

# aesthetics

**aesthetics**, also spelled esthetics, the philosophical study of [beauty](#) and [taste](#). It is closely related to the [philosophy of art](#), which is concerned with the [nature](#) of [art](#) and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated.

To provide more than a general [definition](#) of the [subject matter](#) of aesthetics is immensely difficult. Indeed, it could be said that self-definition has been the major task of modern aesthetics. We are acquainted with an interesting and puzzling realm of experience: the realm of the beautiful, the ugly, the [sublime](#), and the elegant; of taste, criticism, and fine art; and of contemplation, sensuous enjoyment, and charm. In all these phenomena we believe that similar principles are operative and that similar interests are engaged. If we are mistaken in this [impression](#), we will have to dismiss such ideas as beauty and taste as having only peripheral philosophical interest. Alternatively, if our impression is correct and philosophy corroborates it, we will have discovered the basis for a philosophical aesthetics.

This article seeks to clarify the nature of modern aesthetics and to delineate its underlying principles and concerns. Although the article focusses on Western aesthetic thought and its development, it surveys some of the seminal features of Marxist and Eastern aesthetics.

## The nature and scope of aesthetics

Aesthetics is broader in scope than the philosophy of art, which comprises one of its branches. It deals not only with the nature and value of [the arts](#) but also with those responses to natural objects that find expression in the language of the [beautiful](#) and the ugly. A problem is encountered at the outset, however, for terms such as beautiful and ugly seem too vague in their application and too subjective in their meaning to divide the world successfully into those things that do, and those that do not, exemplify them. Almost anything might be seen as beautiful by someone or from some point of view; and different people apply the word to quite disparate objects for reasons that often seem to have little or nothing in common. It may be that there is some single underlying belief that motivates all of their judgments. It may also be, however, that the term beautiful has no sense except as the expression of an attitude, which is in turn attached by different people to quite different states of affairs.

Moreover, in spite of the emphasis laid by philosophers on the terms beautiful and ugly, it is far from evident that they are the most important or most useful either in the discussion and criticism of art or in the description of that which appeals to us in nature. To convey what is significant in a poem, we might describe it as ironic, moving, expressive, balanced, and harmonious. Likewise, in characterizing a favourite stretch of countryside, we may prefer to describe it as peaceful, soft, atmospheric, harsh, and evocative, rather than beautiful. The least that should be said is that beautiful belongs to a class of terms from which it has been

chosen as much for convenience' sake as for any sense that it captures what is distinctive of the class.

At the same time, there seems to be no clear way of delimiting the class in question—not at least in advance of theory. Aesthetics must therefore cast its net more widely than the study either of beauty or of other aesthetic concepts if it is to discover the principles whereby it is to be defined. We are at once returned, therefore, to the vexing question of our subject matter: What should a philosopher study in order to understand such ideas as beauty and taste?

## Three approaches to aesthetics

Three broad approaches have been proposed in answer to that question, each intuitively reasonable:

1. The study of the aesthetic [concepts](#), or, more specifically, the analysis of the “language of criticism,” in which [particular](#) judgments are singled out and their [logic](#) and justification displayed. In his famous treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), [Edmund Burke](#) attempted to draw a distinction between two aesthetic concepts, and, by studying the qualities that they denoted, to analyze the separate human attitudes that are directed toward them. Burke’s distinction between the sublime and the beautiful was extremely influential, reflecting as it did the prevailing [style](#) of contemporary criticism. In more recent times, philosophers have tended to concentrate on the concepts of modern literary theory—namely, those such as [representation](#), expression, [form](#), style, and sentimentality. The study invariably has a dual purpose: to show how (if at all) these descriptions might be justified, and to show what is distinctive in the human experiences that are expressed in them.

2. A philosophical study of certain states of [mind](#)—responses, [attitudes](#), emotions—that are held to be involved in [aesthetic experience](#). Thus, in the seminal work of modern aesthetics *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790; *The Critique of Judgment*), [Immanuel Kant](#) located the distinctive features of the aesthetic in the faculty of “[judgment](#),” whereby we take up a certain stance toward objects, separating them from our scientific interests and our practical concerns. The key to the aesthetic realm lies therefore in a certain “disinterested” attitude, which we may assume toward any object and which can be expressed in many contrasting ways.

More recently, philosophers—distrustful of Kant’s theory of the faculties—have tried to express the notions of an “aesthetic attitude” and “aesthetic experience” in other ways, relying upon developments in philosophical psychology that owe much to G.W.F. Hegel, the Phenomenologists, and [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#) (more precisely, the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* [1953]). In considering these theories (some of which are discussed below) a crucial distinction must be borne in mind: that between philosophy of mind and empirical psychology. Philosophy is not a science, because it does not investigate the causes of phenomena. It is an a priori or conceptual investigation, the underlying concern of which is to identify rather than to explain. In effect, the aim of the philosopher is

to give the broadest possible description of the things themselves, so as to show how we must understand them and how we ought to value them. The two most prominent current philosophical methods—Phenomenology and conceptual analysis—tend to regard this aim as distinct from, and (at least in part) prior to, the aim of science. For how can we begin to explain what we have yet to identify? While there have been empirical studies of aesthetic experience (exercises in the psychology of beauty), these form no part of aesthetics as considered in this article. Indeed, the remarkable paucity of their conclusions may reasonably be attributed to their attempt to provide a theory of phenomena that have yet to be properly defined.

3. The philosophical study of the [aesthetic object](#). This approach reflects the view that the problems of aesthetics exist primarily because the world contains a special class of objects toward which we react selectively and which we describe in aesthetic terms. The usual class singled out as prime aesthetic objects is that comprising works of art. All other aesthetic objects (landscapes, faces, *objets trouvés*, and the like) tend to be included in this class only because, and to the extent that, they can be seen as art (or so it is claimed).

If we adopt such an approach, then there ceases to be a real distinction between aesthetics and the philosophy of art; and aesthetic concepts and aesthetic experience deserve their names through being, respectively, the concepts required in understanding works of art and the experience provoked by confronting them. Thus Hegel, perhaps the major philosophical influence on modern aesthetics, considered the main task of aesthetics to reside in the study of the various forms of art and of the spiritual [content](#) peculiar to each. Much of recent aesthetics has been similarly focussed on artistic problems, and it could be said that it is now orthodox to consider aesthetics entirely through the study of art.

The third approach to aesthetics does not require this concentration upon art. Even someone who considered art to be no more than one manifestation of aesthetic value—perhaps even a comparatively insignificant manifestation—may believe that the first concern of aesthetics is to study the objects of aesthetic experience and to find in them the true distinguishing features of the aesthetic realm. Unless we restrict the domain of aesthetic objects, however, it becomes extremely difficult to maintain that they have anything significant in common beyond the [fact](#) of inspiring a similar interest. This means that we should be compelled to adopt the second approach to aesthetics after all. And there seems no more plausible way of restricting the domain of aesthetic objects than through the concept of art.

The three approaches may lead to incompatible results. Alternatively, they may be in [harmony](#). Once again, it can only be at the end point of our philosophy that we shall be able to decide. Initially, it must be assumed that the three approaches may differ substantially, or merely in emphasis, and thus that each question in aesthetics has a tripartite form.

## The aesthetic object

The third approach to aesthetics begins with a class of aesthetic objects and attempts thereafter to show the significance of that class to those who selectively respond to it. The term aesthetic object, however, is ambiguous, and, depending on its interpretation, may suggest two separate programs of philosophical aesthetics. The expression may denote either the “[intentional](#)” or the “material” object of aesthetic experience. This distinction, a legacy of the Scholastic philosophers of the Middle Ages, has played a major role in recent Phenomenology. It may be briefly characterized as follows: When someone responds to object *O*, his response depends upon a conception of *O* that may, in fact, be erroneous. *O* is then the material object of his response, while his conception defines the intentional object. (The term intentional comes from the Latin *intendere*, “to aim.”) To cite an example: A person is frightened by a white cloth flapping in a darkened hall, taking it for a ghost. Here, the material object of the fear is the cloth, while the intentional object is a ghost. A philosophical discussion of fear may be presented as a discussion of things feared, but if so, the phrase denotes the class of intentional objects of fear and not the (infinitely varied and infinitely disordered) class of material objects. In an important sense, the intentional object is part of a [state of mind](#), whereas the material object always has independent (and objective) [existence](#). If the expression “aesthetic object” is, therefore, taken in its intentional construction, the study of the aesthetic object becomes the study, not of an independently existing class of things, but of the aesthetic experience itself. It is in this sense that the term occurs in the writings of Phenomenologists (*e.g.*, Mikel Dufrenne, *La Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* [1953; *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*] and Roman Ingarden, *Das literarische Kunstwerk* [1931; *The Literary Work of Art*]), whose studies of the aesthetic object exemplify not the third, but the second, of the approaches considered above.

Which of those two approaches should be adopted? We can already see one reason for adopting the approach that puts the aesthetic experience first and examines the aesthetic object primarily as the intentional object of that experience. It is, after all, to experience that we must turn if we are to [understand](#) the value of the aesthetic realm—our reason for engaging with it, studying it, and adding to it. Until we understand that value, we will not know why we ought to construct such a concept as the aesthetic, still less why we should erect a whole branch of philosophy devoted to its study.

A further reason also suggests itself for rejecting the approach to aesthetics that sees it merely as the philosophy of art, because art, and the institutions that sustain it, are mutable and perhaps inessential features of the human condition. While we classify together such separate art forms as [poetry](#), the novel, [music](#), drama, [painting](#), [sculpture](#), and [architecture](#), our disposition to do so is as much the consequence of philosophical theory as its premise. Would other people at other times and in other conditions have countenanced such a classification or seen its point? And if so, would they have been motivated by similar purposes, similar observations, and similar beliefs? We might reasonably be skeptical, for while there have been many attempts to find something in common—if only a “family resemblance”—between the various currently accepted art forms, they have all been both

contentious in themselves and of little aesthetic interest. Considered materially (*i.e.*, without reference to the experiences that we direct to them), the arts seem to have little in common except for those properties that are either too uninteresting to deserve philosophical scrutiny (the [property](#), for example, of being artifacts) or else too vast and vague to be independently intelligible.

Consider the theory of [Clive Bell](#) (*Art*, 1914) that art is distinguished by its character as “significant form.” Initially attractive, the suggestion crumbles at once before the skeptic. When is form “significant”? The only answer to be extracted from Bell is this: “when it is art.” In effect, the theory reduces to a tautology. In any normal understanding of the words, a traffic warden is a significant form, at least to the motorist who sees himself about to receive a ticket. Thus, to explain Bell’s meaning, it is necessary to restrict the term significant to the significance (whatever that is) of art.

Moreover, it is of the greatest philosophical importance to attend not only to the resemblances between the art forms but also to their differences. It is true that almost anything can be seen from some point of view as beautiful. At the same time, however, our experience of beauty crucially depends upon a [knowledge](#) of the object in which beauty is seen. It is absurd to suppose that I could present you with an object that might be a stone, a sculpture, a box, a fruit, or an animal, and expect you to tell me whether it is beautiful before knowing what it is. In general we may say—in opposition to a certain tradition in aesthetics that finds expression in Kant’s theory—that our sense of beauty is always dependent upon a conception of the object in the way that our sense of the beauty of the human figure is dependent upon a conception of that figure. Features that we should regard as beautiful in a horse—developed haunches, curved back, and so on—we should regard as ugly in a human being, and those aesthetic judgments would be determined by our conception of what humans and horses generally are, how they move, and what they achieve through their movements. In a similar way, features that are beautiful in a sculpture may not be beautiful in a work of architecture, where an idea of [function](#) seems to govern our perceptions. In every case, our [perception](#) of the beauty of a work of art requires us to be aware of the distinctive character of each art form and to put out of mind, as largely irrelevant to our concerns, the overarching category of art to which all supposedly belong. But if that is so, it is difficult to see how we could cast light upon the realm of aesthetic interest by studying the concept of art.

