

Why we need to replace Advertising with Art

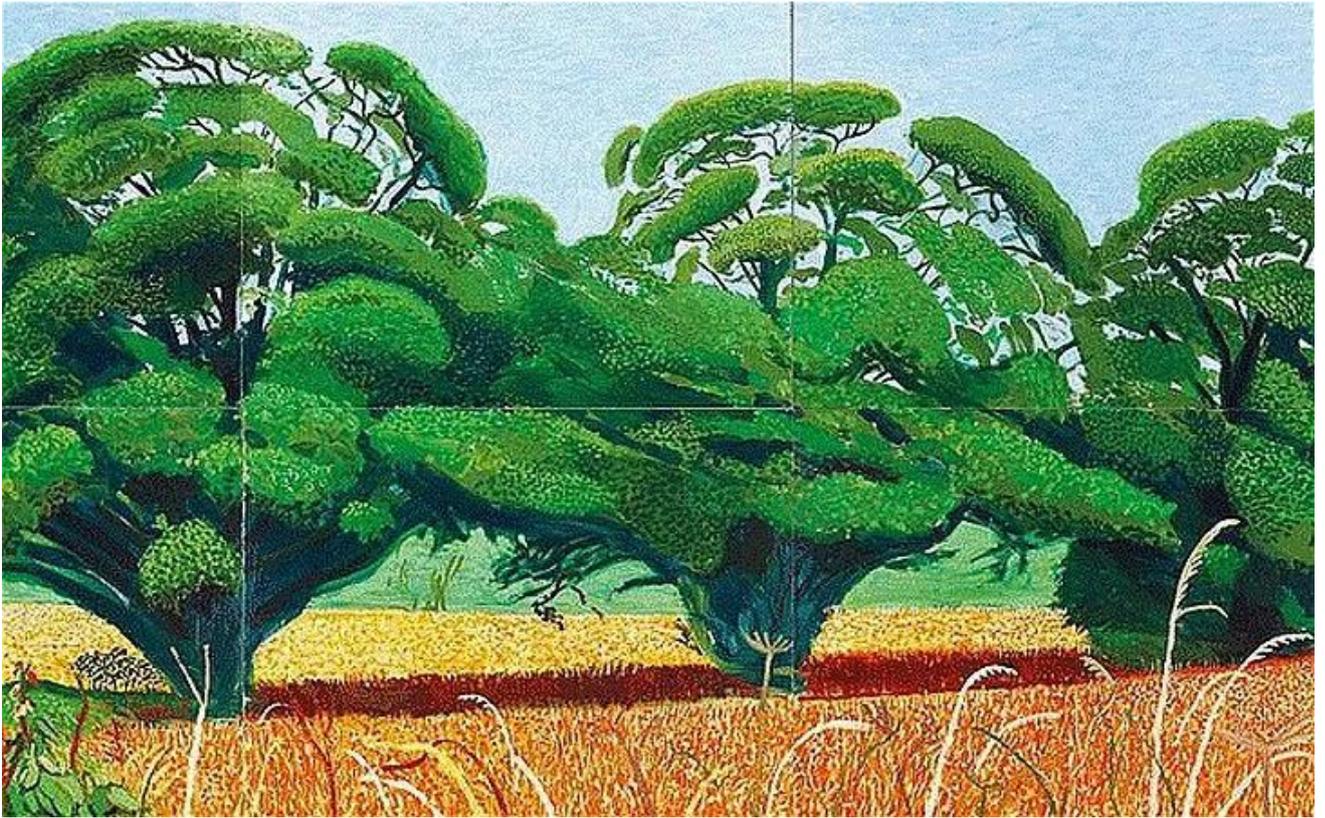
One of the most powerful forces in our society is all the more powerful because it goes unacknowledged. It operates, quite deliberately, 'under the radar', preferring to nudge and influence our choices without engaging with our conscious minds. It is hiding in plain sight, with all of its hugely inventive resources dedicated to nudging us towards a heightened appreciation of certain aspects of the world. With enormous skill, it emphasises the very best sides of particular places and objects. It uses brilliant writers and image makers, who can create deeply inspiring and beguiling associations. They take care to ensure that we see their work almost every day, although they are happiest when we take in their message unconsciously. What is this huge force in society? It is advertising: the most compelling agent of mass appreciation we have ever known.

Because advertising is everywhere, it can be easy to forget that only a very few sorts of things ever get advertised. Almost nothing in the world is in a position to afford the budgets required by a campaign. Advertising is overwhelmingly reserved for those wealthy rulers of modern life: nappies, cornflakes, shampoos, holiday destinations, cars and so on.

Advertising skews our priorities. One of our major flaws, and a big contributor to our unhappiness, is that we are very bad at keeping in mind the real ingredients of fulfilment. We quickly lose sight of the value of day-to-day things. We are deeply ungrateful towards anything that is free or doesn't cost very much. We trust in the value of objects more than ideas or feelings or even people. We are sluggish in remembering to love and to care – and we are all too easily given to racing through the years forgetting the wonder, fragility and beauty of existence.

