**Aesthetic Sensibility and Taste**

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Aesthetic sensibility and personal development Despite David Hume’s (1757) ingenious arguments to the contrary, the notion of a fixed “standard of taste” is unrealistic. This is true whether we seek this standard in the form of a group of ideal critics or judges, as Hume suggested, or whether we follow the Birkhoffs of the world in searching for quantifiable measures of aesthetic value. Regardless, the lack of a fixed or objective standard doesn’t stop us from seeking to improve our taste [[1]](#footnote-1)and encounter more rewarding aesthetic experiences. The development of taste and aesthetic sensibility is an ongoing process. But how do we know where to look for these more rewarding experiences as we undertake this process of developing our taste? Herwitz (2008) offers some useful suggestions, arguing that “taste is a circular and constructivist enterprise. We are led by others because they elevate our taste to their level, and this because we already have taste” (p. 52). Even so, we are left to ask how we are able to gain an initial foothold in this process. One suggestion comes from neuroaesthetics (Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999), which seeks to uncover the evolutionarily hardwired tendencies that shape our preferences. Certainly, our preferences and tastes are constrained by our biological makeup, but they are not rigidly determined by them. What we know about an artwork or other aesthetic object affects our appreciation of it. This seems like a truism, but it poses problems for nativist accounts of aesthetic preference. A vivid example comes from Saito (2010), in which the author discusses the example of a lavishly kept green lawn in Arizona. Superficially, the lawn might be visually appealing—the kind of lawn that would make any suburban homeowner jealous. Yet once we come to understand what goes into maintaining such a lawn in the middle of the desert—in particular, the burden it places on the local environment—it is likely to lose some of its appeal. It might even be perceived as garish or tacky, in much the same way that a previously admired painting loses its luster when it turns out to be a forgery. In other words, we do not just respond automatically and passively to aesthetic stimuli. Furthermore, our differential responses to artworks and other aesthetic objects cannot be simply a matter of differences in processing fluency (think back to Berlyne’s modified Wundt curve). How can we better understand the effects of such background knowledge on our aesthetic responses? This is another underexplored question for cognitive science to consider.

1. Taste has been variously understood as

   1. the capacity to take pleasure in certain artistic and natural objects
   2. the capacity to identify the constituent elements in such objects, and
   3. the capacity to discern certain special properties.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)