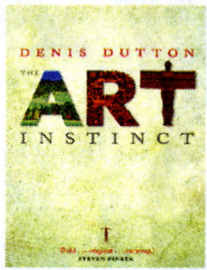


The Art Instinct, by
Denis Dutton (OUP,
£9.99)



Our love of the arts is not the random by-product of evolution or a culturally contingent phenomenon, but a natural and universal human instinct, as innate as language or a spider's urge to spin a web. This is Dutton's bold claim. Darwin realised that sexual selection is the mechanism that produced the peacock's showy but (as regards evolution) useless tail, and Dutton argues this also partly explains the emergence of artistic abilities. In a fascinating chapter on "fiction-making", he also shows how our art instinct may even have had "survival value": fantasy as well as science can give a species the edge in the struggle for survival. Dutton's evolutionary view of the arts is well argued and intellectually compelling, although ultimately speculative. Unfortunately, his attempt to "restore the vital place of beauty, skill and pleasure as high artistic values" also reveals a somewhat limited concept of great art. He argues that Schoenberg's "contratonal" music is unpopular because it subverts the art instinct. But without such challenging works our lives would be immeasurably poorer. **PDS**