



Original article

Art as Experience in *The Goldfinch* (2013) by Donna Tartt

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ABSTRACT

This study draws on John Dewey's aesthetic philosophy as expressed in his book *Art as Experience* (1934) to analyze Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* (2013), exploring how concepts of aesthetic experience are manifested in the novel. Dewey's theory is based upon two main pillars. The first one: art is not an isolated activity, or restricted to museums and theaters, but rather a natural extension of daily life and its sensory and emotional manifestations. The second one: aesthetic experience is not limited to the artists alone, rather it can be undertaken by any individual, provided that he is consciously engaged in a vital interaction with the world around him. In *The Goldfinch*, the protagonist, Theodore Decker, undergoes a complete aesthetic (artistic) experience—though he is not an artist in the literal sense—revealing his true identity and preferences and facilitating his social reintegration after the shock of his mother's loss.

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Keywords: Aesthetic, Antique, Art, Experience, Trauma

الفن كخبرة في رواية الحسون بقلم دونا تارت

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المُستخلص

تعتمد هذه الدراسة على فلسفة جون ديوي الجمالية كما تم التعبير عنها في كتابه الفن 1934 كخبرة لتحليل الحسون بقلم دونا تارت 2013، واستكشاف كيفية ظهور مفاهيم التجربة الجمالية في الرواية. تستند نظرية ديوي على ركيزتين رئيسيتين. الأول: الفن ليس نشاطاً منعزلاً ، أو يقتصر على المتاحف والمسارح فقط ، بل هو امتداد طبيعي للحياة اليومية ومظاهرها الحسية والعاطفية. والثاني: لا تقتصر التجربة الجمالية على الفنانين وحدهم ، بل يمكن لأي فرد ان يخوضها ، بشرط أن يشارك بوعي في تفاعل حيوي مع العالم من حوله. في الحسون ، يمر بطل الرواية ، ثيودور ديكر ، بتجربة جمالية (فنية) كاملة —على الرغم من أنه ليس فناناً بالمعنى الحرفي—تكشف عن هويته الحقيقية وتفضيلاته وتسهل إعادة الاندماج الاجتماعي بعد صدمة فقدان والدته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفن ، التجربة، الجمالي، التحف العتيقة، الصدمة.

Introduction: Theoretical Part

The American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952), published his book *Art as Experience* in 1934, launching a unique and unprecedented theoretical approach in the field of art and philosophy on the role of art in life. He is a prominent American philosopher, educator, psychologist and one of the most influential figures in the philosophy of pragmatism (Chaliakopoulos 2020). Dewey writes that modernity has created a gap between aesthetic (artistic) experience and ordinary experience (the daily life), attributing this gap to colonialism, capitalism and the rise of industrialism; which has limited the interconnectedness between art and everyday life. He mentions that in modern time art has been revered as a form of expression that goes beyond the mundane aspects of everyday life, and is often seen as something spiritual, elitist or reserved for the educated classes. This glorification of art generates the classical status of art, or as Dewey terms “the museum concept of art”; which removes art from the everyday lives of ordinary people (Dewey 1934, Leddy and Polaka 2023).

In the past, there was not as much separation between culture, history, literature and art as it is in the present. All those disciplines have been intertwined with each other and with people’s understanding of themselves and the world around them. The Lascaux cave paintings in France for instance, are one of the most famous examples of primitive art that reflects this complexity. Primitive people used sculpture and painting to document hunting, animal husbandry, ritual gatherings, and their interactions with the natural environment, all of which were common daily practices (Gandy, 2023). They did not intend to write history or display their artistic skills. Rather, these sculptures are part of their culture and everyday life, from tracking the movement of herds to depicting tools and weapons, reflecting the interplay of art in the simplest details of their lives and practices. In the same context, discussed Michaelangelo's artistic legacy, Sulaiman writes that Michelangelo “grew up in Florence where people were quarrying stones mountains and shaping them to construct homes , churches, farm government buildings , palaces , and forts . He felt that walking through the city was like walking through a gallery” (Sulaiman,2022, p.96). This supports Dewey’s perspective, in which the material

elements of everyday life are transformed into aesthetic mediums, carrying social and cultural connotations. In Dewey's philosophy, the aesthetic character of a work of art lies not in the isolation of its material or its display within an art institution, but rather in the sensory and social process that creates a connection between the artist and the receiving community. The cut and shaped stones used to build homes, churches, and public facilities embody the expertise of the craft and become a symbolic record of pride, identity, and livelihood in Florence. Thus, strolling through a city built with these stones becomes a cognitive experience akin to strolling through an open gallery, accessible to everyone, regardless of social status, ethnicity, identity, etc.

