In every culture on earth, people decorate their possessions and themselves, and enjoy visual art. They stare in awe at vast landscapes and the starry sky, and they sing and dance, and make instrumental music. Why? The answer seems obvious: it gives them pleasure. But why should it? What benefit does the innate capacity for aesthetic pleasure bestow on the human organism?

We know that aesthetic pleasure isn’t just a drive, like hunger or sexual desire. Hunger is prospective: it urges us to eat. Pleasure, on the other hand, accompanies eating. It tells us to continue. “Keep eating this!” it says. But eating should not continue indefinitely. Once the body has absorbed enough nourishment, it is bad to continue. So when we are sated, the body withdraws pleasure; the fuller you are the less pleasant it is to eat, no matter how delicious the food. This gives drive-associated pleasure a characteristic time-profile. Being hungry is unpleasant; being very hungry is exceedingly so. When you eat, you first relieve the distress of hunger and then begin to take pleasure in the food itself, if it is tasty. Then as you become sated, the pleasure dies away. The “Keep eating!” message gives way to displeasure, which is a “Stop eating!” imperative. Pleasure regulates eating: it tells you what to eat and how much. Sexual pleasure has a similar profile, though of course its regulatory role is a good bit more complex. Pleasure doesn’t just duplicate drives. It complements them.

Eating and sex are drive-related pleasures, but we experience other kinds of pleasures, too. Consider *cuddling*. There is no *drive* to cuddle a loved one. There is no increasingly unpleasant hormonal build-up that impels you; unlike hunger or sex, it isn’t brought on by deprivation. Nor is there any natural satiation point, such as an orgasm. Unlike sex, cuddling has a relatively flat time-pleasure profile. Of course, nobody goes on cuddling forever. But this is because other urges take over, or because they become sleepy or tired. Unlike eating, it does not shut down once a specific end is gained. Pleasure encourages the activity independently of any immediate result.

*Aesthetic* pleasure is activity-focussed, like cuddling, not drive-actuated or end-directed, like eating. The activity it accompanies is what I would generically call “contemplation.” You are *listening* to an aria by Rossini or the sound of a nightingale; you are *looking* at the Rocky Mountains or a painting by Ingres: aesthetic pleasure tells you that this contemplative engagement is worthwhile, to keep on doing it—but not for some immediate result. By contrast: I can take pleasure in looking at the Rocky Mountains for non-aesthetic reasons. Catching sight of them, I might be elated that my long journey to the ski-slopes is finally coming to an end. But *aesthetic* pleasure in something is pleasure in just looking at it, or listening to it, or pleasure in contemplating its qualities. Aesthetic pleasure motivates you to keep looking; it doesn’t tell you that the object of your contemplation is good for anything other than contemplation.

When activity-focussed pleasures are not purely reflective or intellectual, they bring characteristic autonomous bodily or behavioural responses. They express themselves involuntarily in the face by a soft expression or smile. (Contrast intense sexual pleasure or ravenous eating.) Psychologically, they focus attention on the pleasurable activity; one tends to “get lost” in the beauty of the starry sky or in van Gogh’s version, and other concerns, including worries and pain, tend to recede. This dreaminess or absorption is mediated by endogenously secreted opioids, which also bring on feelingsof pleasure. These effects are characteristic of what we might call *physical* pleasure, and we should recognize that some intellectual pleasures—a book, a Sudoku puzzle, friendly conversation—elicit physical pleasure. And so does aesthetic pleasure: it has bodily expression.

Whether drive-related or activity-focussed, pleasure is informative about things in the world. But its messages are relevant only to a specific activity. The pleasant taste of a mango teaches me that it is good to eat when I am hungry, but it doesn’t tell me anything about *other* activities that I could undertake with mangoes. It doesn’t tell me, for instance, that a mango is a good thing to apply to a wound (as certain leaves are) or that it is good to look at. Similarly, a person with whom one cuddles isn’t necessarily one with whom one wants to have sex (e.g., one’s child) or conversation (e.g., one’s dog). A book one has had fun reading isn’t necessarily one that would be decorative on one’s shelf. Pleasure in one activity involving an object doesn’t translate into generalized approval.

