



Art de vivre, or Art of living.

View from Paris

Ian Avril' | Fitzroy Magazine

Julia Neio / art of living (<https://fitzroymag.com/art-de-vivre/>) 29 January 2020

So, what is **Art de vivre** (In Russian, pronounced Ar-De-Vivr)? Certainly, “art of living”. But what does this term mean, it’s so close in meaning to a beautiful lifestyle, yet so far from its meaning? It fully relates to a French life paradigm of getting satisfaction from life. If you, working with no break to get all the money in the world, are surprised at eating every two hours every week day and every four on the weekends, then you haven’t reached the French zen, and aren’t even a bit close to it. Here, in the victorious country of Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood, these questions aren’t asked. They just live, because just living is more enjoyable.

This is because, from a Parisian dentist’s answer to my question, who had a queue that was scheduled months in advance, but he accepted people only three hours a day: “We work to live, we do not live to work”. And it seems like this is the most accurate evidence for the Art de vivre in its original meaning.

However, who can tell us better about the art of living than French people? We met with the art director of the Fitzroy magazine, Ian Avril in a bistro on the De Suffren avenue. This place is iconic from all sides — Here, you have a view on the main touristic symbol of Paris, the Eiffel Tower and a view on one side of Champ de Mars, and a military academy in the yard of which farewells with the most outstanding people of France takes place — from Chirac to Azanvour — with another. It’s astonishing, that there are almost no tourists here, and the tables in all surrounding establishments are booked entirely by locals.

Ian was obviously late. Because for the French being late is a part of art de vivre. It wasn’t because he didn’t rush anywhere, but because they didn’t care, and they live by the idea of “Let the whole world wait”. Being late, however, they will never say “it’s my fault”, but they will always find an excuse, like “The neighbor has blocked the passage out” or “transport workers strike again”. Or they just won’t justify why they were late. But why? You just need to get used to this. Experiencing the feeling of guilt for being half

an hour late – It isn't *comme il faut*, it isn't necessary: It's a beautiful day, and you're drinking wine, turning your face to the sun, how can you not like this short, by their opinion, period of laziness, In the time of which you can read a book, scroll the Facebook feed or just look around and admire the surroundings?!



In this calming stream of life, the most incompatible things are surprisingly combined: dissatisfaction in everything, but also a Stoic calmness, let's say, In a line to a bakery for a good baguette (Baguettes can be made completely wrong, if you didn't know) – the line is moving really slowly, while the baker is talking about the health of a repeat grandmother client's dog, standing behind her clients are nodding their heads so that when it's their time, they can share their news about their family with the baker. And no one is complaining, because there is nothing odd and scary in this. And putting yourself into long discussions about the government doing horrible things, the streets being cleaned up worse, and the time flies in these pointless discussions – while not caring at all about the people who are waiting for their baguette behind your back – which is completely normal. Like so being ultra-left in your political views, however making meeting in “Le fouquet” or “L'Apicius”, where a dinner will cost the annual salary of some Somali dock, discussing the hard lives of the working class and at the same evening go to your own villa on Cap-Ferrat. Why?

The most important factor in art de vivre is freedom.

“Yes, this is because, – replies Ian – Art de vivre – is an innate ability of doing a lot of unnecessary and unprofitable choices. This, first of all, means to live, not to exist. An ant can exist. Or, let's say, a Muscovite. But not everyone is able to live. It isn't a science, it is experience and practice, not directories and studied rules, taken from modern magazines. This isn't a theory of letters and statements, it is life. On one side of the scales – are the rules which form unshakeable foundations of the society, on the other side – Thorough knowledge of these rules which can be broken gracefully, if there is enough courage. Because the most important factor in art de vivre is freedom”.

By the way, this freedom is forever pinned in the constitution of France in the paragraph “La liberté c'est la possibilité de faire tout ce qui ne nuit pas à autrui” (Freedom – is the ability to do everything, that doesn't harm others). And Russian speakers really like to quote the phrase, which is attributed to the anarchist Bakunin: “your freedom ends when the freedom of others begins”, – This is a fundamentally wrong concept. Your freedom doesn't end, when rules and the freedom of others start. Because a free person, following the concept of art de vivre, will give you the same freedom to live and enjoy life, that he has.

“Art de vivre cannot be confused with the rules of style, — Ian continues. — Even a monkey can learn the rules of red and white wine. A monkey can learn, that the bottom button of a jacket is never fastened, and for important meetings, a tie should always be tied with a thick Windsor knot. People, endowed with this knowledge, are no more than empty people, or colored peacocks in fancy costumes, under which there is nothing. What is the purpose of a person like that? In the external factors — yacht, house with a pool, Long-legged beauty with an intellect of an elementary grade child, with hefty bank accounts, which are all around the world, so that God forbid, not a single penny will be overpaid to taxes. In the desire to become richer and to follow the limits, which are imposed by society. But this has no freedom. Neither does it have life.

