



[Muse](#) [Search](#) [Journals](#) [This Journal](#) [Contents](#)

[Notes and Fragments](#)

Komar and Melamid Discover Pleistocene Taste

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In late 1993, The Nation Institute and two Russian émigré artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, performed the first scientific nationwide inquiry about "what Americans want in art." A thousand and one adult Americans representing both sexes and a variety of geographic, ethnic, and income groups were asked in a telephone survey about their preferences for colors, size, subject matter, and treatment used in paintings.

The project was widely reported in the press, and the art world--not surprisingly--scorned the very idea of polling the masses. Komar and Melamid, who in Russia had been dissident artists, reasoned that in the democratic country of America ordinary people's opinions mattered. No one had ever before directly asked The People about their preferences. Appropriately in a market-oriented society, they used "market research" techniques to find "a people's art"--i.e., the kind of art that people really want.

The pollsters asked questions like the following: "If you had to name one color as your favorite color--the color you would like to see stand out in a painting you would consider buying for your home, for example--which color would it be?" "When you select pictures, photographs, or other pieces of art for your home, do you find you lean more toward modern or more toward traditional styles?" "Many people find that a lot of the paintings they like have similar features or subjects. Take animals for example. On the whole, would you say that you prefer seeing paintings of wild animals, like lions, giraffes, or deer, or that you **[End Page 486]** prefer paintings of domestic animals?" They asked for choices between natural and portrait settings, indoor and outdoor scenes. Among the latter, did people prefer forests, lakes, rivers, oceans and seas? fields and rural scenes? A city with houses and buildings? Which season was best liked? Would respondents choose realistic-looking or "different looking" paintings? Exaggerations? Imaginary objects? Bold stark designs or playful whimsical designs? Sharp

angles or soft curves? Geometric patterns or random uneven patterns? Expressive or smooth brushstrokes? A surface that was thickly textured or smooth and flat? Colors blended or kept separate? Serious or festive themes? Busy or simple treatment?

Overwhelmingly people preferred smoothly-painted outdoor scenes that looked "real," with blended colors. They liked both wild and domestic animals, and human figures, especially of children and women, in casual poses, and historical figures. The favorite color was emphatically blue, with green the second favorite.

Consequently Komar and Melamid made a painting, called *America's Most Wanted*, that combined in one work all the most-liked features. It was a "44% blue landscape" showing water, clouds, distant hills, a lightly-treed foreground, casually dressed human figures, George Washington, a yawning hippopotamus, some children, and a male and female deer--all painted in a conventional, all-purpose nineteenth-century realist style. A second painting, *America's Least Wanted*, showed a "different-looking" abstract or "imaginary" conglomeration of bold, stark geometric shapes in colors of gold, orange, peach, and teal, with a thick textured surface.

Similar polls subsequently carried out in nine other countries--Russia, Ukraine, France, Kenya, Finland, Iceland, Denmark, Turkey, and China--revealed surprisingly similar preferences. The artists made paintings using the most wanted and least wanted features for each country, presenting them in an exhibition and eventually in an expensive book. ¹ The pictures differed only in small details (e.g., a large hippopotamus and Mount Kilimanjaro in Kenya, a water buffalo and rice paddies in China, and groups of playing children in Turkey). Everywhere the preferred setting was an idealized blue landscape.

When I heard about the project, I could not help but notice that its findings bore out rather strikingly those of *soi-disant* "Darwinian Aesthetics," ² although neither the artists nor anyone connected with the survey appears to have known about this body of work. Darwinian aesthetics (sometimes called evolutionary aesthetics or, applied to landscapes, "environmental aesthetics") identifies and describes universal **[End Page 487]** human preferences for particular features that affected our Pleistocene ancestors' survival (e.g., led them to make better decisions about when to move, where to settle, and what activities to follow in various localities), or reproductive success (e.g., male preference for a low waist-hip ratio in females, or preferences of both sexes for symmetrical features in prospective sex partners). ³ Since universal human preferences presumably derive from an adaptive Pleistocene hunter-gatherer psychology, they have been suggested as a profitable arena in which to study the evolution of aesthetic tastes in art (e.g., Orians and Heerwagen, p. 555).



