

# Boredom, Art, and Evolution

by [Kelli Converso](#)

The painting looms over its observer. Its inky water would threaten to overwhelm the gallery if it weren't caged by brush strokes and framed on a white wall. Unlike the more modern, abstract pieces that tend to populate the Whitney Biennial in New York City, *The Guiding Light* is striking through its sheer simplicity. Conjuring only a hazy vision of water at night, the painting is a classic horizon scene. Its impressionistic style hints at a level of influence and maturity that the year-old painting wears surprisingly well. When I first laid eyes on the painting, I felt a curiosity that has only struck me a handful of times in museums. I wanted to stand in front of its large frame until it yielded its secrets, its intentions; I felt with a tethering certainty that something sat beneath the placid waves. So, I turned to the only resource I had on hand: the small plaque inscribed with the painting's history and origins.

*The Guiding Light* (2021) is a landscape painting. With 99 ½ x 137 ½ inches of canvas, the artist Harold Ancart had ample space to work with, yet instead of filling the frame with detail, he embraced the scene's murkiness, granting the painting minimal ornamentation. Darkness obscures any distinguishable features, except for the moon's glimmering reflection and a few glowing dots in the distance. Are we eyeing a lake, pond, or ocean? Do boats and fish inhabit the waves, or does pollution? No moral or political prerogative can be readily discerned in the piece, which is disarming in an exhibition like the Biennial, known for its thought-provoking curation. While many pieces at the Biennial ask the audience to reconceptualize or relearn American sociopolitical structures, *The Guiding Light* was the first piece at the exhibition that called me to simply think, rather than rethink: an enchanting and rather novel experience.



*The Guiding Light* (2021)

In the wall text, artist Harold Ancart describes his inspiration for *The Guiding Light* as “fire, flowers, and the horizon,” because “before screens” these were objects of “human fixation” (Ancart qtd. in Wall Text). This mention of the digital age brings a layer of complexity to the work, as the artist’s intentions add a new context to the aesthetic product. For Ancart, artistry is a rejection of screens. The ambiguity of the scene is meant to disrupt the instant gratification that technology affords us. To find meaning in the painting, viewers can create their own ideas – an experience that differs from the digital realm, where content is often served to us with ready-made meanings. *The Guiding Light* approaches human contemplation as a lost but still salvageable skill.

But does the correlation between the rise of digital media and a decline in creative thinking reach beyond a complaint suggested in an artist’s statement?

An *NPR* interview between host Audie Cornish and tech podcaster Manoush Zomorodi, titled “Bored . . . and Brilliant? A Challenge To Disconnect From Your Phone,” says yes, and investigates the science behind the connection. According to Zomorodi, smartphones have limited our access to an experience that is crucial for stretching the mind: boredom. A study done by Dr. Sandi Mann in the U.K. found that trial subjects were more likely to conceive of unique ideas after engaging in an extremely boring task – reading the phone book – than after alternative tasks. In Mann’s own words, “When we’re bored we’re searching for something to stimulate us, so we might go off in our heads to try and find that stimulation by our minds wandering, daydreaming. You start thinking a little bit beyond the conscious, a little bit into the subconscious, which allows sort of different connections to take place” (Mann qtd. in Cornish). In the digital age, our desire for stimulation can be met with split-second fixes, which prevent us from delving into that daydreaming zone. Works like Ancart’s, which focus on murky human preoccupations, may allow viewers to tap back into our primordial speculative side.

To understand what is so captivating about Ancart's obscure landscape, let's look to a more iconic historical example, Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). In the two centuries since its creation, this artwork has been deemed a consummate representation of Romanticism for its emphasis on nature, emotion, and individualism. Friedrich's oil paints on canvas conjure the image of a man, the titular wanderer, surveying a great expanse of rocks and fog. This work inspires a sense of awe and curiosity at how the wanderer must feel to have such an enchanting and terrifying world just out of reach.



*Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818)

In "Friedrich's *Wanderer*: Paradox of the Modern Subject," published in *Canadian Art Review*, Julian Jason Haladyn explores the painting through the lenses of abstraction, mediation, and modernism. He notes that the prominence of the fog highlights the limitations of human perception, yet instead of shying away from this daunting notion, "Friedrich confronts this human problem by embracing the abstract void" that exists between the subject and the "mountainous foggy background" (47). By intentionally depicting obscurity, Friedrich calls his audience to employ their own judgment and imagination, just as the wanderer must. The horizon becomes not simply a realm of curiosity, but a realm the audience defines and creates through their own imaginations.

