zeki, the pioneer of neuroaesthetics: “The main function of the brain is to acquire new knowledge and that visual art is an extension of that function…art extends the functions of the brain more directly than other processes of acquiring knowledge” and “Since vision is above all an active process, art also encourages an active and creative exploration of the world.”

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