Literature—as another form of art—whether it is purely historical or contains some elements of myth and fantasy, such as *The Iliad* (8th century BCE) in ancient Greece and *Beowulf* (8th-10th century CE) in Old English literature, is transmitted orally by ordinary people for hundreds of years, rather than being limited to certain people or a specific place. Therefore, this demonstrates Dewey's perspective of the interpenetration between art and daily experiences and popular culture. Hence, in his *Art as Experience*, Dewey aims to bridge this gap and reintroduce art into everyday life, for he considers art as not merely a separate object, but an experience in itself. He resembles the relationship between art and daily life as mountain peaks to the earth, for mountains cannot stand without the support of the earth (Dewey 1934 p. 14).

Concerning his definition of art, Dewey differentiates between art product and work of art. He mentions that artistic products such as paintings, statues, etc are “physical and potential” objects, which means the focus is on the final—physical—product only. This type of art is limited to the artists only, and it is necessary to include certain characteristics that distinguish it from other works of art within its category, which are individuality, selectivity and universality. Dewey however, believes that this concept later led to a state akin to the museum conception of art that separates art from the rhythm of everyday life. However Dewey does not deny the importance of material artistic production, but rather emphasizes it as a necessary means of conveying aesthetic experience from the artist to the recipient. In his book *Art as Experience*, Dewey devotes a special chapter to explaining the role of artistic mediums—such as color, line, sound, and movement—as a concrete language that allows the artist to express his experience in a perceptible and interactive way. However, Dewey emphasizes that the true value of a work of art lies not in its material or form alone, but in its ability to embody the “qualitative unity” between the artist's inner experience and the experience lived in daily life. According to Dewey, art is not isolation from reality, but rather an extension of it, emerging from its details and reshaping them in a way that reveals their aesthetic depth (Dewey, 1934, 63 and Leddy 2020).

Therefore, Richard Shousterman writes, Dewey aims to widening the realm of art by defining art as experience rather than an object (Shousterman 2002). That is what Dewey focuses on in his explanation of the works of art—of the artistic process—as “active and experienced”. He states that art is not limited to artists alone; rather, everyone is able to gain an artistic experience by immersing himself in his life experiences, as art is essentially a form of experience (Dewey, 1934, p.162). In this vision Dewey expands the scope of what can be described as artistic to include any action or experience that is done with full engagement or immersion—experiences that involve an organic unity between sensation, action, and meaning—such as a housewife immersed in arranging her house, or a player gliding gracefully toward a goal (Dewey, 1934, p. 5). These experiences for Dewey are artistic or

aesthetic experiences. Furthermore, Dewey is against the classification of art into fine and useful art. In this context Al-turabi and Al-maamouri have been supported him declaring that humans have long been engaged in various forms of art since the dawn of their consciousness, without separating them on the basis of being fine or utilitarian arts (Al-turabi and Al-maamouri 2025).

Explaining his concept of “aesthetic experience,” Dewey writes that experience is the interaction between living beings—including humans—and their environment (Dewey, 1934, p. 22). Anyone is able to have an aesthetic experience if he is fully immersed in his current experience; then, this experience can be described as aesthetic or artistic; which is as well a work of art or artistic process. He writes that although “artistic” refers to the process of making or producing art, and “aesthetic” refers to the appreciation of art, the two cannot be separated or distanced. They essentially refer to the same thing. But there is no word in the English language that combines them, which is why they must be separated (Dewey, 1934, p. 47).