The specificity of pleasure might seem obvious, but some who write about aesthetic pleasure miss the point. Aesthetic pleasure is pleasure in contemplating something. This pleasure could be sensory, like the enjoyment one derives from looking at a painting or listening to music. Or it could be intellectual, like the pleasure of reading the latest Robert Harris. In both cases, pleasure in contemplation has to be distinguished from wanting an object for other uses. Kant was among the first to understand this. His example was that of a palace. You might long to live in it, or you might hate it for its extravagance and want to destroy it. But both of these responses are distinct from the pleasure or displeasure derived from merely looking at it. Only the latter pleasure counts as aesthetic.

Discussing sexual selection, Darwin wrote: ““When we behold a male bird elaborately displaying his graceful plumes or splendid colours before the female . . . it is impossible to doubt that she admires the beauty of her male partner.” Assuming that he really means *beauty*, and not sexual attractiveness, this is a mistake. It confuses sexual desire with aesthetic admiration. According to Darwin’s own theory, when a female looks at a male that way, she is not getting pleasure from looking at him for the sake of looking at him; rather, she is driven to mate with him. Darwin wrongly equates the concupiscent gaze with simple looking. Kant’s point was that aesthetic appreciation is disinterested. It is pleasure just in looking.

This brings us back to my puzzle. Aesthetic pleasure encourages us to contemplate its object. But why is *this* good? Why is it valuable to be absorbed in contemplation, with all the attendant dangers of reduced vigilance? Wasting time and energy puts one at an evolutionary disadvantage. For large animals such as us, unneeded activity is particularly expensive.

Start with perception. Our perceptual receptors receive a “booming, buzzing confusion” of stimulation. Vision gives us two slightly differing two-dimensional images; audition gives us two sound images each a summation of sonic emissions from many different sources. These images change from moment to moment, as the perceiver’s position as well as external circumstances change. Yet, perception delivers to our consciousness a remarkably clear and coherent presentation of discrete objects arrayed in three-dimensional space. This happens even in bad conditions—in near-darkness (in which stimuli are faint), in fog (where the outlines of objects are indistinct), in the noise of a loud party or concert (in which voices are fragmented and broken up), in the chaos of a carousel or fast-moving car (where nothing seems to stay still). In a huge range of conditions, many inimical to receiving information, perceivers have an extraordinary ability to construct a stable and coherent image of the world.

In order to do this, the visual system has to be sensitive to pattern and order, for these are signs of significant objects and events. Finding such patterns comes naturally, but like other natural activities it requires practice. Perception is a skill that has to be developed by repetition. Think of motor skills. Animals and humans *play* and roughhouse to develop skills. They do this naturally; evolution has made it pleasurable to do so. Similarly, infants babble; later, they talk . . . and talk, and talk. They don’t do this to communicate. They do it to play, and by this play they acquire the capacity to communicate.

It is the same way with perception. Infants stare; they cock their heads to listen. As the Toronto psychologist Daniel Berlyne noted, infants begin by closely attending to simple patterns. As they grow older, they become interested in more and more complex displays, staring with special fascination at incongruities, asymmetries, and the like. This is perceptual play. Looking at things that display significant patterns is good because it develops perceptual skill. As we grow to adulthood, the patterns that give us pleasure are more complex than when we start out. As infants, we might begin by staring at checker-boards; as adults, we are moved by the mysteries of complex landscapes and search for meaning in the starry sky.

Aesthetic pleasure is the fun of perceptual play; it is valuable because it develops perceptual skill. This complements a suggestion made by the British neuroscientist, Semir Zeki: Art, he says, is a search for “constant, lasting, essential and enduring features of objects, surfaces, faces, situations.” I want to add that the objects we pleasurably gaze at are those that that afford us a rich field for such a search. We begin our lives by taking pleasure in looking and listening to things; by this pleasurable activity we learn how to perceive. This is how our aesthetic capacities get off the ground.

Now, why should *adults* find perceptual play fun? Aren’t they done learning how to perceive? More importantly, what is the value of the sophisticated perceptual discriminations that connoisseurs bring to art? Surely, we do not gaze for hours at a painting by Bosch or by Klimt simply in order to hone our ecological perception skills. And what is the value of artistic form? Why is it aesthetically salient?