Whether or not that concept is a recent invention, it is certainly a recent obsession. Medieval and [Renaissance](#) philosophers who approached the problems of beauty and taste—*e.g.*, St. Thomas Aquinas, Peter Abelard, and even Leon Battista Alberti—often wrote of beauty without reference to art, taking as their principal example the human face and body. The distinctively modern approach to aesthetics began to take [shape](#) during the 18th century, with the writings on art of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Batteux, and Johann Winckelmann and the theories of taste proposed by the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, [Francis Hutcheson](#), Lord Kames (Henry Home), and Archibald Alison. This approach materialized not only because of a growing interest in [fine art](#) as a uniquely human [phenomenon](#) but also because of the awakening of feelings toward [nature](#), which marked the dawn of the

Romantic [movement](#). In Kant's aesthetics, indeed, nature has pride of place as offering the only examples of what he calls "free beauty"—*i.e.*, beauty that can be appreciated without the intermediary of any polluting concept. Art, for Kant, was not merely one among many objects of aesthetic interest; it was also fatally flawed in its dependence upon intellectual understanding.

Even without taking that extreme position, it is difficult to accept that the fragile and historically determined concept of art can bear the weight of a full aesthetic theory. Leaving aside the case of natural beauty, we must still recognize the existence of a host of human activities (dress, decoration, manners, ornament) in which taste is of the [essence](#) and yet which seems totally removed from the world of fine art. It has been common, following the lead of Batteux, to make a distinction between the fine and the useful arts, and to accommodate the activities just referred to under the latter description; but it is clear that this is no more than a gesture and that the points of similarity between the art of the dressmaker and that of the composer are of significance only because of a similarity in the interests that these arts are meant to satisfy.

## The aesthetic recipient

Whichever approach we take, however, there is an all-important question upon the answer to which the course of aesthetics depends: the question of the recipient. Only beings of a certain kind have aesthetic interests and aesthetic experience, produce and appreciate art, employ such concepts as those of beauty, expression, and form. What is it that gives these beings access to this realm? The question is at least as old as [Plato](#) but received its most important modern exposition in the philosophy of Kant, who argued, first, that it is only rational beings who can exercise judgment—the faculty of aesthetic interest—and, second, that until exercised in [aesthetic judgment](#) rationality is incomplete. It is worth pausing to examine these two claims.

Rational beings are those, like us, whose [thought](#) and conduct are guided by reason; who deliberate about what to believe and what to do; and who affect each other's beliefs and actions through argument and persuasion. Kant argued that reason has both a theoretical and a practical employment, and that a rational being finds both his conduct and his thought inspired and limited by reason. The guiding law of rational conduct is that of morality, enshrined in the [categorical imperative](#), which enjoins us to act only on that maxim which we can at the same time will as a universal law.

By virtue of practical reason, the rational being sees himself and others of his kind as subject to an order that is not that of nature: he lives responsive to the law of reason and sees himself as a potential member of a "kingdom of ends" wherein the demands of reason are satisfied. Moreover, he looks on every rational being—himself included—as made sacrosanct by reason and by the morality that stems from it. The rational being, he recognizes, must be treated always as an end in himself, as something of intrinsic value, and never as a mere object to be disposed of according to purposes that are not its own.

The capacity to see things as intrinsically valuable, irreplaceable, or ends in themselves is one of the important gifts of reason. But it is not exercised only practically or only in our dealings with other reasoning beings. It may also be exercised [contemplatively](#) toward nature as a whole. In this case, practical considerations are held in abeyance, and we stand back from nature and look on it with a disinterested concern. Such an attitude is not only peculiar to rational beings but also necessary to them. Without it, they have only an impoverished grasp of their own significance and of their relation to the world in which they are situated through their thoughts and actions. This disinterested contemplation and the experiences that arise from it acquaint us, according to Kant, with the ultimate harmony that exists between the world and our faculties. They therefore provide the guarantee, both of practical reasoning and of the understanding, by intimating to us directly that the world answers to our purposes and corresponds to our beliefs.

Disinterested contemplation forms, for Kant, the core of aesthetic experience and the ground of the judgment of beauty. He thus concludes (1) that only rational beings have aesthetic experience; (2) that every rational being needs aesthetic experience and is significantly incomplete without it; and (3) that aesthetic experience stands in fundamental proximity to moral judgment and is integral to our nature as moral beings.

Modern philosophers have sometimes followed Kant, sometimes ignored him. Rarely, however, have they set out to show that aesthetic experience is more widely distributed than the human race. For what could it mean to say of a cow, for example, that in staring at a landscape it is moved by the sentiment of beauty? What in a cow's behaviour or mental [composition](#) could manifest such a feeling? While a cow may be uninterested, it cannot surely be disinterested, in the manner of a rational being for whom disinterest is the most passionate form of interest. It is in pondering such considerations that one comes to realize just how deeply embedded in human nature is the aesthetic impulse, and how impossible it is to separate this impulse from the complex mental life that distinguishes human beings from beasts. This condition must be borne in mind by any philosopher seeking to confront the all-important question of the relation between the aesthetic and the moral.

## The [aesthetic experience](#)

Such considerations point toward the aforementioned approach that begins with the aesthetic experience as the most likely to capture the full range of aesthetic phenomena without begging the important philosophical questions about their nature. Can we then single out a faculty, an attitude, a [mode](#) of judgment, or a form of experience that is distinctively aesthetic? And if so, can we [attribute](#) to it the significance that would make this philosophical enterprise both important in itself and relevant to the many questions posed by beauty, criticism, and art?

Taking their cue from Kant, many philosophers have defended the idea of an aesthetic attitude as one divorced from practical concerns, a kind of “distancing,” or standing back, as it were, from ordinary involvement. The classic statement of this position is Edward Bullough's “Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle,” an essay

published in the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1912. While there is certainly something of interest to be said along those lines, it cannot be the whole story. Just what kind of distance is envisaged? Is the lover distanced from his beloved? If not, by what right does he call her beautiful? Does distance imply a lack of practical involvement? If such is the case, how can we ever take up an aesthetic attitude to those things that have a purpose for us—things such as a dress, building, or decoration? But if these are not aesthetic, have we not paid a rather high price for our definition of this word—the price of detaching it from the phenomena that it was designed to identify?

Kant's own formulation was more satisfactory. He described the recipient of aesthetic experience not as distanced but as disinterested, meaning that the recipient does not treat the object of enjoyment either as a vehicle for curiosity or as a means to an end. He contemplates the object as it is in itself and "apart from all interest." In a similar spirit, [Arthur Schopenhauer](#) argued that a person could regard anything aesthetically so long as he regarded it in independence of his will—that is, irrespective of any use to which he might put it. Regarding it thus, a person could come to see the Idea that the object expressed, and in this knowledge consists aesthetic appreciation (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* [1819; *The World as Will and Idea*]).

Of a piece with such a view is the popular theory of art as a kind of "play" activity, in which creation and appreciation are divorced from the normal urgencies of existence and surrendered to leisure. "With the agreeable, the good, the perfect," wrote [Friedrich Schiller](#), "man is merely in earnest, but with beauty he plays" (*Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* [1794–95; *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*]).

Such thoughts have already been encountered. The problem is to give them philosophical precision. They have recurred in modern philosophy in a variety of forms—for example, in the theory that the aesthetic object is always considered for its own sake, or as a unique individual rather than a member of a class. Those particular formulations have caused some philosophers to treat aesthetic objects as though they were endowed with a peculiar metaphysical status. Alternatively, it is sometimes argued that the aesthetic experience has an intuitive character, as opposed to the conceptual character of scientific thought or the instrumental character of practical understanding.

The simplest way of summarizing this approach to aesthetics is in terms of two fundamental propositions:

1. The aesthetic object is an object of [sensory](#) experience and enjoyed as such: it is heard, seen, or (in the limiting case) imagined in sensory form.
2. The aesthetic object is at the same time [contemplated](#): its [appearance](#) is a [matter](#) of intrinsic interest and studied not merely as an object of sensory [pleasure](#) but also as the repository of significance and value.

The first of these propositions explains the word aesthetic, which was initially used in this connection by the Leibnizian philosopher [Alexander Baumgarten](#) in *Meditationes*



*Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus* (1735; *Reflections on Poetry*).

Baumgarten borrowed the Greek term for sensory perception (*aisthēsis*) in order to denote a realm of [concrete](#) knowledge (the realm, as he saw it, of poetry), in which a content is communicated in sensory form. The second proposition is, in essence, the foundation of taste. It describes the motive of our attempt to discriminate rationally between those objects that are worthy of contemplative attention and those that are not.

Almost all of the aesthetic theories of post-Kantian [Idealism](#) depend upon those two propositions and try to explain the peculiarities of aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment in terms of the [synthesis](#) of the sensory and the intellectual that they imply—the synthesis summarized in Hegel’s theory of art as “the sensuous embodiment of the Idea.” Neither proposition is particularly clear. Throughout the discussions of Kant and his immediate following, the “sensory” is assimilated to the “concrete,” the “individual,” the “particular,” and the “determinate,” while the “intellectual” is assimilated to the “abstract,” the “universal,” the “general,” and the “indeterminate”—assimilations that would nowadays be regarded with extreme suspicion. Nevertheless, subsequent theories have repeatedly returned to the idea that aesthetic experience involves a special synthesis of intellectual and sensory components, and that both its peculiarities and its value are to be derived from such a synthesis.

The idea at once gives rise to paradoxes. The most important was noticed by Kant, who called it the [antinomy](#) of taste. As an exercise of [reason](#), he argued, aesthetic experience must inevitably tend toward a reasoned [choice](#) and therefore must formulate itself as a judgment. Aesthetic judgment, however, seems to be in conflict with itself. It cannot be at the same time aesthetic (an expression of sensory enjoyment) and also a judgment (claiming universal assent). Yet all rational beings, by virtue of their rationality, seem disposed to make these judgments. On the one hand, they feel pleasure in some object, and this pleasure is immediate, not based, according to Kant, in any conceptualization or in any inquiry into cause, purpose, or constitution. On the other hand, they express their pleasure in the form of a judgment, speaking “as if beauty were a [quality](#) of the object,” and so representing their pleasure as objectively valid. But how can this be so? The pleasure is immediate, based in no reasoning or analysis. So what permits this demand for universal agreement?

However we approach the idea of beauty, we find this paradox emerging. Our ideas, feelings, and judgments are called aesthetic precisely because of their direct relation to sensory enjoyment. Hence, no one can judge the beauty of an object that he has never encountered. Scientific judgments, like practical principles, can be received “second hand.” I can, for example, take you as my authority for the truths of physics or for the utility of railways. But I cannot take you as my authority for the merits of Leonardo or Mozart if I have not seen or heard works by either [artist](#). It would seem to follow from this that there can be no rules or principles of aesthetic judgment, since I must feel the pleasure immediately in the perception of the object and cannot be talked into it by any grounds of proof. It is always experience, and never conceptual thought, that gives the right to aesthetic judgment, so that anything that alters the experience of an object alters its aesthetic

significance as well. As Kant put it, aesthetic judgment is “free from concepts,” and beauty itself is not a concept.

Such a conclusion, however, seems to be inconsistent with the fact that aesthetic judgment is a form of judgment. When I describe something as beautiful, I do not mean merely that it pleases me: I am speaking about it, not about myself, and, if challenged, I try to find reasons for my view. I do not explain my feeling but give grounds for it by pointing to features of its object. Any search for reasons has the “universalizing” character of rationality: I am in effect saying that others, insofar as they are rational, ought to feel exactly the same delight as I feel. [Being](#) disinterested, I have put aside my interests, and with them everything that makes my judgment relative to me. But, if that is so, then “the judgment of taste is based on concepts, for otherwise there could be no room even for contention in the matter, or for the claim to the necessary agreement of others.”

In short, the expression aesthetic judgment seems to be a contradiction in terms, denying in the first term precisely that reference to rational considerations that it affirms in the second. This paradox, which we have expressed in Kant’s language, is not peculiar to the philosophy of Kant. On the contrary, it is encountered in one form or another by every philosopher or critic who takes aesthetic experience seriously, and who therefore recognizes the tension between the sensory and the intellectual constraints upon it. On the one hand, aesthetic experience is rooted in the immediate sensory enjoyment of its object through an act of perception. On the other, it seems to reach beyond enjoyment toward a meaning that is addressed to our reasoning powers and that seeks judgment from them. Thus criticism, the reasoned justification of aesthetic judgment, is an inevitable upshot of aesthetic experience. Yet, critical reasons can never be merely intellectual; they always contain a reference to the way in which an object is perceived.