Analytical Part: Theo’s Aesthetic Experience in The Goldfinch

Donna Tartt (1963_ present) is a prominent American writer with a particular fondness for art, which is evident in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Goldfinch* (2013). The author draws on Carel Fabritius's the Dutch Golden Age painting, *The Goldfinch* (1654), as a narrative and symbolic focus. The painting depicts a golden bird chained yet standing with dignity, refusing to withdraw from life, making it a symbol of hope and resistance. In Western culture, the bird is also associated with Christian symbols of redemption and resurrection, with the myth of Christ's removal of thorns during the crucifixion, and with the memory of healing after fourteenth-century plagues, adding a spiritual and mythological dimension to the painting. Moreover, the painting survived the Delft gunpowder store explosion that killed Fabritius along with most of his works, she states on Theo's tongue "If every great painting is really a self-portrait what if anything is Fabritius saying about himself?" (Tartt 2013, p.703, Schauer 2016) . Tartt's use of the painting is therefore not limited to its aesthetic value but serves to explore themes of identity, survival, and the emotional connection to beauty amid chaos. These references give the painting a function that goes beyond visual decoration, becoming a mirror of the human experience in moments of brokenness and recovery. Thus, *The Goldfinch* can be read as Tarte's attempt to present the concept of truth within the artistic field; the novel seeks to explore the potential of art to perform cognitive, socio-psychological, critical, and transformative functions (Coy 2016) .

Tartt states that the Taliban's destruction of the great Buddha statues in Bamiyan in 2001 constituted a symbolic and essential starting point for her novel *The Goldfinch* (Centlivres ,2008, p.4). The inspiration does not stem from a direct simulation of the event, but rather from a philosophical contemplation of the tension between art and ruin, and the continuity of beauty and the possibility of erasing it. From this perspective, *The Goldfinch* can be read as a contemporary narrative response to a global cultural catastrophe, as it restores art not only as an aesthetic value, but as an existential act that resists oblivion and represents a creative confrontation in front of the powers of erasure and destruction (Dabhade). Thus, the scene of the museum's bombing at the beginning of the novel gives an indication that the event goes beyond the contemplation of meaninglessness.

Bulging on this, Tartt cleverly invests these historical, technical and symbolic characteristics in the novel, as the painting is used as a metaphorical and narrative axis that reflects the case of the protagonist Theodor Decker (Theo). The actual events of the novel begin on a rainy day when Theo and his mother are forced to take shelter in the museum (The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) to continue on their way to Theo's school after the storm passes. Theo's art-loving mother (Audrey) takes the opportunity to contemplate Dutch paintings, especially her favorite, *The Goldfinch*. Theo—the 13 years old—follows a girl with red hair and shiny eyes (Pippa) to the gift shop, to separate from his mother. Suddenly, in a hate crime against art, the museum is shaken with a great explosion that steals the mother's life; Theo describes it as “ A tremendous, earsplitting blast shook the room... There was a black flash, with debris sweeping and twisting around me, and a roar of hot wind slammed into me and threw me across the room” (Tartt, 2013, p. 30). After the explosion, Theo wakes up to find himself covered in the rubble of the museum. Searching for a way out, he stumbles upon a dying old man (later revealed to be Pippa's uncle Mr. Blackwell and the owner of an antique shop named Hobart and Blackwell). As he breathes his last, the man asks Theo to take *The Goldfinch* painting with him and keep it safe because he knows that art thieves will come to steal it. Then, the old man gives Theo an antique ring and asks him to take it to his friend Hobie in the antique shop, where his passion for the world of antiques begins.

After his mother's death, Theo transitions between different environments, such as the house of his friend Andy, the rich Barbour family in Park Avenue, with whom he lived a perfect and luxurious life, where the strict system of aristocratic society, etiquette and luxury. Then his father's house in the arid Los Angeles desert. It is the most difficult stage of his life, as he moves from the system and the refinement of New York to a world of chaos, absurdity, and the frenzied pursuit of money. According to the law, Theo had to go with his father —Theo later knows that his father has taken him out of the money that his mother Audrey left for his education—to live in an isolated house in an abandoned neighborhood in the Las Vegas desert back to his father's mistress, Xandra. At this stage, Theo's life changes forever when he gets to know Boris, who lives a life very similar to Theo's. Like Theo, Boris's mother passed away to leave him to an addicted father who knows nothing about his son; he goes to work in the morning and returns drunk, striking Boris with or without reason, which leads Boris to take drugs, to be able to endure this situation. Theo found only Boris, who accompanies him at school and at home, and drags him into drug addiction and theft—many times they are forced to steal shops to provide food under indifferent fathers.

