

# **Art for Life’s Sake: Reclaiming the Social Purpose of Artistic**

## **Expression**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the enduring relevance of the doctrine “Art for Life’s Sake,” a counterpoint to the aesthetic ideal of “Art for Art’s Sake.” Rooted in the belief that art must serve a meaningful social, moral, or experiential purpose, this philosophy emphasizes the integration of artistic expression with real-life concerns. Drawing from literary, philosophical, and cultural contexts, the manuscript traces the historical evolution of this idea, its manifestation in global and Indian literary traditions, and its implications for editorial, pedagogical, and creative practices. The study argues that “Art for Life’s Sake” is not merely a slogan but a transformative framework that reorients artistic production toward empathy, justice, and human dignity.

**Keywords:** Art for Life’s Sake, Social Function of Art, Literary Realism, Progressive Literature, Aesthetic Philosophy, Editorial Ethics, Cultural Critique, Indian Literary Movements

This article revisits the concept of “Art for Life’s Sake” through a multidisciplinary lens, examining its historical roots, literary expressions, and contemporary relevance, as articulated in recent scholarship by Rajarao and Srinivas (2014). The tension between

aesthetic autonomy and social responsibility has long shaped debates in art and literature. The doctrine of “Art for Art’s Sake” (*l’art pour l’art*), which emerged in 19th-century Europe, posited that art exists independently of moral, political, or utilitarian concerns. In contrast, “Art for Life’s Sake” asserts that art must engage with the lived realities of its audience—its struggles, aspirations, and injustices (Rajaroo & Srinivas, 2014). This philosophy gained prominence in the 20th century, particularly in colonized societies, revolutionary movements, and socially conscious literary traditions. It insists that art is not an ivory tower pursuit but a mirror and catalyst of life. It also reflects on how this philosophy informs editorial decision-making, especially in platforms committed to ethical, inclusive, and socially engaged scholarship.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a conceptual-historical methodology, combining literary analysis, cultural theory, and editorial reflection. It draws on primary texts, critical essays, and archival materials to trace the evolution of “Art for Life’s Sake” across different cultural contexts. The analysis is structured around three axes: (1) the philosophical foundations of the doctrine, (2) its literary manifestations in Indian and global traditions, and (3) its implications for editorial and pedagogical practice. The study also includes comparative insights, contrasting “Art for Life’s Sake” with “Art for Art’s Sake” to highlight their divergent assumptions about the role of the artist, the function of art, and the relationship between aesthetics and ethics.

### **Analysis**

The phrase “Art for Life’s Sake” is not merely a rhetorical inversion of “Art for Art’s Sake”; it represents a fundamental shift in the purpose and practice of art. While aestheticism celebrates form, beauty, and artistic autonomy, the life-oriented approach foregrounds content, context, and consequence. It views art as a means of understanding, critiquing, and transforming the world. This philosophy is deeply rooted in humanist traditions, where art is

seen as a vehicle for empathy, education, and emancipation. In the Indian context, “Art for Life’s Sake” found powerful expression in the Progressive Writers’ Movement (PWM), which emerged in the 1930s as a response to colonial oppression, social inequality, and cultural stagnation. Writers like Munshi Premchand, Sajjad Zaheer, Ismat Chughtai, and Mulk Raj Anand championed literature that addressed the plight of peasants, workers, women, and marginalized communities. Their works combined literary craft with political commitment, demonstrating that artistic excellence and social relevance are not mutually exclusive. Premchand’s short story “Kafan,” for instance, uses stark realism to expose the dehumanizing effects of poverty and caste. The story’s unflinching portrayal of suffering is not meant to shock but to awaken moral consciousness. Similarly, Ismat Chughtai’s “Lihaaf” challenges patriarchal norms and sexual repression, using fiction as a space for feminist critique. In the global arena, the doctrine resonates with the works of writers like Leo Tolstoy, who argued in “What is Art?” that true art must promote moral and spiritual unity. Tolstoy rejected art that catered to elite tastes or aesthetic formalism, insisting that art should be accessible, sincere, and ethically grounded. In the African context, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s call to decolonize the mind aligns with “Art for Life’s Sake.” His novels and essays advocate for literature that reflects indigenous realities and resists cultural imperialism. In Latin America, the testimonio genre—first-person narratives of oppression and resistance—embodies this philosophy by giving voice to the voiceless. “Art for Life’s Sake” also finds expression in visual and performing arts. From Diego Rivera’s murals to street theatre in India, artists have used their mediums to engage with social issues, educate the public, and inspire collective action. In contemporary times, digital storytelling, protest art, and community-based art projects continue this legacy, demonstrating that art can be both aesthetically compelling and socially transformative. Editorially, the doctrine has significant implications. Platforms that embrace “Art for Life’s Sake” prioritize content that is not only well-crafted but also ethically resonant

and socially relevant. This includes publishing research on marginalized voices, curating special issues on urgent themes (e.g., climate justice, gender equity, indigenous knowledge), and ensuring that citation practices reflect epistemic diversity. Pedagogically, “Art for Life’s Sake” encourages educators to treat literature and art as tools for critical inquiry and civic learning. It supports interdisciplinary approaches that connect texts to historical events, social movements, and ethical dilemmas. It also validates the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, encouraging them to see their lives reflected in the curriculum. In creative writing workshops, this philosophy nurtures authenticity, empathy, and purpose, guiding students to write not just beautifully but meaningfully. The doctrine also challenges the commodification of art in neoliberal economies, where artistic value is often measured by market success or institutional prestige. “Art for Life’s Sake” resists this logic, asserting that the worth of art lies in its capacity to humanize, provoke, and heal. It calls for a reorientation of artistic priorities—from self-referentiality to social responsibility, from aesthetic purity to ethical engagement. This does not mean reducing art to propaganda or didacticism; rather, it means recognizing that all art is situated, and that silence or neutrality in the face of injustice is itself a political stance. The relevance of “Art for Life’s Sake” is particularly acute in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate emergencies, and global conflicts have underscored the need for art that consoles, critiques, and connects. During lockdowns, poetry, music, and visual art became lifelines for millions, offering solace and solidarity. At the same time, artists and writers used their platforms to expose inequalities, advocate for public health, and imagine alternative futures. In this context, “Art for Life’s Sake” is not a nostalgic ideal but a contemporary imperative. The doctrine also intersects with movements for decolonization, gender justice, and ecological sustainability. It challenges Eurocentric canons, patriarchal aesthetics, and extractive models of creativity. It affirms that art must be accountable—to communities, to histories, and to the planet. This accountability does not

stifle creativity; it deepens it, grounding artistic freedom in ethical responsibility. This philosophy offers a roadmap for inclusive, impactful, and future-facing publishing and pedagogy. Finally, “Art for Life’s Sake” invites a redefinition of success in the arts. Instead of awards, sales, or citations, it asks: Does this work move people? Does it illuminate injustice? Does it affirm life? These are not sentimental questions; they are critical metrics for evaluating the social value of art. They remind us that the ultimate purpose of art is not to escape life but to enrich it.

### **Conclusion**

“Art for Life’s Sake” is more than a slogan—it is a call to conscience. It affirms that art must be rooted in life, responsive to suffering, and committed to justice. It challenges the isolation of aestheticism and reclaims the social function of artistic expression. For writers, it offers a compass; for editors, a criterion; for educators, a pedagogy; and for readers, a promise—that art can still matter, still move, still make a difference. As we navigate an increasingly fractured world, this doctrine reminds us that beauty and truth are not opposites but allies, and that the highest form of art is one that serves life.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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