The *America's Most Wanted* painting is a test-case illustration of the findings of evolutionary aesthetics studies. These show that humans prefer natural to human-influenced environments (Kaplan, p. 587),

especially those with *trees and water*. *Savannah-type* environments are also highly valued, i.e., those with *low, grassy ground cover, distant views, and scattered trees* (Orians and Heerwagen, p. 558; Kaplan, p. 591). The trees rated most highly in such studies have *moderately-dense canopies, taller than they are broad*, which provide shade or refuge, and *trunks which bifurcate near the ground* allowing easy climbing to gain greater views or to escape predators (Orians and Heerwagen, p. 559). Being in deep woods or in wide open spaces is *not* preferred (Kaplan, p. 592). **[End Page 488]** Desirable landscapes also contain moderate degrees of complexity, a sense of coherence, and a semi-open spatial configuration, features which signal an ease of movement as well as the potential for gaining more information about the environment ("wayfinding," says Kaplan, p. 584).

In addition to being "coherent" or "legible," preferred landscapes often contain a quality called "mystery"--a hint of interesting features such as partially blocked views or a *distant horizon* which emotionally entice the viewer to enter the environment to explore and learn more (Orians and Heerwagen, p. 560). The dark cliffs to the left in *America's Most Wanted* would seem to fill the bill for this feature. Indications of weather, as disclosed by clouds and the amount of light provided, give important environmental information--hence "*cloud patterns* are among the most powerful evokers of strong emotions, both positive and negative" (Orians and Heerwagen, p. 566). Shadows allow better perception of depth and hence details of the environment (p. 567).

The presence of *water* is immediately appealing as an essential resource (p. 573). The presence of *large mammals* "enriches environmental experience"; as they are both a potential source of food and a source of danger, humans enjoy watching large mammals and find their behavior intrinsically interesting (pp. 567-68). Cues associated with land productivity and harvest are more positively received than cues associated with dormancy: the painting suggests high summer or early autumn.

The congruence of Komar and Melamid's findings with those of Darwinian aesthetics has undeniable interest, along with entertainment value. More importantly and seriously, however, considering the two endeavors side by side provides an opportunity to address what seems to me a mistaken assumption in both projects--namely, the implication that studies of preferences provide insight into human artmaking or aesthetic experiences, either today or in the Pleistocene. While the tongues of Komar and Melamid appear to be as firmly in their cheeks as their bulging wallets presumably are in their back pockets, some Darwinian aestheticians sincerely suggest that their findings about preferences may be applied not only to the design of human environments but to understanding the evolution of aesthetic tastes in art or even to the analyses of works of art (e.g., Thornhill; Orians and Heerwagen, p. 575).

Leaving aside the fact that the tradition of landscape painting is of recent origin in the modern Western tradition, ⁴ I claim that polling **[End Page 489]** humans for

preferred colors, shapes, environments, and similar features ⁵ has little if any relevance to our understanding of (1) the cues we respond to in art, (2) the feelings these cues engender, (3) the variability in quality of aesthetic experiences, and (4) the ultimate adaptive benefits of artmaking and art appreciation. For related reasons, Darwinian aesthetics is as limited as Komar and Melamid's project to understanding the nature of art, ⁶ whether in the Pleistocene or at the end of the twentieth century.

(1) *Aesthetic Cues: In experiences of the arts we respond to more than adaptive preferences and to more than single qualities.* For good adaptive reasons humans generally find warm baths, a relaxing massage, the taste of a fresh peach, and the touch, sight, or smell of their lover or child emotionally positive; they prefer these to many other stimuli. However, to suggest that such sense experiences are much like experiences of the arts is confused.

Response to an occasion or instance of art is not to isolated sense qualities but to their combination and to what is done to them. Hence art experiences are typically many-faceted and complex: they are not simply reflex responses to the sum of a number of "most wanted" features (even if these features can be shown to have enhanced survival and reproduction in ancestral environments). Komar and Melamid's painting makes this clear, as do formulaic films or novels that include "everything" that humans have evolved to pay attention to (sex, riches, adventure, resourceful hero, evil villain, and so forth). Responding to symmetrical female faces or breasts or to a low waist-hip ratio has little to do with aesthetic response to visual art--otherwise a *Playboy* centerfold photograph would be the pinnacle of aesthetic excellence. To suggest that such features contribute to an understanding of, say, the appreciation by members of premodern societies in Africa, Oceania, and the Americas of their carved or painted images is simply risible.

To be sure, the arts everywhere make use of emotionally captivating and cognitively interesting features that ancestrally were (and may still be) relevant to vital interests, and to subject matter of biologically-important concern. Among these interests and themes one can mention male-female relationships, life transitions, the mortal body, and feelings of hope or helplessness, triumph or despair. Movements that are strong, vigorous, and controlled, or graceful and fluent, are associated with vitality, youth, health, and competence, as are vibrant tones and entraining rhythms. Clear and true colors, firmness, and glossiness visually indicate freshness and ripeness. (Their opposites, **[End Page 490]** signs of weakness, decay, or disease, are disliked and considered to be ugly.) Eye motifs, zigzag lines, and other cues of possible danger are also immediately compelling, ⁷ as are intimations of violence or death.

