

Aesthetics

Arthur C. Danto

I. Introduction _____

Aesthetics, branch of philosophy concerned with the essence and perception of beauty and ugliness. Aesthetics also deals with the question of whether such qualities are objectively present in the things they appear to qualify, or whether they exist only in the mind of the individual; hence, whether objects are perceived by a particular mode, the aesthetic mode, or whether instead the objects have, in themselves, special qualities—aesthetic qualities. Philosophy also asks if there is a difference between the beautiful and the sublime.

Criticism and the psychology of art, although independent disciplines, are related to aesthetics. The psychology of art is concerned with such elements of the arts as human responses to color, sound, line, form, and words and with the ways in which the emotions condition such responses. Criticism confines itself to particular works of art, analyzing their structures, meanings, and problems, comparing them with other works, and evaluating them.

The term *aesthetics* was introduced in 1753 by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, but the study of the nature of beauty had been pursued for centuries. In the past it was chiefly a subject for philosophers. Since the 19th century, artists also have contributed their views.

_____ II. Classical Theories _____

The first aesthetic theory of any scope is that of Plato, who believed that reality consists of archetypes, or forms, beyond human sensation, which are the models for all things that exist in human experience. The objects of such experience are examples, or imitations, of those forms. The philosopher tries to reason from the object experienced to the reality it imitates; the artist copies the experienced object, or uses it as a model for the work. Thus, the artist's work is an imitation of an imitation.

Plato's thinking had a marked ascetic strain. In his *Republic*, Plato went so far as to banish some types of artists from his ideal society because he thought their work encouraged immorality or portrayed base characters, and that certain musical compositions caused laziness or incited people to immoderate actions.

Aristotle also spoke of art as imitation, but not in the Platonic sense. One could imitate “things as they ought to be,” he wrote, and “art partly completes what nature cannot bring to a finish.” The artist separates the form from the matter of some objects of experience, such as the human body or a tree, and imposes that form on another matter, such as canvas or marble. Thus, imitation is not just copying an original model, nor is it devising a symbol for the original; rather, it is a particular representation of an aspect of things, and each work is an imitation of the universal whole.

Aesthetics was inseparable from morality and politics for both Aristotle and Plato. The former wrote about music in his *Politics*, maintaining that art affects human character, and hence the social order. Because Aristotle held that happiness is the aim of life, he believed that the

major function of art is to provide human satisfaction. In the *Poetics*, his great work on the principles of drama, Aristotle argued that tragedy so stimulates the emotions of pity and fear, which he considered morbid and unhealthy, that by the end of the play the spectator is purged of them. This catharsis makes the audience psychologically healthier and thus more capable of happiness. Neoclassical drama since the 17th century has been greatly influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics*. The works of the French dramatists Jean Baptiste Racine, Pierre Corneille, and Molière, in particular, advocate its doctrine of the three unities: time, place, and action. This concept dominated literary theories up to the 19th century.

_____III. Other Early Approaches_____

The 3rd-century philosopher Plotinus, born in Egypt and trained in philosophy at Alexandria, although a Neoplatonist, gave far more importance to art than did Plato. In Plotinus's view, art reveals the form of an object more clearly than ordinary experience does, and it raises the soul to contemplation of the universal. According to Plotinus, the highest moments of life are mystical, which is to say that the soul is united, in the world of forms, with the divine, which Plotinus spoke of as "the One." Aesthetic experience comes closest to mystical experience, for one loses oneself while contemplating the aesthetic object.

Art in the Middle Ages was primarily an expression of religion, with an aesthetic principle based largely on Neoplatonism. During the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries, art became more secular, and its aesthetics were classical rather than religious. The great impetus to aesthetic thought in the modern world occurred in Germany during the 18th century. The German critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his *Laokoon* (1766), argued that art is self-limiting and reaches its height only when these limitations are recognized. The German critic and classical archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann maintained that, in accordance with the ancient Greeks, the best art is impersonal, expressing ideal proportion and balance rather than its creator's individuality. The German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte considered beauty a moral virtue. The artist creates a world in which beauty, as much as truth, is an end, foreshadowing that absolute freedom which is the goal of the human will. For Fichte, art is individual, not social, but it fulfills a great human purpose.