And, if everyone understands, that showing up at the Black-tie appointment dressed up like a clochard —is a violation of the rules, then you need to realize, that everyone’s rules and limits are different. If it is uncomfortable in hard and lacquered shoes from A. Testoni, then even at a meeting with a persident you could come in converse sneakers, just because, your freedom extends far beyond plastering the bloody feet in the Elysee palace.

We need to fully understand, that it is impossible to get everything. But it is possible for you to get something comfortable and pleasant. You just need to have a balance. Balance — this is the fundamental principle of society, a base of freedom and the art of living. First of all, this is because everything that we do — we do for ourselves. So what is your choice? Life — is a choice of its own. When we eat something tasty — we are doing something nice for ourselves in the first place, if, of course, the doctor didn’t prescribe you otherwise. When we wear nice, beautiful clothes, stitched from good fabrics — this is, in the first place, good for ourselves. We are not supposed to adjust ourselves for someone, or to do something for someone. We just need to understand, that from one side no one cares, but from the other — everyone has something to do with everything”.

Basically, to put it simply, real art-de-vivre —is firstly, the compliance of two, Mutually exclusive things: savoir-vivre, good manners, and a meaning shifted from economics into a common language “Laissez-faire”, permissiveness.

Let's say, in a nearby shop there was a shortage of wine due to strikes which have been going on for two months. A French person from the middle class, working in a boring office with a salary, hardly higher than the minimum wage, he looks around the empty shelves with a sad look, with a sigh he puts three bottles of Gigondas wine for 22 Euro each into his cart, “Such a normal Saturday dinner will turn out, no meat to be served”. And he smiled. Because everything, that will happen tomorrow — is completely irrelevant.

There is a person I know whose name is Marie-Ortansz with a last name which is so long, it is uncomfortable to pronounce it and hard to mention in a polite society, So that you are not taken as a snob, bragging about “High” acquaintances, She buys clothes in H&M and lives in a rented apartment in the Butte-au-Caye quarter, Because she says “It’s comfortable and close to work”. On the wall of her tiny living room, Exactly above the not working (This is because it is forbidden in big cities) and forever bricked fireplace, there is a real Mondrian (“ My grandma gifted them to me, personally — I think it’s mediocre to be honest, but I cannot sell it, she will be offended”) but wine, bought in a neighboring supermarket for 5 euro, she serves in vintage crystal baccarat glass (“Well, they aren’t to be looked

at”). Marie-Ortansz can taste the difference between Petrus from Cheval-Blanc and without hesitation guess the year of its production, but she also buys shawarma from an Algerian on the side of the street and believes, that every Russian person knows Pushkin by heart, that they can play on all the musical instruments in the world, and it’s easy to discuss Sarat and Wittgenstein. At the same time she is completely convinced, that everyone is equal, even that clochard, who is hugging that bag from a budget supermarket Lidl, and that African man with poor french, in a fake Adidas costume, from whom she periodically buys weed.

But, if you think, that art de vivre — is to live a day, then you are wrong. French people know how to plan globally — a vacation in the mountains is bought in the summer, and a vacation on the beach, is bought right after the ending of the current beach season. It’s really unlikely, that they will spend a lot for a dinner in an unknown restaurant, even if there will be a celebrity on the neighboring table, but without hesitation they pay for themselves and their friends, in a place, which is more expensive, and everyone will be happy. And with pleasure they will be proving to you, that the meat in this small shop is much better, than the place on the other side of the road. Because arguing — is also a part of art-de-vivre. And you can argue about anything — from politics and weather to is Alain Delon really such a scum, as a grandma claims, with a newspaper and a cigarette on a neighboring table, who probably lived at the same time as Raymond Poincare. The only thing, that no one will argue about — is about their own freedom.



This is the reason why the Yellow Vests are striking for about more than a year, and for two months everyone in general — from teachers and ballerinas to lawyers and doctors — unlike transport workers, distributing the days of their strikes skillfully, so that they won't limit the freedom of others. This isn't because of them not working to work longer than they should, and then get a slightly higher pension, but because, the law about pension reform intruded the most sacred for the French, on their Art de Vivre. Because they want to maintain a balance between necessity and pleasure, they start thinking about pension at a bench in the university, and know for sure, that at achieving a certain age, they will be able to fully dedicate themselves to their family, get a house rather than an apartment, talk with grand children, to take a glass of Calvados while having breakfast and not rushing anywhere. Because family and personal life — is more important than money, you will never be able to earn all of it, which is why it's not worth trying. And because they perfectly know, that life — is what is happening right now, and it needs to be lived, not saved for the future.

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Photo: Ian Avril'