



The Winged Victory of Samothrace – photo by Lyokoi88 from e.wikipedia.org Creative Commons

A Brief Introduction to Aesthetics

by Albert Fried-Cassorla

The study of art and beauty -- known as aesthetics – is a worthwhile pursuit. After all, chances are great that you will spend a much time in your life evaluating different objects and experiences as beautiful or not. *Why not know a bit about how smart thinkers have viewed the question?*

Here's what you have to gain: By knowing why you enjoy a work of art, you may become more susceptible to the charms of similar works. Parsing out the factors that please you can illuminate your own sensibility.



Alberto Giacometti with one of his sculptures

Let's say, for example, that you like the long, drawn out and extended human forms created by Alberto Giacometti. I do, to some degree. To me, they exemplify a certain kind of weariness combined with restless energy. His gaunt figures want to proceed despite life's burdens. To me, this is inspiring.

So if you study an artist, almost any artist who moves you, you can find the distinguishing perception that enhances your understanding. Ergo, it possibly enhances your life. My advice is deceptively simple: find the artist and works that move you, and understand why they do.

Aesthetics: A form of axiology.

Before proceeding, it is important to recognize that aesthetics is not a “provable” field, in the same sense that, say, logic is. Axiology is a classification of

philosophical inquiries that depend on value judgments. Ethics and Aesthetics are two such fields.

In logic, syllogisms can be proven. Opinion-based judgments usually cannot. No one can prove to you, for example, that a particular work of art is: A) artistic or B) beautiful. The given work can, however, be proven to be a recognized work of art by the public or by experts.

Art and Beauty are not the same.

Another important consideration is to distinguish between the study of Aesthetics and Art. Aesthetics is a division of philosophy that studies Art, Beauty and Taste.

What is Art?

Here is my own definition, based on my experience as a playwright:

One of the subjects that flows through this work is the question of "What is worthwhile art?" As a playwright, my characters do not directly answer that weighty question, but it lurks in the background. From what I have learned in studying philosophy, and as I have mentioned, esthetics is a field that is part of Axiology, also known as Value Theory. Values are unpredictable, not universal, and hard to evaluate. There is no universal standard.

In my opinion, *Art is a human-made work that elevates the soul.*

Like any given body part, everyone has an opinion about Art. Philosopher Robert Taylor made the point that "Aida" and "The Sound of Music" have equal value for their respective audiences. I would agree. This does not mean that studying what we find appealing or provocative in a work of art is a waste of time. 'Tisn't, I aver! By parsing out our own preferences and the underlying thoughts that create them, we better understand what delights and provokes us. This can lead to enjoying new forms of appreciation

Here are some basic theories of Aesthetics made comprehensible.

The Moral Theory. According the philosopher Immanuel Kant, an important standard of art is its morality. "Beauty is a symbol of morality," he wrote. Does art have a moral component? I would argue that some art does, and some does not.

The novel Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriett Beecher Stowe had a powerful role in history. It helped turn white America against slavery. So it had an important moral purpose.



Goya - The Third of May, 1808

Here are a few brief summaries of other viewpoints:

Plato – He believed that Poets are liars. Rather, he favored Reason over emotion. Yet he was a great story-teller, which is an art in itself.

Aristotle. He emphasized the importance of catharsis. We need to experience the full range of emotions regularly. Does all art require catharsis? In my opinion, no. But it does require involvement or at least enhanced insight.

Ugly as Art. – Witness the famous Urinal by Marcel Duchamp. If a person seeks out what is conventionally considered Ugly and proclaims it Art, has done any more than become an iconoclast? She ,may be exposing flawed concepts, or standards corrupted by over-use. But “ugly” seems to me to only a temporary expedient, after which it become tiresome and anit-illuminating.

Immanuel Kant – He believed Content is not important. Form, on the other hand, is.

Four aspects that were key to his theories:

1. Freedom from concepts – Does not make a statement, such as “this is a chair.” Harmonious, random thoughts, such as seeing pebbles on a beach are thought to be artistic by Kant. I disagree with this. Statements about things can be artistic.
2. Objectivity – (hard to decipher)
3. Disinterest of the spectator – Something simply holds our interest.
4. “obligatoriness”

The Repulsive as Art. This is demonstrated by Marco Evaristti and his goldfish exhibition . He had museum-goers respond to a request and to possibly blend and kill live goldfish.

Escape from Life. Art may serve as a distraction. According to R. G. Collingwood there is a contrast between amusement art vs. magic art. Magic teaches you how to better interact with reality. Magic teaches you how to better interact with reality, personal or social or cosmological. This may be exemplified by the way the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* stimulated revulsion at slavery.

There may be very different definitions of magic in art – some will be broader, some more precise. What exactly this magic is remains the question. I will not attempt to answer that here, but it is a potent defining quality.

Emotional content as supreme. Frank Sibley wrote about emotions and judgments that are exemplified by Art. Adjectives flesh this out, when we say: dynamic, sad, vulgar, serene, or melancholy.

Sublime Art. The sublime often includes a dimension of horror or fright. This employs a special use of the term sublime. The concept was championed by philosopher Edmund Burke.

Enlightenment. – A key question about a particular work may be: *Does it enlighten you?* This is my standard own standard for answering the question: what is Art? Best – but not necessary – is when when it helps us live better lives. R. G. Collingwood – amusementart vs. magic art. **Real vs. Un-Real Emotions.** Some believe fictional situations are un-real. I think they are real but usually less intense than life – but not always.

Conclusion

Opinions about Art and Aesthetics are very diverse. They have much to teach us, not only about those subjects, but about ourselves and society. I hope you found this very brief explorations useful, provocative, or both!

Sources:

Many of the above ideas are just schematic. Further, many are not original. My sources include:

The videos:

Aesthetic Appreciation: Crash Course Philosophy #30

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZ5duzln2wI&t=61s>

Aesthetics Philosophy of the Arts

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eRNaLD10mk&t=133s>

Print article:

and The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on Aesthetics

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/aestheti/>