Yet such signals are not in themselves art, but ingredients of art. They can and do exist in nonaesthetic contexts as well, although Darwinian aesthetics does not suggest how one might distinguish between their aesthetic and nonaesthetic manifestations. At best, one might call the signals *protoaesthetic*.

To provoke aesthetic experience, I claim, something additional has to be done to the salient qualities, events, or objects: additional pattern, exaggeration, or other emphasis so that they become more colorful or vivid, complex or elaborate, harmonious or unified, compelling or moving than they are when untreated. ⁸ Attention is deliberately additionally drawn over and above adaptive features. For example, emphasis and intensification (through repetition, elaboration, and exaggeration, or other indications of special care) enhance accessibility and additionally mark importance. Skill, which indicates competence and care, attests to the seriousness of the maker's intentions. Rare or costly materials appeal because of their novelty, and the knowledge that they are difficult to obtain.

(2) Aesthetic Feelings: *Aesthetic experience is felt not only as pleasurable, comforting, or beautiful but as significantly persuasive and memorable.* A picture of, say, a landscape is appreciated aesthetically not only because it signals restfulness, bounty, or safety, but because its pleasant, restful, bounteous, or safe features are given added emotional significance--which need not even be pleasurable.

As a trivial example, in the film, *Pretty Woman*, Julia Roberts is taken to the opera for the first time by Richard Gere. We watch her face as she obviously responds to its musical rendering of doomed love. After the performance, when asked if she liked it, she replies, "I thought I was going to pee my pants!" ⁹ More seriously, Ibrahim Poudjougou, a Dogon sculptor in Mali, reported that occasionally he made an object that made everyone who saw it "stop breathing" for a moment. ¹⁰ Other responses to the arts include weeping, gooseflesh, tingles, a feeling of admiration for and gratitude to the artist or performer, a sense of "rightness" or fullness. Such responses, which are inadequately described as pleasure, come from absorption in or intent involvement with the thing experienced.

Although aesthetic experiences are perceived with the same sensory equipment that is used when engaging with anything, one takes the **[End Page 491]** occasion not only as a source of sensory stimuli that have informational or pleasurable or even beautiful content but as it provokes receptiveness to possibilities and relations that can be found in or made from the stimuli: the aesthetic feelings arise from the unfolding of these possibilities and relations. Darwinian aesthetics as presently conceived does not provide grounds for addressing this sort of emotional appreciation.

(3) Aesthetic Variability: Humans everywhere distinguish between copulation and lovemaking, feeding or dining, and killing game animals with indifference or respect. *Such distinctions, or differences in behavior, reflect emotional dispositions that transcend the simple satisfaction of an appetite.* When evolutionary theorists regard art as only adaptive preferences, they provide little explanation for why humans should have evolved the capacity to experience a stronger or more elevated state than the ordinary pleasurable satiety (presumably felt by other animals also) after relieving states of hunger or sexual deprivation.

Practically speaking as an evolutionist, the emotional rewards of all individual consummatory experiences of mating or eating (or anything else) should be roughly similar, if they serve the biological purposes--reproduction, survival--for which they are designed. Apart from ultimate adaptive valence or cultural conditioning, we are given no criteria by evolutionary aesthetics studies for explaining why some experiences are generally received by their percipients as being qualitatively more meaningful, valuable, or compelling than others--that is, *aesthetically superior*.

Connoisseurs of a discipline rightly consider their aesthetic appreciation to surpass that of novices. First-time viewers of Russian ballet or a Sinhalese *kohomba kankariya* may respond emotionally to skillful or handsome young men or women, to exciting drumming, or to arresting costumes, but may well miss the significant nuances, unexpected deviations, unforeseen relationships, fine points of ensemble, and other qualitative features of the occasion. A broad array of associations or overtones to one's world or concerns may be evoked by experiences of the arts. In aesthetic experience there is "more than meets the eye"--a complexity or density of meaning embodied in the work and further revealed through its creator's or performer's artful and insightful manipulations.

Aesthetic appreciation in this sense is not only a pastime of an elite in museums of art, nor is it a superfluous side-effect of other adaptations. Even as people (whether premodern or postmodern) have interests in dances, songs, and visual artifacts as functional indicators of reproductive **[End Page 492]** success or failure, they additionally utilize traditional stylistic criteria for aesthetic judgments of these and other important objects and events.