## Relationship between form and content

Two related paradoxes also emerge from the same basic conception of the aesthetic experience. The first was given extended consideration by [Hegel](#), who argued, in his [\*Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik\*](#) (1832; “Lectures on Aesthetics”; Eng. trans., *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*), roughly as follows: Our sensuous appreciation of art concentrates upon the given “appearance”—the “[form](#).” It is this that holds our attention and that gives to the work of art its peculiar individuality. Because it addresses itself to our sensory appreciation, the work of art is essentially concrete, to be understood by an act of perception rather than by a process of discursive thought. At the same time, our understanding of the work of art is in part intellectual; we seek in it a conceptual [content](#), which it presents to us in the form of an idea. One purpose of critical interpretation is to expound this idea in discursive form—to give the equivalent of the content of the work of art in another, nonsensuous idiom. But criticism can never succeed in this task, for, by separating the content from the particular form, it abolishes its individuality. The content presented then ceases to be the exact content of that work of art. In losing its individuality, the content

loses its aesthetic reality; it thus ceases to be a reason for attending to the particular work of art that first attracted our critical attention. It cannot be this that we saw in the original work and that explained its power over us. For this content, displayed in the discursive idiom of the critical intellect, is no more than a husk, a discarded relic of a meaning that eluded us in the act of seizing it. If the content is to be the true object of aesthetic interest, it must remain wedded to its individuality: it cannot be detached from its “sensuous embodiment” without being detached from itself. Content is, therefore, inseparable from form and form in turn inseparable from content. (It is the form that it is only by virtue of the content that it embodies.)

Hegel’s argument is the archetype of many, all aimed at showing that it is both necessary to distinguish form from content and also impossible to do so. This paradox may be resolved by rejecting either of its premises, but, as with Kant’s antinomy, neither premise seems dispensable. To suppose that content and form are inseparable is, in effect, to dismiss both ideas as illusory, since no two works of art can then share either a content or a form—the form being definitive of each work’s individuality. In this case, no one could ever justify his interest in a work of art by reference to its meaning. The intensity of aesthetic interest becomes a puzzling, and ultimately inexplicable, feature of our mental life. If, on the other hand, we insist that content and form are separable, we shall never be able to find, through a study of content, the reason for attending to the particular work of art that intrigues us. Every work of art stands proxy for its paraphrase. An impassable gap then opens between aesthetic experience and its ground, and the claim that aesthetic experience is intrinsically valuable is thrown in doubt.

A related paradox is sometimes referred to as the “heresy of paraphrase,” the words being those of the U.S. [literary critic Cleanth Brooks](#) (*The Well Wrought Urn*, 1949). The heresy is that of assuming that the meaning of a work of art (particularly of [poetry](#)) can be paraphrased. According to Brooks, who here followed an argument of [Benedetto Croce](#), the meaning of a poem consists precisely in what is not translatable. Poetic meaning is bound up with the particular disposition of the words—their sound, [rhythm](#), and arrangement—in short, with the “sensory embodiment” provided by the poem itself. To alter that embodiment is to produce either another poem (and therefore another meaning) or something that is not a work of art at all, and which therefore lacks completely the kind of meaning for which works of art are valued. Hence no poetry is translatable, and no critic can do better than to point to the objective features of the poem that most seem to him to be worthy of attention. Yet, that result too is paradoxical. For what does the critic see in those objective features and how is his recommendation to be supported? Why should we attend to poetry at all if nothing can be said about its virtues save only “look!”? Why look at a poem rather than an advertisement, a mirror, or a blade of grass? Everything becomes equally worthy of attention, since nothing can be said that will justify attention to anything.

## The role of imagination

Such paradoxes suggest the need for a more extensive theory of the mind than has been so far assumed. We have referred somewhat loosely to the sensory and intellectual components of human experience but have said little about the possible relations and dependencies that exist between them. Perhaps, therefore, the paradoxes result only from our impoverished description of the human mind and are not intrinsic to the subject matter of aesthetic interest.

Many modern philosophers have at this point felt the need to invoke imagination, either as a distinct mental “faculty” (Kant) or as a distinctive mental operation by virtue of which thought and experience may be united. For Empiricist philosophers (such as [David Hume](#), Joseph Addison, Archibald Alison, and Lord Kames), imagination involves a kind of “associative” process, whereby experiences evoke ideas, and so become united with them. For Kant and Hegel, imagination is not associative but constitutive—part of the nature of the experience that expresses it.

Once again it is useful to begin from Kant, who distinguished two uses of the imagination: the first in ordinary thought and perception, the second in aesthetic experience. When I look before me and see a book, my experience, according to Kant, embodies a “synthesis.” It contains two elements: the “intuition” presented to the [senses](#) and the “concept” (“book”), contributed by the understanding. The two elements are synthesized by an act of the imagination that constitutes them as a single experience—the experience of seeing a book. Here imagination remains bound by the concepts of the understanding, which is to say that how I see the world depends upon my disposition to form determinate beliefs about it—in this case, the belief that there is a book before me. In aesthetic experience, however, imagination is free from concepts and engages in a kind of free play. This free play of the imagination enables me to bring concepts to bear on an experience that is, in itself, free from concepts. Thus there are two separate ways in which the content of experience is provided: one in ordinary perception, the other in aesthetic experience. In both cases the operative factor, in holding thought and sensation together, is the imagination.

Whether such theories can cast light on the mysterious [unity](#) between the intellectual and the sensory that we observe in aesthetic experience remains doubtful. The argument for saying that there is a single process of imagination involved in all perception, [imagery](#), and remembering seems to consist only in the premise (undoubtedly true) that in these mental processes thought and experience are often inseparable. But to suppose therefore that there is some one “faculty” involved in forging the connection between them is to fail to take seriously the fact that they are inseparable.

Nevertheless, even if we find this general invocation of imagination, as the “synthesizing force” within perception, vacuous or unilluminating, we may yet feel that the imagination has some special role to play in aesthetic experience and that the reference to imagination has some special value in explaining the precise way in which a content and an experience become “fused” (to use George Santayana’s term). Whether or not Kant was right to refer to

a free play of imagination in aesthetic experience, there certainly seems to be a peculiarly creative imagination that human beings may exercise and upon which aesthetic experience calls. It is an exercise of creative imagination to see a face in a picture, since that involves seeing in defiance of judgment—seeing what one knows not to be there. It is not in the same sense an imaginative act to see a face in something that one also judges to *be* a face. This creative capacity is what [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) is referring to in *L'Imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l'ima-gination* (1940; “The Imaginary: The Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination”; Eng. trans., *The Psychology of Imagination*) when he describes imagining as “the positing of an object as a nothingness”—as not being. In memory and perception we take our experience “for real.” In imagination we contribute a content that has no [reality](#) beyond our disposition to “see” it, and it is clear that this added content is frequently summoned by art when, for example, we see the face in a picture or hear the emotion in a piece of music.

Recent work in aesthetics, to some extent inspired by the seminal writings of Sartre and Wittgenstein, has devoted considerable attention to the study of creative imagination. The hope has been to provide the extra ingredient in aesthetic experience that bridges the gap between the sensory and the intellectual and at the same time shows the relation between aesthetic experience and the experience of everyday life—an enterprise that is in turn of the first importance for any study that seeks to describe the moral significance of beauty.

Consider, for example, the spectator at Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. He sees before him an actor who, by speaking certain lines and making certain gestures, earns his bread. But that is not all that he sees. He also sees a hoary king, cast down by age, pride, and weakness, who rages against the depravity of humankind. Yet the spectator knows that, in a crucial sense, there is no such king before him. It is intellectual understanding, not psychical distance, that prevents him from stepping onto the stage to offer his assistance. He knows that the scene he enjoys is one that he invents, albeit under the overwhelming compulsion induced by the actor and his lines. The spectator is being shown something that is outside the normal commerce of theoretical and practical understanding, and he is responding to a scene that bears no spatial, temporal, or causal relation to his own experience. His response is quintessentially aesthetic. For what interest could he have in this scene other than an interest in it for its own sake, for what it is in itself? At the same time, what it is in itself involves what it shows in general. In imaginatively conjuring this scene the spectator draws upon a wealth of experience, which is brought to mind and, as it were, condensed for him into the imaginative perception of the play. (Hence, [Aristotle](#) believed poetry is more general than history, since its concreteness is not that of real events, but rather of imaginary episodes constructed so as to typify human destiny in exemplary form.)

Such an exercise of the imagination clearly has much to tell us about the nature of aesthetic experience. Whether or not it could found a theory of the “missing link” between sensory enjoyment and intellectual understanding, it at least provides a paradigm of the relation between aesthetic experience and the experience of everyday life. The former is an imaginative reconstruction of the latter, which becomes interesting for its own sake precisely because—however realistic—it is not real.

## Emotion, response, and enjoyment

It is natural to suppose that a spectator's response to *King Lear* is at least in part emotional, and that emotion plays a crucial role both in the enjoyment of art and in establishing the value of art. Moreover, it is not only art that stirs our emotions in the act of aesthetic attention: the same is or may be true of natural beauty, whether that of a face or of a landscape. These things hold our attention partly because they address themselves to our feelings and call forth a response which we value both for itself and for the consolation that we may attain through it. Thus we find an important philosophical tradition according to which the distinctive character of aesthetic experience is to be found in distinctively "aesthetic" emotions.

This tradition has ancient origins. Plato banished the [poets](#) from his ideal republic partly because of their capacity to arouse futile and destructive emotions, and in his answer to Plato, Aristotle argued that poetry, in particular tragic poetry, was valuable precisely because of its emotional effect. This idea enabled Aristotle to pose one of the most puzzling problems in aesthetics—the problem of [tragedy](#)—and to offer a solution. How can I willingly offer myself to witness scenes of terror and destruction? And how can I be said to enjoy the result, set store by it, or accord to it a positive value? Aristotle's answer is brief. He explains that by evoking pity and fear a [tragedy](#) also "purges" those emotions, and that is what we enjoy and value:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

Aristotle implies that this purgation (*katharsis*) is not unpleasant to us precisely because the fictional and formalized nature of the action sets it at a distance from us. We can allow ourselves to feel what we normally shun to feel precisely because no one is really threatened (or at least no one real is threatened).

Attractive though that [explanation](#) may seem, it immediately encounters a serious philosophical problem. It is a plausible tenet of philosophical psychology that emotions are founded on beliefs: fear on the belief that one is threatened, pity on the belief that someone is miserable, jealousy on the belief that one has a rival, and so forth. In the nature of things, however, these beliefs do not exist in the [theatre](#). Confronted by fiction, I am relieved precisely of the pressure of belief, and it is this condition that permits the Aristotelian *katharsis*. How, then, can I be said to experience pity and fear when the beliefs requisite to those very emotions are not present? More generally, how can my responses to the fictions presented by works of art share the [structure](#) of my everyday emotions, and how can they impart to those emotions a new meaning, force, or resolution?

Various answers have been proposed to that question. [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#), for example, argued that our response to drama is characterized by a "willing suspension of

disbelief,” and thus involves the very same ingredient of belief that is essential to everyday emotion (*Biographia Literaria*, 1817). Coleridge’s phrase, however, is consciously paradoxical. Belief is characterized precisely by the fact that it lies outside the will: I can command you to imagine something but not to believe it. For this reason, a [suspension of disbelief](#) that is achieved “willingly” is at best a highly dubious example of belief. In fact, the description seems to imply, not belief, but rather imagination, thus returning us to our problem of the relation between emotions directed to reality and those directed to merely imaginary scenes.