After his father's death in a traffic accident due to alcohol driving, Theo escapes from the house of Xandra and returns back to New York, taking shelter in Hobie's shop. James Hobart (Hobie) the skilled furniture restorer, whom he encounters during his time at Barbour's house when he goes to deliver Mr. Blackwell's ring to him. Hobie restores time-worn objects with his magical touch; he serves as a father and a friend of Theo, and teaches him the profession of collecting and restoring antique furniture. In order to save Hobie from accumulating taxes, Theo deceives clients who seek to own antiques only to demonstrate their social status or belonging to a certain class by selling restored furniture pieces as original ones. Throughout the novel, Theo continues to hide the painting, moving it from place to place and from one warehouse to another. Years later, after his return to New York, he discovers, through a chance encounter with Boris, that Boris has been stealing the painting since they

were in Los Angeles. Theo is shocked when he discovers that he hides nothing but a schoolbook that Boris puts in place of the painting, and that the painting has been being transported for years as a pawn in illegal deals. Then, the two decide to travel to Amsterdam, the painting's ultimate destination, to retrieve it (Hajimirsadeghi 2019).

Accordingly, *The Goldfinch* can be read according to one of the most important pillars of Dewey's aesthetic theory: his concept of the ordinary and aesthetic experience—which is the artistic process—that marks human interaction. Throughout the novel art enchants the protagonist Theo everywhere, he has an aesthetic experience on two levels or two dimensions. The first level is his experience with the painting from the first time he sees it in the museum until it is recovered from the gangs by the art police. And the second level is his engagement with the world of antiques. He lives with his mother in a house full of art pieces like paintings, jewels, antiques and books. This environment provides him with ordinary experiences; as he gets unintentional artistic nourishment. Theo starts talking about his mother's passion towards art early. In one of the most expressive passages about the vivid relationship between art and life, he speaks of his mother's passion for art and her first experience of viewing artworks, noting that she didn't see a real painting until she was eighteen and moved to New York. Additionally, he mentions that she describes her immersion in art books and slides as "pure bliss, a perfect paradise," (Tartt, 2013, p. 27) and says she could spend the rest of her life gazing at only a handful of paintings. This deep emotional engagement with art accurately represents what Dewey articulates in his theory. He argues that a work of art is not simply an object to be displayed and viewed (an art product), but rather embodies the complex emotional experience that arises from the recipient's interaction with the artwork in the context of their own life (art process), depicting this interaction as "artistically engaging" (Dewey 1934, p. 5). Her desire to remain within that aesthetic moment and immerse herself in a limited number of paintings does not express a superficial visual fascination, but rather an existential need to re-experience the world through an aesthetic medium that revitalizes the senses and consciousness. Thus, art, as Dewey understands, becomes an extension of the fabric of daily life, not an escape from it, and a means of enriching human experience through renewed repetition and renewed emotion, not separation and cold contemplation.

This is evident in Theo's unconscious teenage words as he describes his mother as a noble person straight out of "Genji tale" (Tartt, 2014, p. 7). This proves his artistic engagement. Even the outer world around him is full with art, the streets where he lives are pulsating with art. In a fleeting yet meaningful scene, Theo describes a group of artists setting up their stalls in the street, unrolling their canvases, pinning up their watercolor reproductions of everyday New York landmarks like St. Patrick's Cathedral and the Brooklyn Bridge (Tartt, 2013, p. 13). So, art becomes part of the street, displayed, touched, and viewed outside the confines of the museum, transforming into a living practice, not limited to an elite or a particular class, but accessible to all within the fabric of lived reality. Furthermore, he describes his visit to the museum and his engagement with the crowds of tourists and their joyful noise as a vacation, separating him from the challenges of the day (Tartt, 2013, p.18). This direct presence of art in the public space reflects, without rhetoric, what John Dewey explicitly called for: that art be unbundled from its institutional isolation and reintegrated into everyday life as an organic extension of human experience.

However, according to the trauma theory, Theo then suffers from identity disintegration due to the explosion incident that killed his mother, which affects his future life and social interactions. In the midst of Theo's shock after the death of his mother and his hard life with his father and then losing him as well, the painting becomes a metaphor for Theo's personal growth. It forms a focal point that reshapes the reality around it, and gives Theo a sense of control and security. From the moment Theo acquires the painting after the explosion, it becomes a psychological mirror that reflects his internal trauma and psychological fragility. For Theo, it is not just a historical painting, nor is it just a mandate that someone orders him to keep, but it occupies an important place in his memory, as a memorial to his mother. On the day of the explosion, his mother goes in particular to see this painting without what is shown in the museum, because it is the first painting she really liked as Theo mentions. She borrows a book from the library to sit and meditate it, even if she does not realize its artistic value due to her young age, but she feels there is something special about this painting. Of course not because it's the missing link between Rembrandt and Vermeer's style—because Fibritius is Rembrandt's student and Vermeer's teacher—but she loved it as if the bird is a living being like a pet.