In a recent meeting with our Head of Art, she commented to me that the problem with advertising is that it taught people to glance at an image rather than properly look at it. I suppose the English Department would say the same thing about reading – that there is a profound difference between skimming something for content and properly reading it for meaning. It is depressing to think that we have never lived in a more visual culture, but that the images we see are distracting us from looking, and are guiding our thoughts towards things that cannot bring us true satisfaction. It is fortunate, then, that we have Art.

One way to redress the balance is to look at what some great artists are doing in their paintings. How they portray the world will advertise values and experiences that will do nothing for the sale of washing powder, but might be better for cleansing our soul and spirit. These are the things that are at once of huge human importance and constantly in danger of being forgotten. At one of the best exhibitions I have seen at the RA, about 10 years ago, the English artist David Hockney ran the equivalent of a major advertising campaign for trees. Look at the chunkiness and satisfying shapes of these Yorkshire trees. Look at how they sit in a wonderful field of ripe wheat – and be drawn into the picture by those rogue stems in the foreground. Feel the warmth of the sunlight. Look at this picture properly – absorb its colours, shapes and marks. Do you not feel better already?



David Hockney, *Three Trees Near Thixendale*, 2007

At the start of the sixteenth century, the German painter Albrecht Dürer launched a similar campaign. He had a different plant in mind – he wants you to look at grass and think about it differently. He wants you to stop seeing a mass of simple green on the lawn and to focus our minds on the value of each blade and stalk of grass.



Albrecht Dürer, *Great Piece of Turf*, 1503

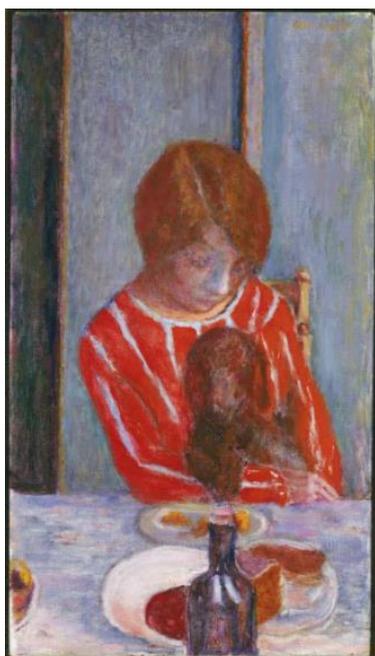
Look at this celebration of the leafiness and stalkiness of the grass. Look how each blade of grass is valued equally and as without price. And in the 1830s, the Danish artist Christen Kobke did a lot of advertising for the sky, especially just before or after a rain shower.



Christen Kobke, *Morning Light*, 1836

Feel the pearly light, the freshness of the morning. Those long morning shadows fill me with hope for the day ahead, as the threatening clouds blow away to reveal brightness.

In the field of human psychology, the French painter Pierre Bonnard carried out an exceptionally successful campaign for tenderness, producing hundreds of images of his partner, Marthe, viewed through lenses of sympathy, concern and understanding.



Pierre Bonnard, *Woman with Dog*, 1922

Look at the simplicity and purity of love here. A simple meal, an adored dog and the adoring eye of Pierre, watching the woman he loves. Note the averted gazes – everything here is done with exquisite lines and use of colour.

In a similarly loving manner, the American painter Mary Cassatt made a pretty good case for the vital importance of spending some of one's life with a child.



Mary Cassatt, *Mother Playing with her Child*, 1899

Look at the intensity of the child's gaze, as it discovers the bright new world around it. The mother only has eyes for her adored child, and gazes on with both tenderness and total attention. Look at the love that has gone into clothing the child with such beautiful clothes and the grass behind – so different to Durer, but fresh and green. These painters, and thousands of others, are drawing your thought to the beauty of the everyday: the wonder of little acts of love or attention. They offer much needed correctives to the lie that what is important is found only in what is rare, remote, costly or famous.

Art can reawaken us to the genuine but too-easily forgotten value of the quiet moments in our lives. Consider Chardin's *Woman Taking Tea*. The sitter's dress might be a bit more elaborate than is normal today; but the painted table, teapot, chair, spoon and cup could be modern. The room is plain. And yet - look at the steam rising from the teacup - the picture is glamorous. It

makes this ordinary occasion and the simple furnishings, seductive. It makes you want a cup of tea. Chardin recognises the worth of a modest moment and marshals his genius to bring its qualities to our notice.



Jean Siméon Chardin, *Woman Taking Tea*, 1735

The importance and the power of art is, in part, to honour and celebrate the very real, but all too easily forgotten, value of ordinary life.

Advertising distracts us from the moments of our lives with flashy images that beguile the eye, but prevent us from really looking. We are sold the lie that happiness lies elsewhere, enjoyed by attractive and wealthy people, who have achieved their goals by spending money on things. The truth is, we don't find happiness on that route. In fact, happiness lies in quite the opposite direction – in spending time and love, rather than money; in really looking, rather than skimming, in valuing people over things and in living in the moment, rather than yearning after an unattainable future. Take a moment to stop and breathe, and surrender yourself to the beauty of the moment. Nothing you can buy is better than what you already have – and a love of Art will remind you of that eternal truth.

With thanks to the Book of Life and Alain de Botton