
Art and Evolution

Another Take on Universalism

Universal Art, Revisited

- ❖ Every culture contains art.
- ❖ Every culture has, so to speak, a language of art: its styles, its scales, its patterns, its genres.
- ❖ Every culture (or, every culture of a certain level of development) features both expert practitioners and also connoisseurs.
- ❖ Every culture has hallowed spaces and elite practices for art (materials, locations, rituals, conspicuous possession as signs of wealth and power, artistic pauses in working life. . .)
- ❖ Everyone, or nearly everyone appreciates at least some art, of some kind, at some level.
- ❖ Question: Why?

One Thought

- ❖ During the speciation phase of human evolution, the tendency for sophisticated development of artifacts and complex culture, including the production of art, became dominant and was bequeathed on down the line.
- ❖ Yet another way in which art is said to be ‘natural’.

Does art not require detachment?

- ❖ One assault on the ‘naturalness’ of art holds that aesthetic appreciation requires ‘disinterestedness’—that is, aesthetic judgment must proceed detached from judgments of function.
 - ❖ Kant: ‘A judgment on beauty in which the slightest interest mingles is highly partisan and not a pure judgment of taste’ (*Analytic of the Beautiful* § 2).
 - ❖ Judgments of beauty must be motivationally inert.
 - ❖ Yet, this level of detachment is not a universal trait: many art forms in many cultures are overlain with all manner of functions; indeed, one might think that this sort of appeal is really rather narrow, treating a relatively late European preoccupation as if it were somehow universal.
 - ❖ Consider Religious Art (to which we will return) and the Benin Bronzes

The Benin Bronzes

- ❖ First off, not really bronze, but a different alloy.
- ❖ Taken during colonial British occupation, during an expedition in 1897, from present day Benin, on the western boundary of Nigeria.
- ❖ There is currently an important discussion about repatriation of the +/- 3000 pieces taken from Benin, mainly to London.
- ❖ Some are historical records; some objects of authority; some decorative; some ritualistic and religious—decorated bells, for instance, used to summon the spirits of ancestors.



Metalwork Head, Benin, 16th c.

Unconvincing

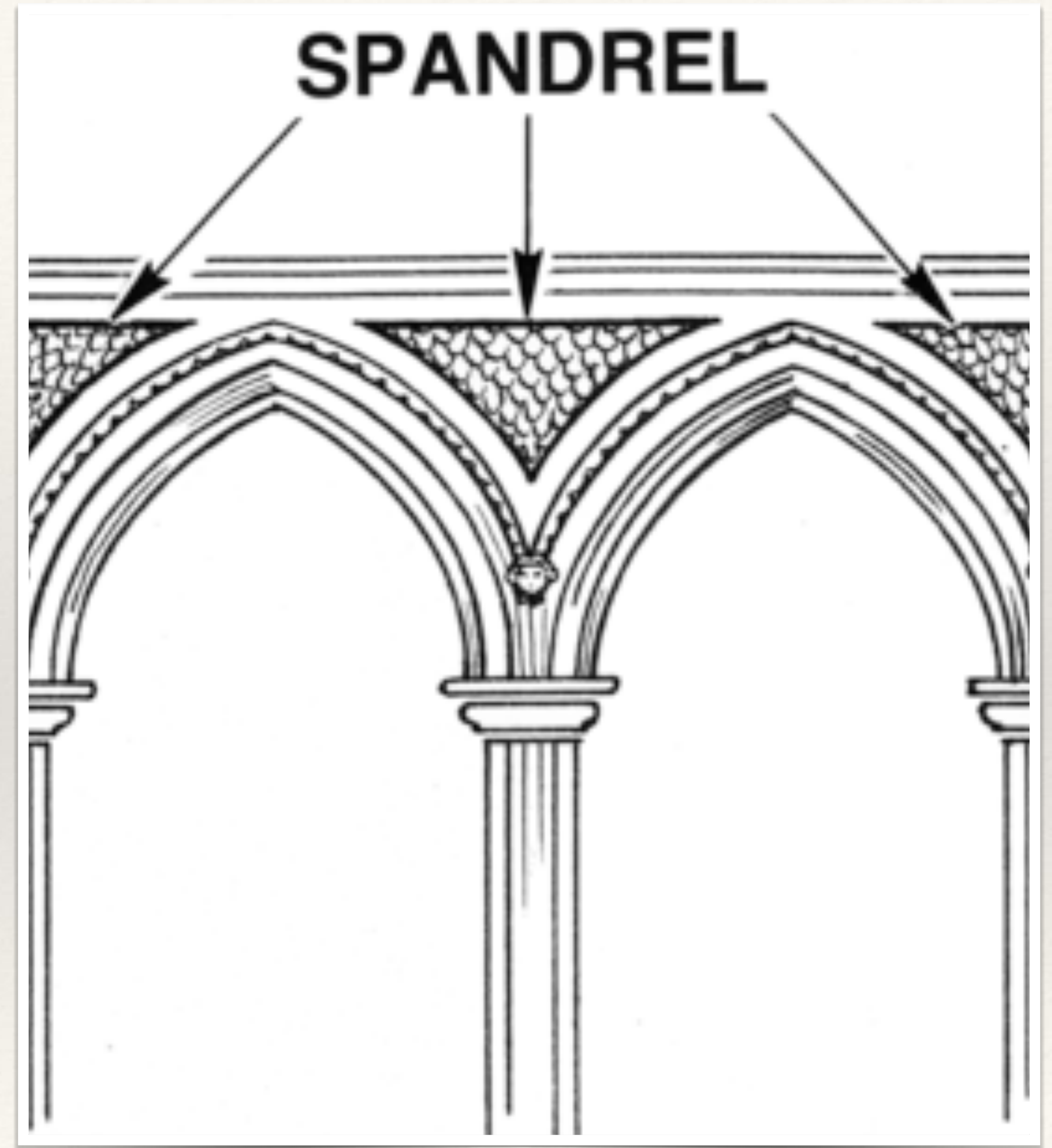
- ❖ The argument for non-universality rests on an assumption of disinterestedness.
- ❖ This presupposition is hardly obvious.
- ❖ What is more, the real flaw seems to reside in the thought that artworks which serve functions cannot also afford disinterested judgments of beauty.

Spandrels?

Seems to collapse all aesthetic experience.

Seems to conflate aesthetic pleasure with other forms of pleasure (sexual attraction and so on).

Seems to ignore the inherently normative character of aesthetic judgment. (We think, or often think, that those who do not share our aesthetic judgments are 'missing something'; we tend not to think this way about, e.g. differences in tastes where sexual partners are concerned.)



A Closing Question

- ❖ Suppose, as Matthen plausibly suggests, that 'Art is *essentially* and *necessarily* self-regarding: it affects us in a way that requires us to take into account the means by which it affects us' (RCA, 285).
 - ❖ Compare games: games have both a prelusory and a lusory goal. A certain objective must be attained (prelusory), but it must be attained within a certain set of rules, specified either overtly or implicitly.
 - ❖ Otherwise, there is no success to be had in the game.
- ❖ Similarly, art has a prelusory goal (perhaps one among others) of creating objects with aesthetic qualities; but it also has the additional lusory goal of creating these qualities in a specific way, namely that it 'make the *means* of eliciting aesthetic pleasure an object of reflexive aesthetic pleasure' (285).
- ❖ Question: why should this be so?