_____IV. Modern Aesthetics_____

The 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant was concerned with judgments of taste. Objects are judged beautiful, he proposed, when they satisfy a disinterested desire: one that does not involve personal interests or needs. It follows from this that beautiful objects have no specific purpose and that judgments of beauty are not expressions of mere personal preference but are universal. Although one cannot be certain that others will be satisfied by objects he or she judges to be beautiful, one can at least say that others ought to be satisfied. The basis for one's response to beauty exists in the structure of one's mind.

Art should give the same disinterested satisfaction as natural beauty. Paradoxically, art can accomplish one thing nature cannot. It can offer ugliness and beauty in one object. A fine painting of an ugly face is still beautiful.

According to the 19th-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, art, religion, and philosophy are the bases of the highest spiritual development. Beauty in nature is everything that the human spirit finds pleasing and congenial to the exercise of spiritual and

intellectual freedom. Certain things in nature can be made more congenial and pleasing, and it is these natural objects that are reorganized by art to satisfy aesthetic demands.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer believed that the forms of the universe, like the eternal Platonic forms, exist beyond the worlds of experience, and that aesthetic satisfaction is achieved by contemplating them for their own sakes, as a means of escaping the painful world of daily experience.

Fichte, Kant, and Hegel are in a direct line of development. Schopenhauer attacked Hegel but was influenced by Kant's view of disinterested contemplation. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche followed Schopenhauer at first, then disagreed with him. Nietzsche concurred that life is tragic, but thought that this should not preclude acceptance of the tragic with joyous affirmation, the full realization of which is art. Art confronts the terrors of the universe and is therefore only for the strong. Art can transform any experience into beauty, and by so doing transforms its horrors in such a way that they may be contemplated with enjoyment.

Although much modern aesthetics is rooted in German thought, German thinking was subject to other Western influences. Lessing, a founder of German romanticism, was affected by the aesthetic writings of the British statesman Edmund Burke.

_____ V. Aesthetics and Art _____

Traditional aesthetics in the 18th and 19th centuries was dominated by the concept of art as imitation of nature. Novelists such as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens in England and dramatists such as Carlo Goldoni in Italy and Alexandre Dumas *fils* (the son of Alexandre Dumas *père*) in France presented realistic accounts of middle-class life. Painters, whether neoclassical, such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, romantic, such as Eugène Delacroix, or realist, such as Gustave Courbet, rendered their subjects with careful attention to lifelike detail.

In traditional aesthetics it was also frequently assumed that art objects are useful as well as beautiful. Paintings might commemorate historical events or encourage morality. Music might inspire piety or patriotism. Drama, especially in the hands of Dumas and the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, might serve to criticize society and so lead to reform.

In the 19th century, however, avant-garde concepts of aesthetics began to challenge traditional views. The change was particularly evident in painting. French impressionists, such as Claude Monet, denounced academic painters for depicting what they thought they should see rather than what they actually saw—that is, surfaces of many colors and wavering forms caused by the distorting play of light and shadow as the sun moves.

In the late 19th century, postimpressionists such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh were more concerned with the structure of a painting and with expressing their own psyche than with representing objects in the world of nature. In the early 20th century this structural interest was developed further by cubist painters such as Pablo Picasso, and the expressionist concern was reflected in the work of Henri Matisse and other fauves and by the German expressionists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The literary aspects of expressionism can be seen in the plays of August Strindberg, a Swede, and Frank Wedekind, a German.

Closely connected with these relatively nonrepresentational approaches to art was the principle of “art for art's sake,” which was derived from Kant's view that art has its own reason for being. The phrase was first used by the French philosopher Victor Cousin in 1818. This doctrine, sometimes called aestheticism, was espoused in England by the critic Walter Horatio Pater, by the Pre-Raphaelite painters, and by the expatriate American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler. In France it was the credo of such symbolist poets as Charles Baudelaire. The “art for art's sake” principle underlies most of avant-garde Western art of the 20th century.

