

TALK

THE COLLECTOR'S HYPOTHESIS: GREATER BENEFITS FROM ART IN SEXUAL SELECTION FOR COLLECTORS THAN FOR ARTISTS

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ABSTRACT

Human fascination with art has deep evolutionary roots, yet its significance remains a challenge for theory due to its universal presence across cultures despite a lack of apparent survival value. At the same time, art poses a major challenge for evolutionary theory (Davies, 2012; Tooby & Cosmides, 2001). On the one hand, it is as universal across human cultures as it is costly, which suggests it is an adaptation (Dissanayake, 2019; Dutton, 2009). On the other hand, it has no apparent value for survival (Miller, 2011; except for storytelling: Carroll, 2004; Mellmann, 2012).

One way evolutionary theory can tackle the mystery of art is to focus on art as a reproductive, rather than survival, adaptation (Miller, 2011). While paintings, sculptures, and other artistic works may have no practical use, they demand ingenuity, dexterity, and other features that signal fitness. It is perhaps surprising that, despite many publications in this area (e.g., Miller, 2001, 2011; Varela et al., 2022; Voland & Grammer, 2003), there is a lack of research explicitly testing the adaptive role of practicing art and its impact on an artist's potential reproductive success.

In this paper, we propose a new variant of the signaling theory, which we call the Collector's Hypothesis, suggesting that artworks serve as indicators of collectors' surplus wealth and social status, benefiting them more than artists in mating and reproductive contexts. Since very few have attempted to verify this empirically, further research in diverse cultural contexts is needed.