She stands to explain to Theo the historical importance of the painting, aesthetic techniques, its power, and how it survived the Delft explosion 1654, without the rest of the paintings, as if it possessed a supernatural power capable of confronting hate and evil. Maybe Theo is also seeking this energy from the painting, as he describes it at his first glimpse, "made me think of pictures I'd seen of my mother when she was small" (Tartt, 2013, p.18). And that is what makes him keep it instead of returning it to the museum—he named it my painting (Tartt, 2013, p.198)—until he obliged. Keeping it wrapped up or stored away, and his fear of thinking about it, reveals his desire to freeze time and cling to the last moments he shared with his mother, as if facing the painting means facing the truth he escapes. He gives a description to the way he restores the painting that reflects his inner situation:

I had noticed, when taking it out of my locker, how unusually bulky (and heavy) it seemed, and when I got it upstairs and out of the pillowcase, I saw why. Clearly I'd been blasted out of my mind when I wrapped and taped it: all those layers of newspaper, wound with a whole extra-large roll of heavy-duty, fiber-reinforced packing tape, had seemed like a prudent caution when I was freaked out and high, but back in my room, in the sober light of afternoon, it looked like it had been bound and wrapped by an insane and/or homeless person—mummified, practically: so much tape on it that it wasn't even quite square any more; even the corners were round. (Tartt, 2013, p.302)

In this sense, the painting becomes a scaffolding of memory that reflects his inner trauma amidst the chaos and forms a cornerstone of his shattered identity.

According to Dewey, art is not reduced to the artwork itself, but to the experience that the individual undergoes when interacting with it. Theo doesn't keep the painting due to its precious or artistically beautiful, but because it represents an intense existential experience that combines past and present, memory and trauma, love and loss. The painting, in this sense, is not just a picture of a bird, but an embodied emotional moment that reshapes his subjective experience and gives him a sense of continuity amidst collapse. Theo's insistence on hiding the painting and not displaying or returning it

reflects his desire to preserve the purity of experience and prevent it from being transformed into an external object to be valued or recovered. In Dewey's view, art loses its value when it is separated from experience and treated as an independent object. Theo, unconsciously, protects his experience from this separation, preventing the painting from being reduced to mere possessions, because for him it is not a possession but an extension of himself. internalized it to himself and the state of collapse he experiences when he discovers that Boris has stolen it, proves that he feels like a part of himself has been lost, not only the painting.

Dewey believes that art reshapes experience and gives life deeper meaning. It fosters integration with the present moment, as past experiences enrich the present, while future expectations energize and vitalize it, producing a rich and vibrant experience (Dewey, 1934). This impact of art is not limited to the theoretical side. Recent scientific studies in the field of art therapy have proven that art plays an effective role in treating the effects of psychological anxiety, especially for individuals who experience loss or devastating events early in life. It demonstrates how art allows people to rebuild their self-narrative after these events (Schouten, Karin A. C., et al. 2015). Which is what happens with Theo; his experience with the painting is not limited to the painful memory of his past or the difficult reality of his present life of dispersion and loss, but rather contributed to reshaping his future and his moral identity. His final decision to facilitate the painting's return to public ownership represents a symbolic moment of liberation, marking the beginning of his reconciliation with his past and his move toward a more authentic self. In this context, the painting transforms from a burden into a catalyst for redemption, reminding him of his mother, prompting moments of serenity and self-honesty, and returning him to his lofty humanist principles. His preference for the painting's return to public ownership, rather than any material gain, embodies his profound awareness that true art is not reduced to its market value, but rather to its ability to preserve memory, shape identity, and inspire salvation. Thus, *The Goldfinch* not only embodies a painful event but also reshapes Theo's psychological and moral trajectory, offering a rich narrative model of art's interaction with memory, identity, and survival. He says "the painting was the secret that raised me above the surface of life and enabled me to know who I am" (Tartt, 2013, p. 768). In this way, the painting becomes an artistic medium that reshapes the self and gives life a deeper meaning by intensifying feeling and transcending the separation between object and experience, making it a literal embodiment of Dewey's concept of art as an experience that reconstructs life from within.