This is the case with Komar and Melamid's painting. Although it looks superficially like a nineteenth-century landscape, it is made with late twentieth-century self-consciousness and cannot be fully appreciated with the eyes of our great-grandparents. In today's art world, the project itself (with the poll, the publicity, the paintings, an exhibition, the town meetings and focus groups, a book) is the "work of art"--a performance piece that raises a number of provocative questions about the place of art in contemporary life; the distance between the art world and the public; the ubiquity and influence of Western calendar style painting all over the world, even in countries like China and Kenya, resulting in what might be called a McPainting; the "stunt-like" and conceptual nature of art today, with an inextricable mixture of seriousness and humor; and the place of the work itself within the history of art. [11](#)

(4) Ultimate Benefits: *The reduction of aesthetics to preferences neglects important and interesting questions about the ultimate or original purposes of artmaking and experience.* For example, why have humans taken biologically-relevant signals and additionally shaped and elaborated them into works and events that gave them special kinds of feelings that are more than simply preferences?

Artful elaboration in traditional societies has been used to draw attention not just to anything, but to important life concerns that people rightly cared about: matters of subsistence and survival, their own bodies, ceremonies that had to do with control of uncertainty. The use of "protoaesthetic" elements, subliminally associated with their biologically relevant referents, naturally provoked sensory interest and gratification--which increased when made additionally striking or beautiful by artful emphasis and elaboration.

Aboriginal Australians tens of thousands of years ago did not simply take notice of the adaptive features of the actual landscapes in which they lived, but marked them with pecked cuplike indentations, handprints, engravings, and paintings, thereby elaborating and transforming them--most likely with accompanying striking, memorable, emotionally-meaningful songs, dances, and stories about that landscape's ancestral origin and continuing maintenance. ¹² That is, they suffused the adaptive features with additional significance. ¹³

It is no accident, I believe, that the arts in traditional societies occur **[End Page 493]** primarily in communal ritual ceremonies. Through their arts, ceremonies manifest and transmit the "emotional dispositions upon which society depends." ¹⁴ Even though the arts allow individuals to display their reproductive resources, it is the arts' ability to hold social groups together by embodying and generating emotionally-felt meanings that has, I claim, been their ultimate evolutionary purpose. By engaging in the arts, people show that they care enough about something to go to the trouble to draw attention to it. They "mean" it, and by the compellingness and memorability of their products or actions, their observers or fellow participants come to mean it too.

Despite the simplistic and inadequate claims by some proponents of "Darwinian Aesthetics," evolutionary biology provides an explanatory framework for considering the arts to be and to have been intrinsically and crucially important to human lives. ¹⁵ This is a claim that no other contemporary theoretical perspective seems able to make, so that it is an especial pity when card-carrying Darwinians who purport to be treating "aesthetics" reveal their inadequate grasp of the subject as it has been developed over some centuries. Their cavalier appropriation of an established branch of scholarly endeavor recalls the borrowing of the term "genetics" by the Oakland School District in early 1997, as they declared that Ebonics (or Black English) was an authentic language. Said the Oakland Schools Superintendent, Carolyn Gettridge, "no matter how many times we have explained that genetically-based means 'having its origins in,' it was taken to mean something else." ¹⁶

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary gives as its first meaning of "genetic, genetically": "relating to or determined by the origin, development, or causal antecedents of something." If the Oakland task force used the dictionary, they can be forgiven for thinking that their usage of the phrase--to imply that Black English originated in Africa--was correct. Yet specialists in genetics and evolutionary theory know that,

precisely used, the term means something both more complex and very different.

In a similar manner, Darwinian Aesthetics has adopted a term whose meaning they appear also to have extracted from a dictionary: "Aesthetics: a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste and with the creation and appreciation of beauty." Yet this description--also from the dictionary--no more characterizes the specialist field of aesthetics as it exists today than does the dictionary definition of "genetic, genetically" describe modern evolutionary and population biology. Between the naïveté of today's Darwinian Aesthetics and the ultra-sophistication of Komar and Melamid's "scientific **[End Page 494]** survey" lies a nourishing and promising approach to the universal roots and vital importance of the arts, an approach that awaits the informed perusal of Darwinians and art theorists alike.

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Notes

1. Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, ed. J. Wypijewski (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997).