This is part of a much larger problem—namely, that of the relation between aesthetic and everyday experience. Two extreme positions serve to illustrate this problem. According to one, art and nature appeal primarily to our emotions: they awaken within us feelings of sympathy, or emotional associations, which are both pleasant in themselves and also instructive. We are made familiar with emotional possibilities, and, through this imaginative exercise, our responses to the world become illuminated and refined. This view, which provides an immediate and satisfying theory of the value of aesthetic experience, has been espoused in some form or other by many of the classical British Empiricists (Shaftesbury, Hume, Addison, Lord Kames, Alison, and Burke, to cite only a few). It is also related to the critical theories of writers such as Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, and F.R. Leavis, whose criticism would make little or no sense without the supposition that works of art have the power to correct and corrupt our emotions.

According to the opposite view, aesthetic interest, because it focusses on an object for its own sake, can involve no interest in “affect.” To be interested in a work of art for the sake of emotion is to be interested in it as a means and, therefore, not aesthetically. In other words, true aesthetic interest is autonomous, standing outside the current of ordinary human feeling—an attitude of pure contemplation or pure “intuition” that isolates its object from the stream of common events and perceives it in its uniqueness, detached, unexplained, and inexplicable. This position has been taken in modern times by [Benedetto Croce](#) and, following him, by [R.G. Collingwood](#), whose resolute defense of the autonomy of aesthetic experience was also associated with a theory of the autonomy of art. Art is not only seen as an end in itself but it is an end in itself, in a profound and significant sense that distinguishes art from all its false substitutes (and, in particular, from craft, which for Collingwood is not an end but merely a means).

Between those two poles, a variety of intermediate positions might be adopted. It is clear, in any case, that many questions have been begged by both sides. The aesthetic of sympathy, as Croce called it, has enormous difficulties in describing the emotions that are awakened in aesthetic experience, particularly the emotions that we are supposed to feel in response to such [abstract](#) arts as music. With what am I sympathizing when I listen to a string quartet or a symphony? What emotion do I feel? Moreover, the position encounters all the difficulties already noted in forging a link between the imaginary and the real.

The aesthetic of autonomy, as we may call it, encounters complementary difficulties and, in particular, the difficulty of showing why we should value either aesthetic experience itself or the art that is its characteristic object. Moreover, it assumes that whenever I take an

emotional interest in something, I am interested in it for the sake of emotion, a false inference that would imply equally that the lover is interested only in his love or the angry person only in his anger. Collingwood thus dismisses “amusement art,” on the spurious ground that to be interested in a work of art for the sake of amusement is to be interested not in the work but only in the amusement that it inspires. That is to say, it is to treat the work as a means to feeling rather than as an end in itself. Such a conclusion is entirely unwarranted. Amusement is, in fact, a [species](#) of interest in something for its own sake: I laugh not for the sake of laughter, but for the sake of the joke. While I may be interested in an object for the sake of the emotion that it arouses, the case is peculiar—the case, in fact, of sentimentality, often dismissed by moralists as a spiritual corruption and equally by critics as a corruption of the aims of art.

The difficulties for both views are brought out by a fundamental aesthetic category: that of enjoyment. Whatever the ultimate value of aesthetic experience, we pursue it in the first instance for enjoyment’s sake. Aesthetic experience includes, as its central instance, a certain kind of [pleasure](#). But what kind of pleasure? While our emotions and sympathies are sometimes pleasurable, this is by no means their essential feature; they may equally be painful or neutral. How then does the aesthetic of sympathy explain the pleasure that we take, and must take, in the object of aesthetic experience? And how does the aesthetic of autonomy avoid the conclusion that all such pleasure is a violation of its strict requirement that we should be interested in the aesthetic object for its own sake alone? Neither theory seems to be equipped, as it stands, either to describe this pleasure or to show its place in the appreciation of art.

## **The work of art**

As the above discussion illustrates, it is impossible to advance far into the theory of aesthetic experience without encountering the specific problems posed by the experience of art. Whether or not we think of art as the central or defining example of the aesthetic object, there is no doubt that it provides the most distinctive illustration both of the elusive nature and the importance of aesthetic interest. With the increasing attention paid to art in a corrupted world where little else is commonly held to be spiritually significant, it is not surprising that the philosophy of art has increasingly begun to displace the philosophy of natural beauty from the central position accorded to the latter by the philosophers and critics of the 18th century. Nor is this shift in emphasis to be regretted; for the existence of art as a major human institution reminds us of the need for a theory that will attribute more to aesthetic experience than enjoyment and that will explain the profundity of the impressions that we receive from beauty—impressions that may provide both meaning and solace to those who experience them. It is thus worth reviewing some of the special problems in the philosophy of art that have most influenced contemporary aesthetics.



## Understanding art

The use of the concept of understanding in describing the appreciation of art marks out an interesting distinction between art and natural beauty. A person may understand or fail to understand T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Michelangelo's "David," or Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, but he cannot understand or fail to understand the Highlands of Scotland, even when he finds them beautiful or ugly. Understanding seems to be a prerequisite to the full experience of art, and this has suggested to many critics and philosophers that art is not so much an object of sensory experience as an instrument of knowledge. In particular, art seems to have the power both to represent reality and to express emotion, and some argue that it is through appreciating the properties of representation and expression that we recognize the meaning of art. At least, it might be supposed that, if we speak of understanding art, it is because we think of art as having content, something that must be understood by the appropriate audience.

The most popular approach to this concept of understanding is through a theory of art as a form of [symbolism](#). But what is meant by this? Is such symbolism one thing or many? Is it a matter of evocation or convention, of personal response or linguistic rule? And what does art symbolize—ideas, feelings, objects, or states of affairs?

## Representation and expression in art

Various theories have been proposed in answer to these questions, the most popular being that the forms of art are similar to language and are to be understood as language is understood, in terms of conventions and semantic rules. A few examples of contemporary theories that have described art in this way include Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms; Susanne K. Langer's theory of presentational symbols; the works on semiology and semiotics, largely inspired by the writings of Roland Barthes, that were fashionable in continental Europe; and the semantic theory of art developed by Nelson Goodman. It seems important to review some of the arguments that have been employed both for and against the overall conception of art that such theories share.

In favour of the view, it is undeniable that many works of art are about the world in somewhat the way that language may be about the world. This is evident in the case of [literature](#) (which is itself an instance of natural language). It is no less evident in the case of painting. A portrait stands to its sitter in a relation that is not unlike that which obtains between a description and the thing described. Even if the majority of pictures are of, or about, entirely imaginary people, scenes, and episodes, this is no different from the case of literature, in which language is used to describe purely imaginary subjects. This relation between a work of art and its subject, captured in the word "about," is sometimes called [representation](#)—a term that owes its currency in aesthetics to Croce and Collingwood, who used it to draw the familiar [contrast](#) between representation and [expression](#).

The concept of expression is variously analyzed. Its principal function in modern aesthetics, however, is to describe those aspects and dimensions of artistic meaning that seem not to fall within the bounds of representation, either because they involve no clear reference to an independent subject matter or because the connection between the subject and the artistic form is too close and inextricable to admit description in the terms appropriate to representation. Therefore, it is widely recognized that abstract (*i.e.*, nonrepresentational) art forms—music, abstract painting, architecture—may yet contain meaningful utterances, and most frequently philosophers and critics use terms such as expression in order to describe these elusive meanings. Music, in particular, is often said to be an expression of emotion and to gain much of its significance from that. Expression in such a case is unlike representation, according to many philosophers, in that it involves no descriptive component. An expression of grief does not describe grief but rather presents it, as it might be presented by a face or a gesture.

Expression must be distinguished from evocation. To say that a piece of music expresses melancholy is not to say that it evokes (arouses) melancholy. To describe a piece of music as expressive of melancholy is to give a reason for listening to it; to describe it as arousing melancholy is to give a reason for avoiding it. (Music that is utterly blank expresses nothing, but it may arouse melancholy.) Expression, where it exists, is integral to the aesthetic character and merit of whatever possesses it. For similar reasons, expression must not be confused with association, in spite of the reliance on the confusion by many 18th-century Empiricists.

The distinction between representation and expression is one of the most important conceptual devices in contemporary philosophy of art. Croce, who introduced it, sought to dismiss representation as aesthetically irrelevant and to elevate expression into the single, true aesthetic function. The first, he argued, is descriptive, or conceptual, concerned with classifying objects according to their common properties, and so done to satisfy our curiosity. The second, by contrast, is intuitive, concerned with presenting its subject matter (an “intuition”) in its immediate concrete reality, so that we see it as it is in itself. In understanding expression, our attitude passes from mere curiosity to that immediate awareness of the concrete particular that is the core of aesthetic experience.

## **Symbolism in art**

Later philosophers have been content merely to distinguish representation and expression as different modes of artistic meaning, characterized perhaps by different formal or semantic properties. [Nelson Goodman](#) of the United States is one such philosopher. His *Languages of Art* (1968) was the first work of analytical philosophy to produce a distinct and systematic theory of art. Goodman’s theory has attracted considerable attention, the more so in that it is an extension of a general philosophical perspective, expounded in works of great rigour and finesse, that embraces the entire realm of logic, metaphysics, and the philosophy of science.

Goodman, like many others, seeks the nature of art in symbolism and the nature of symbolism in a general theory of [signs](#). (This second part of Goodman's aim is what Ferdinand de Saussure called [semiology](#), the general science of signs [*Cours de linguistique générale*, 1916; *Course of General Linguistics*]). The theory derives from the uncompromising [Nominalism](#) expounded in Goodman's earlier works, a Nominalism developed under the influence of two other U.S. philosophers, Rudolf Carnap and W.V. Quine, but also showing certain affinities with the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. According to Goodman's general theory of signs, the relation between signs and the world can be described, like any relation, in terms of its formal structure, the objects related, and its genealogy. But, apart from that formal and factual analysis, there is nothing to be said. Words are labels that we attach to things, but the attempt to justify that practice merely repeats it: in using words, it presupposes precisely the justification that it aims to provide.

A corollary of this view is that relations of identical logical structure and identical genealogy between relevantly similar terms are really one and the same relation. Thus, if we assume that paintings, like words, are signs, then portraits stand to their subjects in the same relation as proper names to the objects denoted by them. (This is the [substance](#) of Goodman's proof that representation is a species of denotation.) We should not worry if that leads us to no new understanding of the relation (*e.g.*, if it leads to no procedure for decoding the painted sign), for Goodman believes the search for such a procedure is incoherent. The meaning of a sign is simply given, along with the artistic practice that creates it.

Goodman proceeds to generalize his theory of symbolism, using the word reference to express the relation between word and thing. (We might well characterize this relation as labelling.) Denotation is the special case of reference exemplified by proper names and portraits—a case in which a symbol labels one individual. When a single label picks out many things, then we have not a name but a predicate.

Sometimes the process of labelling goes both ways. A colour sample is a sign for the colour it possesses—say, the colour red. It therefore refers to the label red, which in turn refers back to the sample. In this case, the predicate red and the sample mutually label each other. Goodman calls this relation exemplification, and analyzes expression as a special case of it—namely, the case where the exemplification of a predicate proceeds by metaphor. For example, a piece of music may refer to sadness; it may also be metaphorically sad. In this case, Goodman argues, we may speak of the music as expressing sadness.

The economy and elegance of Goodman's theory are matched by its extreme inscrutability. On the surface it seems to provide direct and intelligible answers to all the major problems of art. What is art? A system of symbols. What is representation? Denotation. What is expression? A kind of reference. What is the value of art? It symbolizes (displays) reality. What is the distinction between art and science? A distinction between symbol systems but not between the matters they display. Yet, at each point we feel at a loss to know what we are learning about art in being told that it is essentially symbolic.

In this respect, Goodman's theory is similar to many semantic theories of art: it proves that expression, for example, describes a symbolic relation only by giving a theory of symbolism that is so general as to include almost every human artifact. It becomes impossible to extract from the result a procedure of interpretation—a way of understanding a work of art in terms of its alleged symbolic function. In particular, we cannot extend to the discussion of art those theories that show how we understand language in terms of its peculiar syntactic and semantic structure, for such theories always seem to rely precisely on what is peculiar to language and what distinguishes language from, say, music, painting, and architecture.

