Encyclopedia Britannica Entry - "Aesthetics"

Aesthetics, also spelled esthetics, is 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, focusing on Western aesthetic thought and its development.

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 the 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 focused 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.

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 our taste we betray ourselves—not merely a small part of ourselves 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. In contrast, the philistine (or at least one kind of philistine) puts moral values above all others and rejects any aesthetics that does not conform to them. But both the aesthete and the philistine fail 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, 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? Edmund 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, critics try to justify their aesthetic judgments, seeking reasons that will persuade others to see what the critics regard 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.

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 *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.

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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.