_____VI. Major Contemporary Influences_____

Four philosophers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries have been the primary influences on present-day aesthetics. In France Henri Bergson defined science as the use of intelligence to create a system of symbols that supposedly describes reality but actually falsifies it. Art, however, is based on intuition, which is a direct apprehension of reality unmediated by thought. Thus art cuts through conventional symbols and beliefs about people, life, and society and confronts one with reality itself.

In Italy the philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce also exalted intuition, but he considered it the immediate awareness of an object that somehow gives that object form. It is the apprehension of things before one reflects about them. Works of art are the expression, in material form, of such intuitions; but beauty and ugliness are not qualities of the works of art but qualities of the spirit expressed intuitively in these works of art.

The American philosopher and poet George Santayana argued that when one takes pleasure in a thing the pleasure may be regarded as a quality of the thing itself, rather than as a subjective response to it. Just as one may characterize some human act as good in itself, instead of calling it good merely because one approves it, so one may say that some object is beautiful, not merely that one's aesthetic delight in its color and form leads one to call it beautiful.

John Dewey, the American educator and philosopher, viewed human experience as disconnected, fragmentary, full of beginnings without conclusions, or as experiences deliberately manipulated as means to ends. Those exceptional experiences that flow from their beginnings to consummations are aesthetic. Aesthetic experience is enjoyment for its own sake, is complete and self-contained, and is terminal, not merely instrumental to other purposes.

_____A. Marxism and Freudianism_____

Two powerful movements, Marxism in the fields of economics and politics and Freudianism in psychology, have rejected the art-for-art principle and reasserted art's practical uses. Marxism treats art as an expression of the underlying economic relations in society. Marxist proponents maintain that art is great only when it is “progressive,” that is, when it supports the cause of the society under which it is created.

Sigmund Freud believed the value of art to lie in its therapeutic use: It is by this means that both the artist and the public can reveal hidden conflicts and discharge tensions. Fantasies and daydreams, as they enter into art, are thus transformed from an escape from life into ways of meeting it. In the surrealist movement in painting and poetry, the unconscious is used as a source of material. The stream-of-consciousness technique of fiction, notably in the novels of

the Irish writer James Joyce, was derived not only from Freud's work but partly from *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) by the American philosopher and psychologist William James and partly from the French novel *We'll to the Woods No More* (1887; translated 1957) by Edouard Dujardin.

_____B. Existentialism_____

More recently, the French philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre advocated a form of existentialism in which art is seen as an expression of the freedom of the individual to choose, and as such demonstrates the individual's responsibility for his or her choices. Despair, as reflected in art, is not an end but a beginning, because it eradicates the guilts and excuses from which people ordinarily suffer, thus opening the way for genuine freedom.

_____C. Academic Controversies_____

Academic controversies of the 20th century have revolved about meaning in art. The British critic and semanticist I. A. Richards claimed that art is a language. He asserted that two types of language exist: the symbolic, which conveys ideas and information; and the emotive, which expresses, evokes, and excites feelings and attitudes. He regarded art as emotive language, giving order and coherence to experience and attitudes, but containing no symbolic meaning.

Richards's work was important also for its use of psychological techniques in studying aesthetic reactions. In *Practical Criticism* (1929) he described experiments revealing that even highly educated people are conditioned by their education, by handed-down opinion, and by other social and circumstantial elements in their aesthetic responses. Other writers have commented on the conditioning effects of tradition, fashion, and other social pressures, noting, for example, that in the early 18th century the plays of William Shakespeare were viewed as barbarous and Gothic art as vulgar.

Growing interest in aesthetics is revealed by the establishment of the periodicals *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, founded in the United States in 1941; *Revue d'Esthétique*, founded in France in 1948; and the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, founded in 1960.

Contributed By:

Arthur C. Danto, M.A., Ph.D.

Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy, Columbia University. Author of *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, and other books. Editor, *Journal of Philosophy*.

"Aesthetics," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2006

<http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2006 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

http://encarta.msn.com/text_761576304___0/Aesthetics.html