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Denis Dutton, Universal Connoisseur



Denis Dutton, 1944-2010

By Joseph Carroll

*What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.*

—*W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"*

Denis Dutton, founder and editor of the Web site [Arts & Letters Daily](#), died of cancer on December 28. As most [Chronicle readers already know](#), *Arts & Letters Daily* is widely regarded as the single best site for cultural commentary, with links to articles, essays, and reviews on the arts, politics, intellectual controversies, and other research of broad import. ALD was not quite a one-man show (he had a longtime collaborator, Tran Huu Dung), but in important ways, the site was the man: open but discerning, avidly curious, generously appreciative. Denis was warm-hearted but also witty and tough-minded. That intellectual profile was the filter through which the best that was being thought and said found its way onto ALD.

Denis was something like a universal connoisseur. He had expert knowledge in many areas of music, the visual arts, literature, and philosophy; he followed politics with a shrewd critical eye; and he took to heart the central findings in modern evolutionary research into the human mind. By joining a connoisseur's sensibility with a philosopher's analytic acuity, he evaluated the imaginative quality of essays and reviews with quick intuitive tact. Even taking account of that kind of quickness, one can hardly help but stand back in wonder at the scope and quality of the world he opened out to his readers every day on ALD.

Arts & Letters Daily represented one pole of Denis's productive intellectual life—a keen appreciation for diversity and particularity in intellectual and aesthetic experience. The other pole was represented by his magnum opus, published in 2009: *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*. In *The Art Instinct*, Denis aimed at radical causal reduction; he wanted to bring the rich diversity of cultural reference within the compass of evolutionary explanation.

In *The Art Instinct*, Denis tells people what they almost know—that art is wonderful and that it is built into our bones, and the bones of our ancestors. As soon as they hear that, people know it's true. But many would be afraid to say it themselves, and unable to, because saying it requires crossing an invisible fence—the boundaries created by the belief that all human behavior is produced exclusively by arbitrary cultural conventions. Denis does not engage in antagonistic, aggressive acts against that belief; instead, he simply shows his readers what life is like on the other side of the fence, making it visible and accessible to them. Denis offers a full, rich account of art in all its multifarious aspects, high and low, popular and elite, appealing to all the senses, engaging the deepest passions, absorbing cultural conventions, and fulfilling the most fundamental human needs.

With the publication of *The Art Instinct*, Denis achieved the kind of breakthrough into the audience of generally educated readers that most of his colleagues in the humanities have only dreamed about. By speaking simultaneously to scholarly specialists and to the general public, Denis joined the glittering array of "third culture" writers such as Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins, Frans de Waal, Daniel Goleman, Matt Ridley, Nicholas Wade, and Edward O. Wilson. The term "third culture" refers to writers who bridge the divide between "the two cultures," the sciences and the humanities. Other humanists with an evolutionary orientation, myself included, have written books designed to break down the barrier between the sciences and the humanities, but we have not yet reached that broad general audience. Among humanists, Denis was the first.

Even without *The Art Instinct*, Denis would have had a full and interesting career. Along with founding and editing ALD, he founded and edited the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. For 33 years, that journal has stood as a beacon of clarity and educated good sense. ALD was designed to resemble an 18th-century broadsheet, and it thus offered a design metaphor for the ethos of the Enlightenment that also informed *Philosophy and Literature*. Denis believed in reason and evidence; he wanted to get at the truth of things. He believed in science, and he believed that science could illuminate every aspect of the human imagination. He looked back to the 18th century, and in the spirit of that century, he worked constantly to assimilate new knowledge in the spirit of empirical inquiry. It is for that reason that for the past 14 years or so, *Philosophy and Literature* has provided the highest-quality venue for humanists who, like Denis, are oriented to evolutionary biology.

Had he never written *The Art Instinct*, Denis would still have had a beneficent impact on the intellectual world, but his book was a triumphant culmination of his work over many decades. From the perspective provided by *The Art Instinct*, one can see that all his previous work—the dozens of articles and reviews, and the two major editorial efforts—was not episodic and fragmentary; it was part of a continuous creative development. *The Art Instinct* really could not have been written, by Denis or anybody else, before it was. Writing it depended on dramatic

developments in the intellectual world that have taken place over the past 30 or 40 years—a Darwinian revolution first in the social sciences, and then in the humanities. Denis had to be in on that, absorbing it, helping it along, before he could write the book.

Though he recounts few incidents from his personal life, Denis's book has an indirectly autobiographical aspect. Through his multifarious references to particular works of music, painting, sculpture, and literature, he gives a strong, vivid impression of what it was like to have lived his life in absorbed, delighted responsiveness to the arts. He once mentioned to me that one of his earliest memories was of sitting on the floor of his parents' living room, at the age of 3 or 4, rapturously listening to LPs of Beethoven. What an immense blessing that power of appreciation must have been.

Denis was 66. Not terribly old, but still, old enough so that one can say he lived a full life. And indeed, he lived more fully in his 66 years than most people manage in 80 or 90. Denis was truly fortunate in all sorts of ways. He had many interesting companions, a loving family, and a circle of close friends who admired and appreciated him. The trajectory of his career has an almost unreal, novelistic look about it—with his magnum opus coming out just a couple of years before he died, and with the immense public success it achieved. And then, just a few weeks ago, he was awarded the University of Canterbury's Research Medal, the highest recognition his university can give.

It was a good life, with beneficent effects extending outward through the social and intellectual world. Those of us who knew Denis personally already miss him terribly. And we're not alone. The announcement of his death on the ALD Web site has elicited an outpouring of sympathy and grief from many who never met him but who nonetheless knew him through the intellectual world he created around him.

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