2. I refer primarily to an essay with that title, by Randy Thornhill, in C. Crawford and D. Krebs, eds., *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology: Ideas, Issues, and Applications* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1998), to papers about evolved responses to landscape, including G. H. Orians and J. H. Heerwagen, "Evolved Responses to Landscapes," in J. H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, and J. Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and to work on environmental preferences, such as Stephen Kaplan's "Environmental Preference in a Knowledge-Seeking, Knowledge-Using Organism," in *The Adapted Mind*, pp. 581-600.

3. See Thornhill for a comprehensive bibliography and description of such studies. Representative definitions and theoretical positions in evolutionary aesthetics include: *Preference*: "affective biases toward patterns of information" (Kaplan, p. 582), i.e., concern for knowledge (recognition, prediction, evaluation, action); *Aesthetics*: what humans find beautiful (e.g., coherence or mystery in the outdoor environment); a functionally-based way of responding (as to the environment) related to information acquisition and processing (Kaplan, p. 595). Aesthetic reactions are "guides to behavior." According to Thornhill, "the Darwinian theory of human aesthetic value is that beauty is promise of function in the environments in which humans evolved Ugliness is the promise of low survival and reproductive failure. Human aesthetic value is a scale of reproductive success and failure in human evolutionary history."

4. Kenneth Clark, *Landscape Into Art* (London: Pelican Books, orig. 1949; 1956).

[5.](#) Thornhill sometimes calls these "Beauty Features."

[6.](#) Philosophers of art have spent more than two centuries trying to define their subject, an endeavor I can scarcely summarize or contribute to in a short essay. For this article, let me say only that the careful enhancement or elaboration of ordinary objects, materials, sounds, movements, and activities has apparently characterized humans from ancestral times, as has the emotional response to this enhancement or elaboration. It is such enhancement and response that I here call artmaking-and-appreciation.

[7.](#) See Nancy Aiken, *The Biological Origins of Art* (Westport Connecticut: Praeger, 1998) and Johanna Üher, "On Zigzag Designs: Three Levels of Meaning," *Current Anthropology* 32 (1991): 437-39.

[8.](#) Thus if an actual landscape is to produce aesthetic responses as visual art does, one must consider such things as the use of composition, unity, variety, contrast, balance, form, mass, shape, and so on, for these are the things--not simple uncontextualized preferences--considered by Western appreciators in discussions of art. See Ian C. Laurie, "Aesthetic Factors in Visual Evaluation," in E. H. Zube, R. O. Brush, and J. Fabos, eds., *Landscape Assessment: Values, Perception and Resources* (Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania: Dowden, Hutchinson and Rose, 1975), p. 24.

[9.](#) I thank Nancy Aiken for this example.

[10.](#) Rachel Hoffman, "Objects and Acts," *African Arts* (1995): 56-59.

[11.](#) These questions, and others, are raised and discussed with intelligence and good humor in the book (Komar and Melamid, 1997).

[12.](#) See Paul S. C. Taçon, "The Power of Stone: Symbolic Aspects of Stone Use and Tool Development in Western Arnhem Land, Australia," *Antiquity* 65 (1991): 192-207, and Paul S. C. Taçon, Richard Fullagar, Sven Ouzman, and Ken Mulvaney, "Cupule Engravings from Jinmium-Granilpi (Northern Australia) and Beyond: Exploration of a Widespread and Enigmatic Class of Rock Markings," *Antiquity* 71 (1997): 942-65.

[13.](#) "Perhaps the Rainbow Serpent emerged not only to define and describe the nature of a changing universe, along with the position of humans within it, but also to bring people together, to unite them behind a shared symbol, experience, and common cause. . . . [Its presence] would have acted as a constant reminder of similarity between humans . . . as well as of intimate relationship to particular landscapes and other creatures," Paul S. C. Taçon, Meredith Wilson, and Christopher Chippindale, "Birth of the Rainbow Serpent in Arnhem Land Rock Art and Oral History," *Archaeologica Oceania* 31 (1996): 1033-124.

[14.](#) A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press,

orig. 1922; 1948).

[15](#). See, for example, Nancy Aiken, *The Biological Origins of Art*; Joseph Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Kathryn Coe, "Art: The Replicable Unit--An Inquiry into the Possible Origin of Art as a Social Behavior," *Journal of Social and Evolutionary Systems* 15 (1992): 217-34; Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995); and Robert Storey, *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On The Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

[16](#). See "Oakland Schools Clarify Policy on Ebonics, Its African Origins," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (January 13, 1997), p. A3.

Muse	Search	Journals	This Journal	Contents	Top
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