A similar result can be found in an earlier theory upon which Goodman's is to some extent modelled—the one proposed by [Langer](#) in her *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) and *Feeling and Form* (1953). She argues that works of art symbolize states of mind (“feelings”), but that the relation is not to be explained in terms of any rule of reference such as operates in language. Works of art are, Langer says, “presentational symbols” whose relation to their objects is purely morphological. The symbol and its object are related by virtue of the fact that they possess the same “[logical form](#).” It follows that what the symbol expresses cannot be restated in words; words do not present the “logical form” of individuals but rather that of the properties and relations that characterize them. (Here again is the familiar view that art presents the individuality of its subject matter and is therefore not conceptual or descriptive.) With such a view we can no longer explain why we say that a work of art expresses a feeling and not that the feeling expresses the work; for the relation of expression, explained in these morphological terms, is clearly symmetrical. Moreover, like other semantic theories, Langer's analysis provides no procedure for interpretation, nothing that would give application to the claim that in understanding a work of art we understand it as a symbol.

Notwithstanding these difficulties for [semantic](#) theories of art, most philosophers remain convinced that the three categories of representation, expression, and understanding are all-important in making sense of our experience of art. They have become increasingly persuaded, however, with Croce and Collingwood, that the differences between representation and expression are more important than the similarities. In particular, while representation may be secured by semantic rules (as in language itself), there cannot be rules for the production of artistic expression. To think otherwise is to imagine that the difference between a Mozart and a Salieri is merely a difference of skill. Expression occurs in art only where there is expressiveness, and expressiveness is a kind of success to be measured by the response of the audience rather than by the grammar of the work. This response crucially involves understanding, and no theory of expression that is not also a theory of how expression is understood can be persuasive.

## Form

Expression and representation form part of the content of a work of art. Nonetheless, it is not only content that is understood (or misunderstood) by the attentive recipient. There is also form, by which term we may denote all those features of a work of art that compose its unity and individuality as an object of sensory experience. Consider [music](#). In most cases when a listener complains that he does not understand a work of music, he means, not that he has failed to grasp its expressive content, but that the work has failed to cohere for him as a single and satisfying object of experience. He may put the point (somewhat misleadingly) by saying that he has failed to grasp the language or logic of the composition he hears. What matters, however, is that the appreciation of music (as of the other arts) depends upon the perception of certain “unities” and upon feeling the inherent order and reasonableness in a sequence (in this case, a sequence of tones). It is this perception of order that is fundamental to understanding art, whether abstract or representational, and that to many philosophers and critics has seemed more basic than the understanding of content. When [Clive Bell](#) wrote of art as “significant form,” he really meant to defend the view, first, that form is the essence of art and, second, that form must be understood and therefore understandable (*i.e.*, significant). Other philosophers have espoused one or another version of [formalism](#), according to which the distinguishing feature of art—the one that determines our interest in it—is form. Part answers part, and each feature aims to bear some cogent relation to the whole. It is such facts as these that compel our aesthetic attention.

The study of form must involve the study of our perception of form. A considerable amount of work on this subject has been inspired by the theories of the [Gestalt](#) psychologists [Max Wertheimer](#), [Wolfgang Köhler](#), and [Kurt Koffka](#), whose semiempirical, semiphilosophical researches into the perception of form and [pattern](#) seem to make direct contact with many of the more puzzling features of our experience of art. The influence of the Gestalt psychologists is also apparent in works of visual aesthetics; *e.g.*, [Rudolf Arnheim's](#) *Art and Visual Perception* (1954), which explores the significance for our understanding of pictures of such well-known Gestalt phenomena as the figure-ground relationship and the perception of completed wholes.

Fruitful though this emphasis on the “good Gestalt” has been, it cannot claim to have covered in its entirety the immensely complex subject of artistic form. For one thing, the theories and observations of the Gestalt psychologists, while evidently illuminating when applied to music and painting, can be applied to our experience of literature only artificially and inconclusively. Furthermore, it is impossible either to subsume all formal features of music and literature under the idea of a Gestalt or to demonstrate why, when so subsumed, the emotional effect and aesthetic value of form is made intelligible. Too much of aesthetic importance is left unconsidered by the study of the Gestalt, so that formalist critics and philosophers have begun to look elsewhere for an answer to the questions that concern them.

One recurring idea is that the operative feature determining our [perception](#) of form is “structure,” the underlying, concealed formula according to which a work of art is

constructed. This idea has had considerable influence in two areas, music theory and literary criticism, the former through the Austrian music theorist [Heinrich Schenker](#) and the latter through the Russian formalists and the structuralist linguists of Prague and Paris. Schenker tried to show, in *Der freie Satz* (1935; *Free Composition*), that musical form can be understood as generated out of musical cells, deep structures that are expanded in ways that create a web of significant relationships, including a background and a foreground of musical movement. Certain structuralist critics, notably Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes, have tried to perceive the unity of works of literature in terms of a similar development of literary units, often described tendentiously as “codes,” but perhaps better understood as [themes](#). These units are successively varied and transposed in ways that make the whole work into a logical derivation from its parts.

Against this approach it has been argued that in neither case does structural analysis succeed in making contact with the real source of artistic unity. This unity lies within the aesthetic experience itself and so cannot be understood as a structural feature of the work of art. Once again the temptation has been to enshrine in a body of rules what lies essentially beyond the reach of rules: a unity of experience that cannot be predicted but only achieved. Structuralist aesthetics has therefore come under increasing criticism, not only for its pedantry but also for its failure to make genuine contact with the works of art to which it is applied.

In general, the study of artistic form remains highly controversial and fraught with obstacles that have yet to be overcome. This area of the theory of art remains difficult and inaccessible equally to the critic and the philosopher, both of whom have therefore tended to turn their attention to less intractable problems.

## The [ontology](#) of art

One such problem is that of the ontological status of the work of art. Suppose that A has on the desk before him *David Copperfield*. Is *David Copperfield* therefore identical with this book that A can touch and see? Certainly not, for another copy lies on B’s desk, and a single work of art cannot be identical with two distinct physical things. The obvious conclusion is that *David Copperfield*, the novel, is identical with no physical thing. It is not a physical object, any more than is a piece of music, which is clearly distinct from all its performances. Perhaps the same is true of paintings. For could not paintings be, in principle at least, exactly reproduced? And does not that possibility show the painting to be distinct from any particular embodiment in this or that area of painted canvas? With a little stretching, the same thought experiment might be extended to architecture, though the conclusion inevitably becomes increasingly controversial.

The problem of the nature of the work of art is by no means new. Such an argument, however, gives it a pronounced contemporary flavour, so that both Phenomenologists and Analytical philosophers have been much exercised by it, often taking as their starting point the clearly untenable theory of Croce. According to Croce, the work of art does not consist

in a physical event or object but rather in a mental “[intuition](#),” which is grasped by the audience in the act of aesthetic understanding. The unsatisfactory nature of this theory, sometimes called the “ideal” theory of art, becomes apparent as soon as we ask how we would identify the intuition with which any given work of art is supposedly identical. Clearly, we can identify it only in and through a [performance](#), a book, a score, or a canvas. These objects give us the intuition that cannot exist independently of them. (Otherwise we should have to say that the world contains an uncountable number of great works of art whose only defect is that they have never been transcribed.)

Clearly then, the physical embodiment of the work—in sounds, language, scores, or other inscriptions—is more fundamentally a part of it (of its “essence”) than the ideal theory represents it to be. What then is the work of art, and what is its relation to the objects in which it is embodied? These questions have been discussed by Richard Wollheim in *Art and Its Objects* (1968), and again by Goodman in *Languages of Art* (see above). Wollheim argues that works of art are “[types](#)” and their embodiments “tokens.” The distinction here derives from the U.S. philosopher and logician [C.S. Peirce](#), who argued that the letter *a*, for example, is neither identical with any particular token of it (such as the one just written) nor distinct from the class of such tokens. Peirce therefore calls *a* a [type](#) (*i.e.*, a formula for producing tokens).

Wollheim’s theory is open to various objections. For example, works of [architecture](#) are not, as things stand, tokens of types but physical objects, and to make them into types by endlessly reproducing them would be to destroy their aesthetic character. To identify an object in terms of a process that destroys its character is not in any evident sense to identify it. The theory, moreover, seems to be unable to distinguish a musical performance containing a wrong note from a performance of a new work of music containing precisely that note as part of its type.

[Goodman](#)’s theory is more technical and displaces the question of the nature of art in favour of that of the nature of an inscription: Just what is it for a particular set of marks to identify a work of art? Other philosophers have concentrated on the question of identity: What makes this work of art the same as that one? Some argue, for example, that works of art have a distinct criterion of identity, one that reflects the peculiar nature and demands of aesthetic interest. Others dismiss the search for a criterion of identity as both aesthetically insignificant and illusory in itself. Still others, notably the Phenomenologist [Roman Ingarden](#), argue that the work of art exists on several levels, being identical not with physical appearance but with totality of interpretations that secure the various formal and semantic levels that are contained in it.

Questions that so obviously lend themselves to the procedures of modern philosophy have naturally commanded considerable attention. But whether they are aesthetically significant is disputed, and some philosophers go so far as to dismiss all questions of ontology and identity of art as peripheral to the subject matter of aesthetics. The same could not be said, however, of the question of the value of art, which, while less discussed, is evidently of the first importance.

## The value of art

Theories of the value of art are of two kinds, which we may call extrinsic and intrinsic. The first regards art and the appreciation of art as means to some recognized [moral](#) good, while the second regards them as valuable not instrumentally but as ends in themselves. It is characteristic of extrinsic theories to locate the value of art in its effects on the person who appreciates it. Art is held to be a form of [education](#), perhaps an education of the emotions. In this case, it becomes an open question whether there might not be some more effective means to the same result. Alternatively, one may attribute a negative value to art, as Plato did in his *Republic*, arguing that art has a corrupting or diseducative effect on those exposed to it.

The extrinsic approach, adopted in modern times by [Leo Tolstoy](#) in *Chto takoye iskusstvo?* (1896; *What Is Art?*), has seldom seemed wholly satisfactory. Philosophers have constantly sought for a value in aesthetic experience that is unique to it and which, therefore, could not be obtained from any other source. The extreme version of this intrinsic approach is that associated with Walter Pater, [Oscar Wilde](#), and the French Symbolists, and summarized in the slogan “art for art’s sake.” Such thinkers and writers believe that art is not only an end in itself but also a sufficient justification of itself. They also hold that in order to understand art as it should be understood, it is necessary to put aside all interests other than an interest in the work itself.

Between those two extreme views there lies, once again, a host of intermediate positions. We believe, for example, that works of art must be appreciated for their own sake, but that, in the act of appreciation, we gain from them something that is of independent value. Thus a [joke](#) is laughed at for its own sake, even though there is an independent value in laughter, which lightens our lives by taking us momentarily outside ourselves. Why should not something similar be said of works of art, many of which aspire to be amusing in just the way that good jokes are?

The analogy with [laughter](#)—which, in some views, is itself a species of aesthetic interest—introduces a concept without which there can be no serious discussion of the value of art: the concept of [taste](#). If I am amused it is for a reason, and this reason lies in the object of my amusement. We thus begin to think in terms of a distinction between good and bad reasons for laughter. Amusement at the wrong things may seem to us to show corruption of mind, cruelty, or bad taste; and when it does so, we speak of the object as not truly amusing, and feel that we have reason on our side.

Similarly, we regard some works of art as worthy of our attention and others as not. In articulating this judgment, we use all of the diverse and confusing vocabulary of moral appraisal; works of art, like people, are condemned for their sentimentality, coarseness, vulgarity, cruelty, or self-indulgence, and equally praised for their warmth, compassion, nobility, sensitivity, and truthfulness. (The same may apply to the object of natural beauty.) Clearly, if aesthetic interest has a positive value, it is only when motivated by good taste; it is only interest in appropriate objects that can be said to be good for us. All discussion of the



value of art tends, therefore, to turn from the outset in the direction of criticism: Can there be genuine critical evaluation of art, a genuine distinction between that which deserves our attention and that which does not? (And, once again, the question may be extended to objects of natural beauty.)