On the second level, Theo has an aesthetic experience through his interaction with the world of antiques. After his mother's death, Theo moves in with the Barbour family, where he finds himself in a house that resembles a small museum, or as the author describes it on his tongue "a Broadway production, an airless perfection" (Tartt 394). The rich history of Mrs. Barbour's ancestors, who hail from a prominent Massachusetts family, are embodied throughout this house, with all its antiques and artefact. The house contains prominent paintings, such as Rembrandt's *The Hundred Guilder Print*, as well as various antiques, and is a bustling social gathering place for tea parties that bring together the city's philanthropists, antique dealers, and art collectors (Tartt, 2013, p. 569). Theo describes her room:

a few pieces of which had been purchased from Israel Sack in the 1940s, but most of which had come down through her family from colonial times... a set of chairs and mahogany lowboy—Queen

Anne, Salem Massachusetts—that had been in her mother’s family since the 1740s. (Tartt 405).

Yet, these antiques, while not forbidden to touch in the literal sense, belong to a space of inaccessible use, where the relationship with them is redefined within the limits of aesthetic appreciation and historical preservation, not within the logic of use or direct interaction. They are displayed not to be used, but to be evoked as symbolic representations of a bygone era, which makes touching them inconsistent with their contemplative function. This reflects Dewey's “museum concept of art”, that art is something elitist and isolated; to the extent that Theo does not have the freedom to contemplate these paintings openly, and he does so secretly, as Mrs. Barbour states: “I used to catch you in the hallway studying my paintings” (Tartt, 2013, p. 405). However, this reflects his growing connection to art, particularly antiques that hold historical and aesthetic value.

His attraction to art culminates when he discovers Hobie's workshop; he describes it as “magical, a treasure cave” (Tartt, 2013, p. 193). Theo meets Hobie for the first time in the workshop, he gives a description to the place as :

Hobart and Blackwell [is] painted in a neat, old-fashioned arch upon the window of a shop. Through the dusty windows I saw m . . . Staffordshire dogs and majolica cats, dusty crystal, Tarnished silver, antique chair and settees upholstered in sallow old brocade, an elaborate faience birdcage, miniature marble obelisks atop a marble-topped pedestal table and a pair of alabaster cockatoos. (Tartt, 2013, p.115)

At this juncture Theo's artistic experience emerges as a living space that combines manual labor and aesthetic precision, practically embodying John Dewey's idea of linking art to everyday life. According to Dewey, art is not separate from reality; rather, it springs from human experience and reorders feelings and meanings within a tangible context. In Hobie's workshop, Theo finds an environment that restores a part of himself that had been lost due to grief and loss. He has learned about veneer and gilding, what a tenon and joint was, the difference between ebony and real ebony, between the top rails of Newport, Connecticut, and Philadelphia, and how the lumpy design and cut-off top of one Chippendale desk made it inferior to another arch foot of the same style with its decorative quarter columns—what Hobie likes to call the exalted proportions of the drawer. In addition to the types of wood and the dyes suitable for them, the effect of temperature, humidity and light on antiques, and other secrets of the craft. This direct interaction with old objects and the process of restoring them, makes the workshop a place where Theo reconnects with the world and experiences an aesthetic that suspends time and grants him a deeper sense of meaning. Theo’s confessing “I did like old things, though it was something I’d never realized about myself before” (Tartt, 2013, p. 162), expresses a true moment of realization, where aesthetic inclination is not merely a matter of aesthetic effect, but the result of an inner feeling resulting from interaction with matter and time. In this way, craftsmanship transforms into an artistic experience that reconstructs the self, and art becomes a means of understanding life and approaching it with honesty and depth (Freed 2020).