It seems Ancart uses water in *The Guiding Light* in the same way Friedrich uses fog in *Wanderer*. The lack of definition beyond the fog or the water is intended to stir the creative capabilities of viewers, so they can project their own sense of meaning onto the scenes. If Friedrich's painting was empowering to nineteenth-century Western

audiences as a symbol of man's dominance over nature, Ancart issues a subtler call for contemplation. Though a contemporary viewer accustomed to constant stimulation may find a landscape painting boring, the same viewer can leverage the mechanisms of their boredom to enhance their experience of the artwork.

In their article "On the Function of Boredom," behavioral scientists Shane W. Bench and Heather C. Lench examine the implications of boredom for human existence, including our emotional, behavioral, cognitive, experiential, and physiological development. They define boredom as "the aversive experience of wanting, but being unable, to engage in satisfying activity" (460). Boredom, they contend, is an essential element of the human experience, important to goal setting, mind wandering, and strategizing (467–468). We associate these mental actions with positive traits like long-term planning, creativity, or inventiveness, yet boredom forces the internal awareness necessary for their development.

Consequently, boredom can have positive functions, enabling both creative and critical thinking. The mental skills that we hone while bored are the same skills that we draw upon when engaging with artworks like *The Guiding Light* or *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. In his TED Talk, "A Darwinian Theory of Beauty," philosopher of art Denis Dutton suggests that these critical and creative thought processes are needed not just to appreciate art, but also to create it. Dutton unravels the evolutionary history of humankind's aesthetic tastes, starting with the root of all human pleasure and displeasure – natural selection (00:04:46). He claims that nature elucidates the necessary by making it beautiful; we experience this peculiar communication when we fall in love or choose a grassy spot to picnic. The development of our artistic sensibilities has similar evolutionary roots.

Dutton turns to ancient Acheulian hand axes as an example. These teardrop-shaped stones were crafted by "hominid ancestors" nearly 1.4 million years ago, making them the most ancient artistic objects. They have been found "scattered across Asia, Europe, and Africa," indicating that they accompanied hominids wherever they went. Based on the sheer number of these artifacts found across the globe, as well as the evidence of their minimal wear, the axes likely never served a purpose beyond their technical beauty, which is why scholars deem them pieces of art (00:09:22). The ability to forge these hand axes indicates multiple Darwinian 'fitness signals' that displayed their creators' ability to thrive in their environment, constituting a reproductive advantage. Dutton lists these "desirable personal qualities" as "intelligence, fine motor control, planning ability, conscientiousness, and sometimes access to rare materials" (00:11:00). There are clear lines between these qualities and those listed by Bench and Lench, suggesting a primordial link between boredom and human cognitive development.



*Nine Bifaces (700,000-200,000 B.C.)*

The notion that our hominid ancestors created art out of boredom becomes clearer when considering the relationship between boredom and goal setting. “On the Function of Boredom” suggests that boredom may exist to indicate when progress or change is necessary. Identifying that unsatisfied twinge of tedium, we know it’s time to begin a new task (Bench and Lench 461). While this certainly applies to everyday life, I propose that it can also be applied to our evolutionary development as artistic creatures. According to contemporary scientists, daydreaming is “the brain’s default mode” (Zomorodi qtd. in Cornish). It could be that as our ancestors’ cognitive capacity increased, their daydreaming began to inspire artistic creation. As with the older hand axes, the apparent utility of such creation may not have mattered: studies show that “boredom does not discriminate the valence of a goal . . . it simply encourages changing to a new” one (Bench and Lench 462). Art, then, could be an evolutionary response to boredom, and thus our ability both to create and interpret art is inherently tied to our ability to properly experience tedium.

The historical, cultural, and developmental significance of boredom makes our current war against it all the more troubling. While many of us fill up our calendars and scroll on our screens to avoid sitting with this feeling for any length of time, perhaps our ancestors did not experience their boredom in the same way. To craft an Acheulian hand ax simply for admiration, one would have needed stability, time, and resources, all of which connote a safe, secure environment. And if their boredom led our primal ancestors toward science and art, its diminishment now might have dire consequences for generations to come. It would be misguided, though, simply to blame technology. Although our rapid march into a digital world can be daunting, I refuse to find it damning. After all, what were hand axes if not a prehistoric technology? We must claim responsibility for our creations and how we interact with them.

As my eyes gazed at the brushstrokes of *The Guiding Light*, I wondered why I felt so curious about this landscape of water and shadow. Was I innately drawn to the

placidity of the water, since evolutionarily it would suggest an advantageous place to live? Did the static nature of the landscape push me, as cognitive scientists suggest, to fill the space with my own creative thinking? Ancart might have been satisfied simply that I stayed fixated on his horizon rather than turning to my phone. I stood alone for a while before the painting, with no philosophers, scientists, or artists to conjecture in my ear. Then, I decided I was drawn to the painting because it reminded me of the Hudson River at night, and I took a photo before stepping away.

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## Works Cited

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