## Taste, criticism, and judgment

All aesthetic experience, whether of art or nature, seems to be informed by and dependent upon an exercise of taste. We choose the object of aesthetic experience, and often do so carefully and deliberately. Moreover, we are judged by our choices, not only of works of art but also of colour schemes, dresses, and garden ornaments, just as we are judged by our manners and our sense of humour. By his taste an individual betrays himself: not merely a small part of himself but the whole. Yet, the relation between taste and morality is by no means straightforward. There seems, in fact, to be a puzzling question as to the precise nature of the relation between aesthetic and moral values, and between the good taste that discerns the first and the good conduct that responds to the second. If there is no relation, the enormous amount of human energy that is invested in art and criticism may begin to seem rather pointless. If the relation is too close, however, the result is an intolerable moral elitism that makes refinement the sole standard of acceptable conduct, as for example, the elitism depicted by Villiers de L'Isle-Adam in *Axel*, by J.K. Huysmans in *À Rebours*, and by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The aesthete is one who puts aesthetic values above all others and who seeks for a morality that conforms to them. But like his opposite, the philistine, he fails to see that the relation between the aesthetic and the moral is not one of priority; each informs and is informed by the other, without taking precedence and without dictating the choice that belongs within the other's sphere.

Contemporary aesthetics has been less disposed to discuss the idea of taste than that of criticism. But clearly, the two ideas are so closely related that anything said about the one has a direct bearing on the other. In both cases, the approach has been the first of those outlined at the beginning of this article: the approach that starts with a study of the concepts and modes of argument employed in discussing beauty and tries to grasp the distinctive problems of aesthetics through a study of the logical and ideological puzzles to which these concepts and arguments give rise.

Philosophers often distinguish between two kinds of critical discussion—the interpretative and the evaluative—and two classes of concepts corresponding to them. In describing an object of natural beauty or a work of art, we may use a host of so-called aesthetic terms, terms that seem to have a particular role when used in this context and which articulate an aesthetic impression. Among such terms we may notice affective terms—moving, frightening, disturbing; terms denoting emotional qualities—sad, lively, mournful, wistful; and terms denoting the expressive or representational content of a work of art, its formal features, and its overall artistic genre—comic, tragic, ironic. Some of these terms can be applied meaningfully only to works of art; others may be applied to the whole of nature in

order to articulate an aesthetic experience. The examination of their logic has had an increasingly important role in analytical aesthetics. Frank N. Sibley, for example, has argued that such terms are used in aesthetic judgment in a peculiar way, without conditions (*i.e.*, without a reasoned basis), and in order to describe aesthetic properties that are discernible only by the exercise of taste. This sophisticated reminder of Kant's theory that aesthetic judgment is free from concepts has been criticized as creating too great a gap between the language of criticism and the language of everyday life. But it is of considerable interest in itself in attempting to revive a conception of taste that was highly influential in 18th-century aesthetics. As noted above, taste is, according to this conception, a faculty not of evaluation but of perception.

In aesthetics, however, evaluative judgments are inescapable. Theories avoiding the implication that taste is a form of discrimination, which naturally ranks its objects according to their merit, are peculiarly unsatisfying, not the least because they have so little bearing on the practice of criticism or the reasons that lead us to assign such overwhelming importance to art.

What then of the concepts employed in aesthetic evaluation? [Burke](#) introduced a famous distinction between two kinds of aesthetic judgment corresponding to two orders of aesthetic experience: the judgment of the beautiful and that of the [sublime](#). The judgment of [beauty](#) has its origin in our social feelings, particularly in our feelings toward the other sex, and in our hope for a consolation through love and desire. The judgment of the sublime has its origin in our feelings toward nature, and in our intimation of our ultimate solitude and fragility in a world that is not of our own devising and that remains resistant to our demands. In Burke's words,

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.

Burke's distinction emerges as part of a natural philosophy of beauty: an attempt to give the origins of our sentiments rather than to explain the logic of the judgments that convey them. In Kant, the distinction is recast as a distinction between two categories of aesthetic experience and two separate values that attach to it. Sometimes when we sense the harmony between nature and our faculties, we are impressed by the purposiveness and intelligibility of everything that surrounds us. This is the sentiment of beauty. At other times, overcome by the infinite greatness of the world, we renounce the attempt to understand and control it. This is the sentiment of the sublime. In confronting the sublime, the mind is "incited to abandon sensibility"—to reach over to that transcendental view of things that shows to us the [immanence](#) of a supersensible realm and our destiny as subjects of a divine order. Thus, from the presentiment of the sublime, Kant extracts the ultimate ground of his faith in a Supreme Being, and this is for him the most important value that aesthetic experience can convey.

The distinction between the sublime and the beautiful is now less frequently made than at the time of Burke and Kant. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that aesthetic judgment exists in many contrasting forms, of both praise and condemnation. A philosopher who sought to account for the idea of beauty without attending to those of the elegant, the refined, the great, the delicate, the intelligent, the profound, and the lovely would be unlikely to provide us with much understanding of the nature and function of criticism. There may be, however, something that these judgments have in common which might be used in order to cast light on all of them. Kant certainly would have thought so, since he argued that all such judgments share the distinctive features of taste revealed in his antinomy. In other words, they are all grounded in an immediate (“subjective”) experience, while at the same time being “universal”—*i.e.*, held forth as valid for all rational beings irrespective of their particular interests and desires. Thus, the critic tries to justify his aesthetic judgments, seeking reasons that will persuade others to see what he sees as elegant or beautiful in a similar light.

Could there be a genuine critical procedure devoted to that enterprise of providing objective grounds for subjective preferences? This question is integrally connected to another that we have already discussed: the question of the value of aesthetic experience. If aesthetic experience is valueless, or if it has no more value than attaches to idle enjoyment, then it becomes implausible to insist on the existence of objective evaluation.

Modern considerations of this exceedingly difficult question tend to concentrate on the criticism of art and on the role of the critic of art. What is a critic doing when he discusses a work of art, what does he look for, and with what purpose? It might be said that a critic should first of all study the artist’s intention, since this will show the real meaning of his work, the real content that he is trying to communicate. The U.S. critics [W.K. Wimsatt](#) and [Monroe C. Beardsley](#), however, argue that there is a fallacy (the so-called [intentional fallacy](#)) involved in this approach. What is to be interpreted is the work of art itself, not the intentions of the artist, which are hidden from us and no subject for our concern. If judgment is to be aesthetic, it must concern itself with the given object, and the meanings that we attribute to the object are those that we see in it, whatever the artist intended.

The existence of an intentional fallacy has been doubted. Some argue, for example, that Wimsatt and Beardsley make too sharp a distinction between an intention and the act that expresses it, assuming the intention to be a kind of private mental episode forever hidden from an observer rather than a revealed order in the work itself. But when a critic refers to the artistic intention, it is not clear whether he means anything more than the general purposiveness of the work of art, which can be interpreted by a critic without supposing there to be some intention beyond that of producing the precise work before him. (Indeed, in Kant’s view, there can be purposiveness without purpose, and this phenomenon provides the central object of aesthetic interest, whether in art or in nature.) The dispute here is tortuous and obscure. Nevertheless, the move away from intentionalism, as it is called, has been regarded as imperative by most modern critics, who tend to see the role of criticism in either one of two ways: (1) criticism is devoted to the study and interpretation of the aesthetic object rather than of the artist or the recipient; and (2) criticism is devoted to the

articulation of a response to the work of art and to the justification of a particular way of seeing it.

Underlying both these conceptions is the fashionable preoccupation with art as the principal object of critical judgment. Nevertheless, in suggesting that the choice which lies before the critic is between the aesthetic object and the experience that it arouses, the two views ensure that the artist is kept hidden. As a consequence, it is not difficult to adapt them to a wider view of aesthetic judgment and aesthetic experience—to a view that makes room for natural beauty and for the aesthetics of everyday life, as it is manifested in dress, manners, decoration, and the other useful arts.

It might be thought that only the first of the two conceptions can give rise to an objective critical procedure, since it alone requires that criticism focus on an object whose existence and nature is independent of the critic. The most important contemporary defense of an objective criticism, that of the British literary critic [F.R. Leavis](#), has relied heavily on the second idea, however. In a celebrated controversy with his U.S. counterpart, René Wellek, Leavis argued that it is precisely because criticism is devoted to the individual response that it may achieve objectivity. Although there may be objectivity in the scientific explanation of the aesthetic object—*i.e.*, in the classification and description of its typology, structure, and semiotic status—this is not, according to Leavis, the kind of objectivity that matters, for it will never lead to a value judgment and will therefore never amount to an objective criticism. Value judgments arise out of, and are validated by, the direct confrontation in experience between the critical intelligence and the aesthetic object, the first being informed by a [moral](#) awareness that provides the only possible ground for objective evaluation.

If criticism were confined to the study of nature, it would look very peculiar. It is only because of the development of artistic and decorative traditions that the habit of aesthetic judgment becomes established. Accordingly, contemporary attempts to provide a defense of aesthetic judgment concentrate almost exclusively on the criticism of art, and endeavour to find principles whereby the separate works of art may be ordered according to their merit, or at least characterized in evaluative terms. Leavis' "objective" criticism is expressly confined to the evaluation of literary works taken from a single tradition. The reason for this narrowness can be put paradoxically as follows: Criticism can be objective only when it is based in subjectivity. Criticism is the justification of a response, and such justification requires a frame of reference that both the critic and his reader can readily recognize. The successful communication and justification of a response are possible only by reference to the canon of works accepted within a common culture. The canonical works—what Matthew Arnold called the touchstones of criticism—provide the context of relevant comparisons, without which no amount of detailed analysis could convey the quality of the individual work. Critical reasoning is an attempt to place works of art in relation to one another, so that the perceived greatness of the one will provide the standard of measurement for the other. At the same time, the individual quality of feeling in each work must be elicited and discussed exactly as we might discuss the quality of feeling in everyday life, praising it for its intensity, exactness, and generosity, and criticizing it for its sentimentality, obscurity, or lack of seriousness. All of the moral categories that we apply to human feeling

and character we may therefore apply equally to art, and the basis of an objective criticism will be no different from the basis (whatever it might be) for an objective morality. The value of art, on this account, resides partly in the fact that it gives exemplary expression to human feeling and character, and so enables us to measure our own lives and aspirations against their imaginary counterparts.

These ideas are vague and have been frequently criticized for their moralistic overtones as well as for the seeming narrowness of their application. Even if they apply to the criticism of literature, what do we say about the criticism of music, of architecture, of dress and decor, of natural beauty? In the nonliterary arts much criticism is directed first to form, style, and workmanship, and only secondly to the moral content of the works under consideration. There are exceptions to this rule, and once again the principal exception is English—namely, John Ruskin's profoundly moralized criticism of architecture. Nevertheless, the extreme difficulty experienced in extending the Leavisite procedures of practical criticism (in which the reader's response becomes the principal focus of critical attention) to the nonliterary arts has given sustenance to the view that this "moralized" criticism is really only one kind of criticism and not necessarily the most widely applicable or the most important. If such is the case, it cannot really claim to have discovered a basis for the objective exercise of taste.

# The development of Western aesthetics

## The contributions of the ancient Greeks

The two greatest Greek philosophers, [Plato](#) and Aristotle, shared a sense of the importance of aesthetics, and both regarded music, poetry, architecture, and drama as fundamental institutions within the body politic. Plato notoriously recommends the banning of poets and painters from his ideal republic and in the course of his argument provides an extended theory of imitation (*mimesis*), along with spurious reasons for thinking that imitation derogates both from the laws of morality and from the rational cognition of the world. Much of Aristotle's extended and diverse reply to Plato is concerned with rehabilitating imitation as the foundation of moral education (*Ethica Nicomachea*), as the origin of a necessary *katharsis* (*Poetica*), and as the instrument—through music, [dance](#), and poetry—of character formation (*Politica*).

Plato's more mystical writings, notably the [Timaeus](#), contain hints of another approach to aesthetics, one based on the Pythagorean theory of the cosmos that exerted a decisive influence on the Neoplatonists. Through the writings of St. Augustine, Boethius, and Macrobius, the Pythagorean [cosmology](#) and its associated aesthetic of harmony were passed on to the thinkers of the Middle Ages. The Aristotelian theory of imitation and the concern with the expressive and emotionally educative aspect of aesthetic experience were not truly influential until the 17th century. At that time much attention was also paid to another classical work, the Hellenistic treatise on the sublime ascribed to [Longinus](#), which is perhaps the most interesting and extended piece of antique literary criticism to have been passed on to the modern world.

