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Beauty is in the ear of the well informed

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Our responses to music, art and even lovemaking are often tied to our estimation of the people involved, says Paul Bloom

A few months ago, a young man in jeans and a baseball cap took a violin into a subway station in Washington DC during morning rush hour. He opened the case in front of him, put some coins inside to encourage donations and played for 45 minutes. The young man was Joshua Bell, one of the world's greatest violinists, and he was playing his multimillion-dollar Stradivarius. He was incognito, as an experiment devised by The Washington Post to see whether people appreciate great art in an unlikely place.

They don't. No crowd gathered; nobody stayed for Bell's entire performance. People tossed in quarters; some dropped dollar bills, and by the end he had \$32.17 (£16.23) – not too shabby, but not exceptional either. Many of the people who stopped for a moment would have paid hundreds for the privilege of listening, close up, to the music of Joshua Bell. But, of course, they didn't know this was the music of Joshua Bell.

The same experiment has been carried out countless times in the domain of painting. When it was thought to be by Jan Vermeer, *The Disciples at Emmaus* was extremely well regarded, but once it was discovered to be the work of the considerably less esteemed 20th-century forger Han van Meegeren, its value dropped to almost nothing.

This is no great surprise. Most of us would pay far more for a real Picasso, Rembrandt or Chagall than for a duplicate, even if we couldn't tell the difference. But there is also something strange here. Isn't it the same painting, regardless of who painted it? Isn't music music, something that should be appreciated on its own merits, and so it is irrelevant whether it is performed by Bell or some starving graduate student? Many sociologists and psychologists have argued that our focus on the artist or performer has nothing to do with aesthetics; rather, it reflects our hunger for status – we want to be known as the sorts of people who own rare artwork and who attend expensive performances. It is nothing more than snobbery.

But there is another way to look at it. As the philosopher Denis Dutton points out, our appreciation of even a static artwork such as a painting is an appreciation of the process that gave rise to its creation – all art is performance art. From this perspective, the Dutch critics were not guilty of snobbery when their judgments about *The Disciples at Emmaus* changed.

They had discovered that it was no longer the product of a creative artist, but an imitation of another's work. This mattered to them, reasonably so.

It's like discovering that a musical performer is lip-synching or that the winner of the New York City Marathon had actually taken the subway. It detracts from the performance.

The assumed importance of invisible aspects of things and experiences is not limited to art. The critic Arthur Danto points out that much of the pleasure of eating is the belief that one is eating certain things: "[The] food may turn to ashes in one's mouth the moment one discovers the belief to be false, say that it is pork if one is an Orthodox Jew, or beef, if one is a practising Hindu, or human if one is like most of us (however good we might in fact taste)".

Arthur Koestler draws his parallel to sex, telling the story of a young woman in Berlin who worked for a publisher and would

have sex with authors, regardless of age or gender – but only if the author's book had sold more than 20,000 copies. She could not get sexual satisfaction from those whose works sold less. Koestler says that the woman was simply confused ("the Kama Sutra and the bestseller list were hopelessly mixed up in her mind") and that we would be equally confused if we considered the artist when judging a painting.

But actually it is Koestler who is confused. His example works only because the woman's criterion is superficial. What if, instead, she would only get sexual satisfaction from people she thought were intelligent and kind? What if, for her, sex had something to do with love? It might not work that way for everyone, but surely there is nothing mixed up in caring about deeper facts about a person, and reacting accordingly.

Admittedly, focusing on the artist will go awry when you get the facts wrong, as those who walked past Joshua Bell did. They were wrong about what they were listening to, and this affected how they heard the music.

But this is not snobbery or irrationality. It is rooted in human nature: pleasure – from music to painting to sex to food – lies in what we think things are, not merely in what they appear to be.

Paul Bloom is professor of psychology at Yale University. The article is based on part of his book, *Descartes' Baby*, published by Heinemann, £20.