The aesthetic seeds in Theo's ordinary experience begin to grow and develop into an artistic aesthetic engagement that culminates in his work as an art collector. Thus, as Dewey writes that aesthetic experience has a rhythm of intake and outtake; stating: "The first characteristic of the enviring world that makes possible the existence of artistic form is rhythm" (Dewey, 1934, p. 147), these stages of Theo's experience constitute the aesthetic input followed by artistic engagement—which is the dominant feature of Dewey's artistic process—as an outtake. In the advanced stages of Theo's journey, his relationship with art develops from a negative recipient to an active participant in the world of antiques, where he works in the antiques trade as a partner to Hobie. This deep involvement reflects a fundamental shift in his artistic experience, as art is no longer just a subject of visual contemplation or enjoyment, but has become a lived environment that surrounds his daily life and influences his practices and behaviors. He describes the influence:

Hobie made me see the creaturely quality of good furniture, in how he talked of pieces as "he" and "she," in the muscular, almost animal quality that distinguished great pieces from their stiff, boxy, more mannered peers and in the affectionate way he ran his hand along the dark, glowing flanks of his sideboards and lowboys, like pets. He was a good teacher and very soon, by walking me through the Process of examination and comparison, he'd taught me how to identify a reproduction: by wear that was too even (antiques were always worn asymmetrically); by edges that were machine-cut instead of hand-planed (a sensitive fingertip could feel a machine edge, even in poor light); but more than that by a flat, dead quality of wood, lacking a certain glow: the magic that came from centuries of being touched and used and passed through human hands. To contemplate the lives of these dignified old highboys and secretaries—lives longer and gentler than human life—sank me into calm like a stone in deep water, so that when it was time to go I walked out stunned and blinking into the blare of Sixth Avenue, hardly knowing where I was. (Tartt, 2013, p.166)

His experience with antiques exemplifies Shaun McNiff's approach "Art as Medicine" that the creative act itself functions as a therapeutic mechanism. Restoration and handcrafting at Hobie's workshop become a sensory-motor practice that regulates emotions and reframes memory. The physical handling of paintings and objects is not merely about restoring their market value; it provides Theo with a space to reconstruct his personal narrative and regain a sense of power and empowerment after trauma. Through sensory focus on materials and tools, a kind of sensory discipline is achieved that alleviates emotional fragmentation. Restoration provides tangible symbols that embody hope, strength, and resilience in the face of adversity, facilitating social and professional reintegration. This makes the craft practice a practical therapeutic tool that aligns with McNiff's description of art as a "medicine" that works through the process itself, not just through verbal interpretation (Lalande 2021).

Furthermore, Hobie's importance lies not only in his role as a professional mentor developing Theo's physical abilities, but also as an emotional guide who provides a safe environment for him to fully experience beauty. Hobie teaches him not just how to repair things, but how to feel them, contemplate them, and rebuild himself through them. Even the simple food Hobie offers—which Theo describes as “black lump of flowerpot mud” (Tartt, 2013, p.138) and “puffy yellow stuff on toast” (Tartt, 2013, p.113)—is transformed through aroma and taste into a complete aesthetic moment, restoring a sense of warmth and belonging, and demonstrating that art is not merely about form but is created through sensory and emotional interaction. This proves Dewey's point that art exists in any emotional engagement of everyday life; starting “artistic and esthetic quality is implicit in every normal experience” (Dewey 13). In this sense, art in Theo's life becomes not just a profession or a hobby, but a therapeutic tool that restores his inner peace.

Conclusion

Thus, in *The Goldfinch*, art is viewed not merely as an aesthetic object to be acquired or displayed, but as an existential experience that reshapes the moral and emotional self. This is evident in Theo's life, where art becomes a catalyst for salvation, awakening honesty with oneself and evoking buried memories and feelings that reconnect him to his human essence. His preference for the moral and cultural value of the painting over its material value reflects an understanding that true art is measured by its ability to preserve memory, shape identity, and inspire inner transformation, as he explains: “The painting was the secret that lifted me above the surface of life and enabled me to know my identity” (Tartt 768). Thus, the painting becomes a medium that rebuilds life from within by intensifying feeling and transcending the separation between object and experience, which confirms Dewey's claim that artistic processes are rooted in everyday experiences and that interaction with a work of art—even by a non-artist—can fulfill the conditions of an immersive aesthetic experience. Theo's involvement in acquiring, restoring, and repurposing artworks in the antiques market highlights a new life cycle for art, embodying Dewey's concept of art as a form of living communication that connects the individual to their environment and makes it a way of life that fosters integration between the self and the surroundings. Artistic practice thus becomes a tool for understanding the self and the world, and for forming a coherent artistic and cultural identity, rather than merely a static object for viewing or superficial appreciation. Art becomes a tool for understanding the self and the world, and for forming a coherent artistic and cultural identity. This perspective makes art a dynamic and vibrant experience, not just a static object for viewing or superficial appreciation.

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