

A Defense of the Merely Good

(transcript of a Quick-Fire Talk given at the American Society for Aesthetics 2023 Annual Meeting in Arlington, Virginia)

In the spirit of the Quick-Fire format, I have done no additional reading or research, I have simply built upon an original intuition. I will eventually confess a fear that the intuition may only warrant a 5-minute treatment, but there may possibly be more—let us explore that possibility together.

Our story begins in 2006 when I attended my first ASA in Milwaukee, partially because I could commute daily from my home in the north Chicago suburbs. I felt very much out of my element, but the ideas were flowing fast and furious and were contagious because I stumbled upon an intriguing title and an accompanying thought experiment. The title, which many of you saw in this year's program, was "A Defence of the Merely Good." At that time, I launched the thought experiment with a Star Trek transporter, but today it might be more relevant to use Sorcerer Wong's mystic portals from the Marvel Universe. Choose your own preferred IP. Either way, this insta-transport, and general utopian tendencies, facilitates the building of a world art museum. No longer would a hodunk art repository be needed for every small to large city—everyone across the whole planet could visit a shared institution with an unrivaled collection of world masterpieces.

Although I am certain I would enjoy a visit to the masterpiece-only museum, I have an intuition that the removal of the galleries of merely good art would result in a diminished aesthetic experience.

There are many curatorial and institutional reasons to include works that are only good in the collection:

- An examination of the breadth of an art movement
- To show an artist's development
- A storehouse for works that will eventually gain, but have not yet been given, the appellation "masterpiece"

I am not concerned with these practices. I only care about the quality of the aesthetic experience as a museum goer.

Back in 2006, I mentioned this newly minted thought experiment to a friendly philosopher at one of the receptions and he made a comment that has been repeated to me many times over the years by day-job coworkers and art

studio mates: the necessity of comparison. How will I recognize a masterpiece without lesser works to compare? But I am not convinced this must happen in the museum. Art in homes, from kindergarten class and art schools (not to mention aesthetic experiences of the world) would be enough to prime visitor experiences of masterpieces. Besides, if this training needs to happen in the museum, why have I never seen the Bupont Family Wing of Bad Art as a pedagogical primer?

In hallway greetings at this, the 2023 ASA, folks have been responding well to the title. People seem eager to hear the defense, but unfortunately, this is where intuition fails me. I have no actual defense. Part of me thinks the more satisfying museum experience when good art is included is simply a matter of more options and greater variety—and the experience of good works has much in common with the experience of masterpieces. But a small and timid part of me thinks, perhaps, the approachability and the quotidian humanity of merely good works offers a discernibly different entry into aesthetic engagement.