## Medieval aesthetics

[St. Thomas Aquinas](#) devoted certain passages of his [Summa Theologiae](#) (c. 1266–73) to the study of beauty. To his thinking, humankind's interest in beauty is of sensuous origin, but it is the prerogative of those senses that are capable of "contemplation"—namely, the eye and the ear. Aquinas defines beauty in Aristotelian terms as that which pleases solely in the contemplation of it and recognizes three prerequisites of beauty: perfection, appropriate [proportion](#), and clarity. Aquinas' position typifies the approach to aesthetics adopted by the [Scholastics](#). More widely diffused among medieval thinkers was the [Neoplatonist](#) theory, in which beauty is seen as a kind of divine order conforming to mathematical laws: the laws of number, which are also the laws of harmony. Music, poetry, and architecture all exhibit the same conformity to a cosmic order, and, in experiencing their beauty, we are really experiencing the same order in ourselves and resonating to it as one string to another. This theory, expounded in treatises on music by St. Augustine and Boethius, is consciously invoked by [Dante](#) in his *Convivio* (c. 1304–07; [The Banquet](#)). In this piece, generally considered one of the first sustained works of literary criticism in the modern manner, the poet analyzes the four levels of meaning contained in his own poems.

The Neoplatonist emphasis on number and harmony dominated aesthetics during the early Renaissance as well and was reaffirmed by [Leon Alberti](#) in his great treatise on [architecture](#), *De Re Aedificatoria* (1452; [Ten Books on Architecture](#)). Alberti also advanced a definition of beauty, which he called *concinnitas*, taking his terminology from Cicero. Beauty is for Alberti such an order and arrangement of the parts of an object that nothing can be altered except for the worse. This kind of definition can hardly stand alone as a basis for aesthetics, for what does the word worse mean? The obvious answer, “less beautiful,” at once reduces the definition to circularity.

## The origins of modern aesthetics

Francis Bacon wrote essays on beauty and deformity, but he confined his remarks to the human figure. René Descartes produced a treatise on music, although it contains little that would be recognized as aesthetics in the modern sense. During the first decades of modern philosophy, aesthetics flourished, not in the works of the great philosophers, but in the writings of such minor figures as Baltasar Gracián, Jean de La Bruyère (who began the study of [taste](#) that was to dominate aesthetics for a century), and Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon.

It was not until the end of the 17th century that the distinctive concerns of modern aesthetics were established. At that time, taste, imagination, natural beauty, and imitation came to be recognized as the central topics in aesthetics. In Britain the principal influences were the [3rd Earl of Shaftesbury](#) and his disciples Francis Hutcheson and Joseph Addison. Shaftesbury, a follower of the political and educational philosopher John Locke, did more than any of his contemporaries to establish [ethics](#) and aesthetics as central areas of philosophical inquiry. As a naturalist, he believed that the fundamental principles of morals and taste could be established by due attention to human nature, our sentiments being so ordered that certain things naturally please us and are naturally conducive to our good ([Characteristiks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times](#), 1711). Taste is a kind of balanced discernment, whereby a person recognizes that which is congenial to his sentiments and therefore an object of pleasurable contemplation. Following Locke, Shaftesbury laid much emphasis on the [association](#) of ideas as a fundamental component in aesthetic experience and the crucial bridge from the sphere of contemplation to the sphere of action. [Addison](#) adopted this position in a series of influential essays, “The Pleasures of the Imagination” in [The Spectator](#) (1712). He defended the theory that imaginative association is the fundamental component in our experience of art, architecture, and nature, and is the true explanation of their value to us.

[Francis Hutcheson](#) was perhaps the first to place the problem of aesthetic judgment among the central questions of epistemology: How can we know that something is beautiful? What guides our judgment and what validates it? His answer was decidedly Empiricist in tone: aesthetic judgments are perceptual and take their authority from a sense that is common to all who make them. In [An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue](#) (1725), Hutcheson explained: “The origin of our perceptions of beauty and harmony is

justly called a ‘sense’ because it involves no intellectual [element](#), no reflection on principles and causes.”

## The significance of [Baumgarten](#)’s work

Such a statement would have been vigorously repudiated by Hutcheson’s contemporary Alexander Baumgarten, who, in his aforementioned *Reflections on Poetry*, introduced the term aesthetic in its distinctively modern sense. Baumgarten was a pupil of [Christian Wolff](#), the Rationalist philosopher who had created the orthodox philosophy of the German Enlightenment by building the metaphysical ideas of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz into a system. He was thus heir to a tradition that dismissed the senses and the imagination as incapable of providing a genuine cognition of their objects and standing always to be corrected (and replaced) by rational reflection. Baumgarten, however, argued that [poetry](#) is surely cognitive: it provides insight into the world of a kind that could be conveyed in no other way. At the same time, poetic insights are perceptual (“aesthetic”) and hence imbued with the distinctive character of sensory and imaginative experience. According to Baumgarten, the ideas conveyed by poetry are “clear and confused,” as opposed to the “clear and distinct” ideas of reason in the sense that they had been described by Descartes and the 17th-century Rationalists. Baumgarten held that the aesthetic value of a poem resides in the relative preponderance of clarity over confusion. Accordingly, his theory of the value of art was ultimately cognitive.

It was some decades before Baumgarten’s coinage became philosophical currency. But there is no doubt that his treatise, for all its pedantry and outmoded philosophical method, deserves its reputation as the founding work of modern aesthetics.

## Major concerns of 18th-century aesthetics

The development of aesthetics between the work of Baumgarten and that of [Immanuel Kant](#), who had been influenced by Baumgarten’s writings, was complex and diverse, [drawing](#) inspiration from virtually every realm of human inquiry. Yet, throughout this period certain topics repeatedly received focal attention in discussions pertaining to aesthetic questions.

One such topic was the faculty of taste, the analysis of which remained the common point among German, French, and English writers. Taste was seen either as a sense (Hutcheson), as a peculiar kind of emotionally inspired discrimination (Hume), or as a part of refined good manners (Voltaire). In an important essay entitled “Of the Standard of Taste” (in *Four Dissertations*, 1757), [Hume](#), following Voltaire in the *Encyclopédie*, raised the question of the basis of aesthetic judgment and argued that “it is natural for us to seek a standard of taste; a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.” But where is this standard of taste to be found? Hume recommends an ideal of the man of taste, whose discriminations are unclouded by an emotional distemper and informed by a “delicacy of imagination . . .



requisite to convey a sensibility of . . . finer emotions.” For, Hume argues, there is a great resemblance between “mental” and “bodily” taste—between the taste exercised in aesthetic discrimination and that exercised in the appreciation of food and drink, which can equally be deformed by some abnormal condition of the subject. Hume proceeded to lay down various procedures for the education of taste and for the proper conduct of critical judgment. His discussion, notwithstanding its skeptical undercurrent, has proved lastingly influential on the English schools of criticism, as well as on the preferred Anglo-Saxon approach to the questions of aesthetics.

A second major concern of 18th-century writers was the role of [imagination](#). Addison’s essays were seminal, but discussion of imagination remained largely confined to the associative theories of Locke and his followers until Hume gave to the imagination a fundamental role in the generation of commonsense beliefs. Kant attempted to describe the imagination as a distinctive faculty, active in the generation of scientific judgment as well as aesthetic pleasure. Between them, Hume and Kant laid the ground for the Romantic writers on art: [Johann Gottfried von Herder](#), [Friedrich Schiller](#), Friedrich Schelling, and Novalis (pseudonym of Friedrich Leopold, Freiherr von Hardenberg) in [Germany](#), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth in England. For such writers, imagination was to be the distinctive feature both of aesthetic activity and of all true insight into the human condition. Meanwhile, Lord Kames and Archibald Alison had each provided full accounts of the role of association in the formation and justification of critical judgment. Alison, in particular, recognized the inadequacies of the traditional Empiricist approach to imaginative association and provided a theory as to how the feelings aroused by a work of art or a scene of natural beauty may become part of its appearance—qualities of the object as much as of the subject (*Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* [1790]).

The concept of [imitation](#), introduced into the discussion of art by Plato and Aristotle, was fundamental to the 18th-century philosophy of art. Imitation is a vague term, frequently used to cover both representation and expression in the modern sense. The thesis that imitation is the common and distinguishing feature of the arts was put forward by James Harris in *Three Treatises* (1744) and subsequently made famous by Charles Batteux in a book entitled *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe* (1746; “The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle”). This diffuse and ill-argued work contains the first modern attempt to give a systematic theory of art and aesthetic judgment that will show the unity of the phenomena and their common importance. “The laws of taste,” Batteux argued, “have nothing but the imitation of beautiful nature as their object”; from which it follows that the arts, which are addressed to taste, must imitate nature. The distinction between the fine and useful arts (recast by Collingwood as the distinction between art and craft) stems from Batteux.

Still another characteristic of 18th-century aesthetics was the concern with the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. Burke’s famous work, [On the Sublime and Beautiful](#), has already been discussed. Its influence was felt throughout late 18th-century aesthetics. For example, it inspired one of Kant’s first publications, an essay on the sublime. Treatises on beauty were common, one of the most famous being [The Analysis of Beauty](#) (1753) by

the painter [William Hogarth](#), which introduces the theory that beauty is achieved through the “serpentine line.”

The view that art is expression emerged during the 1700s. [Rousseau](#) put forth the theory of the arts as forms of emotional expression in an essay dealing with the origin of languages. This theory, regarded as providing the best possible explanation of the power of music, was widely adopted. Treatises on musical expression proliferated during the late 18th century. One illustrative example is [James Beattie](#)'s *Essay on Poetry and Music as They Affect the Mind* (1776), in which the author rejects the view of music as a representational (imitative) art form and argues that expression is the true source of musical excellence. Another example is provided by Denis Diderot in his [didactic](#) novel *Le Neveu de Rameau* (1761–74; *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works*). The theory of expression was inherited by the German Romantics, especially by Schelling, Schiller, and Herder. It was, furthermore, developed in a novel direction by the Italian philosopher [Giambattista Vico](#) in his [Scienza nuova](#) (1725–44; *New Science*). Vico integrated art into a comprehensive theory of the development and decline of civilization. According to him, the cyclical movement of culture is achieved partly by a process of successive expression, through language and art, of the “myths” that give insight into surrounding social conditions.

## **Kant, Schiller, and Hegel**

As previously noted, Kant's *The Critique of Judgment* introduced the first full account of aesthetic experience as a distinct exercise of rational mentality. The principal ingredients of Kant's work are the following: the antinomy of taste, the emphasis on the free play of the imagination, the theory of aesthetic experience as both free from concepts and disinterested, the view that the central object of aesthetic interest is not art but nature, and the description of the moral and spiritual significance of aesthetic experience, which opens to us a transcendental point of view of the world of nature and enables us to see the world as purposive, but without purpose. In that perception, observes [Kant](#), lies the deepest intimation of our nature and of our ultimate relation to a “supersensible” realm.

[Schiller](#)'s *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795; [On the Aesthetic Education of Man](#)), inspired by Kant, develops further the theory of the disinterested character of the aesthetic. Schiller argues that through this disinterested quality aesthetic experience becomes the true vehicle of moral and political education, providing human beings both with the self-identity that is their fulfillment and with the institutions that enable them to flourish: “What is man before beauty cajoles from him a delight in things for their own sake, or the serenity of form tempers the savagery of life? A monotonous round of ends, a constant vacillation of judgment; self-seeking, and yet without a self; lawless, yet without freedom; a slave, and yet to no rule.”