Here is a remarkable fact. Everyone achieves a certain basic level of skill in characteristically human activities: walking, talking, looking, listening, and singing. We do this by pleasurable play when young; perhaps we maintain these skills by gazing on fairly complex scenes even in adulthood. But with each of these activities, the human body affords us the capacity to improve—to become extraordinarily skilled in a few activities. Spontaneously developed language and motor skills are adequate for most purposes, but they are far below those of the most accomplished performers. An accomplished poet or playwright has a command of language that comes from repetition, practice, and instruction. She comes to this level of expertise with great difficulty. The same goes for somebody who appreciates poetry with hard-won knowledge of context and allusion.

Basic skills are achieved by pleasurable activity, extraordinary skills by painful and difficult activity. The activity by which an accomplished artist improves and maintains her skill is arduous, not spontaneous. Nonetheless, there is a kind of pleasure that comes with high levels of skill as well. Somebody who is practising to reach a higher level of skill than she has thus far achieved experiences displeasure when she performs. Let’s say she’s a pianist practising Chopin’s *Etudes*. She is dissatisfied when she plays them at the skill level she has already achieved; this is why she wants to improve. But when she tries to play them better—faster, more evenly, with more power—she finds that her fluency is poor. She has to break established automaticities in order to achieve a higher level of performance. Her teacher may introduce her to new techniques to help, or she may try them out on her accord, or even (if she is truly outstanding) invent them. But when she uses these new techniques, not only does she have to think step-by-step about what she is doing, which is stressful, but also she constantly fails. These are painful experiences. But when she finally is able to play at the skill level she is aiming for, she plays fluently and what she plays sounds good to her. As the Swedish psychologist, Anders Ericsson, has found, pleasure in performance happens when skill matches aspiration. But achieving aspirational levels can be extremely difficult, involving life-changing sacrifice and dedication.

What motivates individuals to take on the *un*pleasant practice needed to improve their skills to the extraordinary levels that art demands? Partly ambition, of course, and the desire to achieve easy fluency, however unpleasant the process of achieving it might be. But also human cultures have invented a motivating device—interactive play. In the realm of motor play, sports and games play this role—*winning* is an artificially created achievement that motivates individuals to become better. In the case of aesthetic activity, there is art, which is an interaction between maker and consumer. The maker skilfully creates something that challenges the perceptual discrimination of the consumer; by improving her discriminatory abilities, the consumer challenges the creative capacity of the maker.

Here is a parable to illustrate the process. Suppose that a primitive maker of cloth decorates her product with a complex design. She does this both because she finds it pleasant to look at and because it is pleasant develop her motor skills and hand-eye coordination in this way. Now, as it turns out, everybody else in the community shares in the perceptual pleasure she enables, which gives her an economic incentive to produce more patterned cloth. Maybe others copy her as well, and insinuate themselves into her domain. At this point, repeated perceptual attention to the pattern will induce in consumers a greater sensitivity to the subtleties of patterned cloth. Thus, consumers (including the maker herself) become sensitized to imperfections in the patterns—perhaps the spatial interval is not perfectly even, or perhaps the repeated element is not exactly the same throughout. This gives producers the incentive to improve their skills. And, because they invest in beauty, it gives consumers an incentive to improve their skills of discrimination. One can even imagine the one group setting particular challenges for the other, and codifying such challenges within the artificial constraints of form—as games have rules to elicit skill, art has form for the same purpose. The result is a virtuous spiral in the co-development of perceptual and productive skills.

The Renaissance art historian, Michael Baxandall, once wrote that *taste* is “the conformity between discriminations demanded by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the beholder.” Looking at a great painting, he said, “a man with intellectual self-respect [is] in no position to remain quite passive; he [is] obliged to discriminate.” This interaction between artist and beholder is the cultural context in which making and perceiving are driven to ever higher levels by life-absorbing immersion.

Art is a cultural institution that channels and transforms the simple joys of infant perceptual play into something extraordinarily complex and grand. It imparts value to the contemplation of objects that possess form-dictated complexity. Sophisticated aesthetic pleasure marks this value.