Schiller's *Briefe* exerted a profound influence on [Hegel](#)'s philosophy in general and on his [Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik](#) in particular. In discussions of remarkable range and imaginative power, Hegel introduces the distinctively modern conception of art as a request for self-realization, an evolving discovery of forms that give sensuous embodiment to the

spirit by articulating in concrete form its inner tensions and resolutions. For Hegel, the arts are arranged in both historical and intellectual sequence, from architecture (in which [Geist](#) [“spirit”] is only half articulate and given purely symbolic expression), through sculpture and painting, to music and thence to poetry, which is the true art of the Romantics. Finally, all art is destined to be superseded by philosophy, in which the spirit achieves final articulation as Idea. The stages of art were identified by Hegel with various stages of historical development. In each art form a particular *Zeitgeist* (i.e., spirit of the time) finds expression, and the necessary transition from one art form to its successor is part of a larger historical transformation in which all civilization is engaged.

The incidental discussions of Hegel’s *Vorlesungen* introduce most of the themes of contemporary philosophy of art, though in the peculiar language of Hegelian [Idealism](#). Nineteenth-century Idealist aesthetics can reasonably be described as a series of footnotes to Hegel, who was, however, less original than he pretended. Many of the individual thoughts and theories in his lectures on aesthetics were taken from the contemporary literature of German [Romanticism](#) (in particular, the writings of Herder, Jean Paul [pseudonym of Johann Paul Friedrich Richter] and Novalis) and from the works of German critics and art historians (notably G.E. Lessing and Johann Winckelmann) who had forged the link between modern conceptions of art and the art of antiquity. The influence of Hegel was, therefore, the influence of German Romanticism as a whole, and it is not surprising that the few who escaped it lost their audience in doing so.

## Post-Hegelian aesthetics

Little of 19th-century aesthetics after Hegel has proved of lasting interest. Perhaps the most important exception is the controversial literature surrounding Richard Wagner, particularly the attack on the expressive theory of music launched by Wagner’s critic [Eduard Hanslick](#) in his *Vom musikalisch-Schönen* (1854; [On the Beautiful in Music](#)). With this work modern musical aesthetics was born, and all the assumptions made by Batteux and Hegel concerning the unity (or unity in diversity) of the arts were thrown in doubt.

The most impressive work on aesthetics of the late 1800s was [George Santayana](#)’s [The Sense of Beauty](#) (1896), which shows a welcome move away from the 19th-century obsession with art toward more fundamental issues in the philosophy of mind. Santayana argues against Kant’s theory of the disinterested and universal quality of aesthetic interest, and defends the view that pleasure is the central aesthetic category, beauty being “pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing.” All human functions and experiences may contribute to the sense of beauty, which has two broad categories of object: form and expression. In his theory of expression Santayana again takes up the problem raised by the theory of the association of ideas, and argues that in aesthetic pleasure the associative process achieves a kind of fusion between the response aroused and the object which arouses it, and that this is the fundamental experience of expression.

# Expressionism

After Kant and Hegel, the most important influence on modern aesthetics has been Croce. His oft-cited *Estetica come scienza dell' espressione e linguistica generale* (1902; *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistics*, or *Aesthetic*) presents, in a rather novel idiom, some of the important insights underlying the theories of his predecessors. In this work, Croce distinguishes [concept](#) from [intuition](#): the latter is a kind of acquaintance with the individuality of an object, while the former is an instrument of classification. Art is to be understood first as expression and second as intuition. The distinction between representation and expression is ultimately identical with that between concept and intuition. The peculiarities of aesthetic interest are really peculiarities of intuition: this explains the problem of form and content and gives the meaning of the idea that the object of aesthetic interest is interesting for its own sake and not as a means to an end.

Croce conceived his expressionism as providing the philosophical justification for the artistic revolutions of the 19th century and, in particular, for the [Impressionist](#) style of painting, in which representation gives way to the attempt to convey experience directly onto the canvas. His extreme view of the autonomy of art led him to dismiss all attempts to describe art as a form of representation or to establish direct connections between the content of art and the content of scientific theories. [Croce's](#) disciple [R.G. Collingwood](#) (*Principles of Art*, 1938) was similarly dismissive of representation and similarly concerned with presenting a theory of art that would justify the revolutionary practice of his contemporaries (in this case, the post-Symbolist poetry of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*). As pointed out earlier, Collingwood distinguishes craft, which is a means to an end, from art, which is an end in itself. But since art is also, for Collingwood, expression, expression too must be an end in itself. It cannot be construed as the giving of form to independently identifiable states of mind. The feeling must reside in the form itself and be obtainable exclusively in that form. If it were otherwise, art would be simply another kind of craft—the craft of giving expression to preexisting and independently identifiable states of mind. Therefore, like Croce, Collingwood opposes expression in art to description: expression gives us the particularity and not the generality of states of mind.

Collingwood sets his aesthetics within the context of a theory of the imagination, in which he shows the influence of the British Empiricists as well as of the Idealist metaphysicians who had influenced Croce. A similar attempt to unite the theory of art with a philosophy of the imagination had been made by the French philosopher [Alain](#) in his *Système des beaux-arts* (1920, revised 1926; “System of the Fine Arts”), a work that is distinguished by its detailed attention to dress, [fashion](#), manners, and the useful arts, and by its idea of the artist as *artisan d'abord*. Along with [John Dewey's](#) *Art As Experience* (1934), in which aesthetic experience is presented as integral to the organic completion of human nature, these works provide the culminating expression of a now defunct view of aesthetics as central to the understanding not of art alone but of the human condition as well.

## Marxist aesthetics

Many attempts have been made to develop a specifically Marxist aesthetics, one that would incorporate the Marxian theory of history and class consciousness and the critique of bourgeois ideology, so as to generate principles of analysis and evaluation and show the place of art in the theory and practice of revolution. William Morris in England and [Georgy V. Plekhanov](#) in [Russia](#) both attempted to unite Marx's social criticism with a conception of the nature of artistic labour. Plekhanov's *Iskusstvo i obshchestvennaya zhizn* (1912; *Art and Social Life*) is a kind of synthesis of early Marxist thought and attempts to recast the practices of art and criticism in a revolutionary mold. The ideology of "art for art's sake," Plekhanov argues, develops only in conditions of social decline when artist and recipient are in "hopeless disaccord with the social environment in which they live." Drawing on Kant and Schiller, Plekhanov presents a theory of the origins of art in [play](#); play, however, must not be understood in isolation. It is indissolubly linked to labour, of which it is the complementary opposite. An art of play will be the "free" art of the revolution, of humankind returned to social harmony, but only because play and labour will then be reunited and transcended. In place of their opposition will be a harmonious whole in which art is continuous with labour.

The aesthetic theories of the Russian Revolution owe something to Plekhanov; something to the school of Formalist criticism, typified by the proto-Structuralist M. Bakhtin; and something to the anti-aesthetic propaganda of the Russian [Constructivists](#), who believed in an art expressive of human dominion over raw materials—an art that would be destructive of all existing patterns of subordination. The official approach of the [Soviets](#) to art, however, was typified, first, by the persecution of all those who expressed adherence to those theories, and, second, by the adoption under Stalin of [Socialist Realism](#) (the view that art is dedicated to the "realistic" representation of proletarian values and proletarian life) as the sole legitimate basis for artistic practice.

Subsequent Marxist thinking about art was largely influenced by two major central European thinkers: [Walter Benjamin](#) and [György Lukács](#). Both were exponents of Marxist [humanism](#) who saw the important contribution of Marxian theory to aesthetics in the analysis of the condition of labour and in the critique of the alienated and "reified" consciousness of human beings under capitalism. Benjamin's collection of essays *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1936; *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*) attempts to describe the changed experience of art in the modern world and sees the rise of Fascism and mass society as the culmination of a process of debasement, whereby art ceases to be a means of instruction and becomes instead a mere gratification, a matter of taste alone. "Communism responds by politicizing art"—that is, by making art into the instrument by which the false consciousness of the masses is to be overthrown.

Lukács developed a multifaceted approach to literary criticism in which the historical condition of society and the reality of class consciousness are singled out as the ideological agenda of works of literature and the major source of their appeal. This position is set forth

in such works as *Die Theorie des Romans* (1920; *The Theory of the Novel*). Neither Lukács nor Benjamin produced a coherent aesthetics as defined in this article, although each was immensely influential on the practice of modern literary criticism whether Marxist or not in its ultimate inspiration.

[Roger Scruton](#)

## Eastern aesthetics

### [India](#)

The disparagement of the sensory realm as mere illusion (“the veil of Maya”), characteristic of much Indian religion, went hand in hand with a [philosophy](#) of embodiment (karma), which gave a distinctive role to art both as an instrument of worship and as an earthly delight. The legends of the great god Krishna abound in exaggerated fantasies of erotic and physical power; the art of the temples testifies to a sensuality that belies the mystical gestures of renunciation which form the commonplaces of [Hindu](#) morality. In providing theories of such art and of the natural beauty that it celebrates, Indian philosophers have relied heavily on the concept of aesthetic flavour, or *rasa*, a kind of contemplative abstraction in which the inwardness of human feelings irradiates the surrounding world of embodied forms.

The theory of *rasa* is attributed to [Bharata](#), a sage-priest who may have lived about ad 500. It was developed by the rhetorician and philosopher [Abhinavagupta](#) (c. ad 1000), who applied it to all varieties of theatre and poetry. The principal human feelings, according to Bharata, are delight, laughter, sorrow, anger, fear, disgust, heroism, and astonishment, all of which may be recast in contemplative form as the various *rasas*: erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, terrible, odious, marvellous, and quietistic. These *rasas* comprise the components of aesthetic experience. The power to taste *rasa* is a reward for merit in some previous existence.

### [China](#)

[Confucius](#) (551–479 bc) emphasized the role of aesthetic enjoyment in moral and political education, and, like his near contemporary Plato, was suspicious of the power of [art](#) to awaken frenzied and distracted feelings. Music must be stately and dignified, contributing to the inner harmony that is the foundation of good behaviour, and all art is at its noblest when incorporated into the rituals and traditions that enforce the stability and order of social life.

[Lao-tzu](#), the legendary founder of [Taoism](#), was even more puritanical. He condemned all art as a blinding of the eye, a deafening of the ear, and a cloying of the palate. Later Taoists were more lenient, however, encouraging a freer, more intuitive approach both to works of art and to nature. The philosophy of beauty presented in their works and in the writings of the Ch’an ([Zen](#)) Buddhists who succeeded them is seldom articulate, being confined to epigrams and short commentaries that remain opaque to the uninitiated.

The same epigrammatic style and the same fervent puritanism can be discerned in the writings of [Mao Tse-tung](#), who initiated in the Cultural Revolution the most successful war against beauty that has been waged in modern history.

## Japan

The practice of literary commentary and aesthetic discussion was extensively developed in Japan and is exemplified at its most engaging in the great novel [Genji monogatari](#) (c. 1000; *Tale of Genji*), written by [Murasaki Shikibu](#), lady-in-waiting to the Empress. Centuries of commentary on this novel, as well as on the court literature that it inspired, on the [nō](#) and puppet plays, and on the lyrical verses of the haiku poets, led to the establishment of an aesthetics of supreme refinement. Many of the concepts of this form of aesthetics were drawn from the writings of [Zeami](#) Motokiyo (1363–1443), a playwright and actor-manager. Zeami argued that the value of art is to be found in [yūgen](#) (“mystery and depth”) and that the artist must follow the rule of *sōō* (“consonance”), according to which every object, gesture, and expression has to be appropriate to its context.

The domination of aesthetic scruples over Japanese life has, as its culminating instance, the [tea ceremony](#)—a marvel of constrained social ballet—to the study of which whole lives have been devoted. Associated with this triumph of manners is an art of mood and evocation, in which significance is found in the small, concentrated gesture, the sudden revelation of transcendent meaning in what is most ordinary and unassuming. In the late 18th century [Motoori Norinaga](#), a leading literary scholar, summed up the essence of Japanese art and literature as the expression of a touching intimation of transience, which he captured in the famous phrase *mono no aware*, meaning roughly “the sensitivity to the sadness of things.” Other aesthetic qualities emphasized by classical scholars and critics are *en* (“charming”), *okashi* (“amusing”), and *sabi* (having the beauty of old, faded, worn, or lovely things). In all such aesthetic categories, we can sense the resonance of the Taoist and Buddhist ideas of renunciation.

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"aesthetics". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*.