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A NEW MEASURE OF 'GOOD TASTE' IN VISUAL ART

H. J. Eysenck*

Abstract—This article introduces a new test of visual aesthetic sensitivity, the VAST. This test consists of 42 pairs of non-representational figures, drawn by an artist and arranged in such a way that each pair contains an original and a version slightly altered by the artist to incorporate various types of faults. Test items were only accepted after unanimous agreement between expert judges. The score is the number of figures correctly identified as superior. A number of studies are reported from cross-cultural comparisons between European adults and children, and Japanese and Chinese adults and children, showing that preference judgements are very similar between these various groups, and are no more alike between the two mongol races than they are between either of them and British subjects. The test has greater face validity because of the high aesthetic value of the items, as compared with previous tests, and scores are uncorrelated with intelligence or personality, suggesting that visual aesthetic sensitivity is relatively independent of these external factors.

In the literature there are several tests of 'good taste' in visual aesthetic judgements, such as the Maitland-Graves Design Judgement Test [1] and the Barron-Welsh Art Scale [2, 3], but on the whole these have not been very successful. They have been criticised on psychometric grounds in studies which demonstrate errors in design and lack of validity in discriminating artists from non-artists [4–8]. One major drawback of these and other similar tests is that the stimuli are clearly of low artistic interest; a test to be genuinely a measure of aesthetic sensitivity would have to show some evidence that judgements made on the basis of the drawings provided were truly 'aesthetic' in a meaningful way.

In order to provide such a test, the writer collaborated with Götz, the representational German painter, in the construction of such a test [9]. There are several versions of this test, differing in degree of difficulty. Each version consists of 42 pairs of drawings, one of which is 'right' and the other 'wrong'. Figure 1 shows three typical items, illustrating easy, middling and difficult item levels. The difficulty level of an item is judged in terms of the proportion of correct choices made by a random group of subjects, with 50% constituting the chance level (impossibly difficult), and 100% constituting the opposite extreme of impossibly easy. The item at the top is an example of an easy item, with an average proportion of correct answers of 95%. The middle item constitutes a difficult item, with an average proportion of correct answers of 60%. The bottom item is an example of middling difficulty, with an average proportion of correct answers of 79%. These proportions are for a sample of 111 British university students without any special artistic training.

In the construction of the test, the artist first drew the 'good' picture, and then made certain alterations which intentionally incorporated faults in the design. Having completed the set of pairs, he then asked eight well-known painters to go through the test and make their choices. A pair was only accepted if all eight judges gave unanimous agreement. Thus we have a professional criterion as the basis of the scoring procedure.

The instructions emphasized not so much the individual's preference for one item or the other, but rather the *quality* of the design. The test is usually given as a group test, the items being presented on a slide projector, although there is also a printed version which can be given to subjects individually. Instructions are as follows: "You will be shown a series of 42 pairs of designs; each pair consists of two rather similar designs. One of these is



Fig. 1. Easy (No. 27, top), difficult (No. 3, middle), and medium difficult (No. 9, bottom) items of the Aesthetic Sensitivity Scale.

constructed to be more harmonious in its configuration than the other. Look carefully at the two designs, and you will see that the less harmonious design contains errors and faults; this judgement is based on the unanimous judgement of a group of experts, painters and graphic artists. Your task is to discover which of the two designs is the better one, i.e. the more harmonious. Sometimes the 'better' design will be on the right,

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sometimes on the left. Look carefully, and take your time before coming to a decision. It is only when all subjects taking part in the experiment have made their decision and written 'R' [for right] or 'L' [for left] after the corresponding number of the design, that we will go on to the next design. The particular number of each design being shown will be called out.

"Note that you are not asked to say which design you find more pleasant. Your task is to discover which of the designs is the more harmonious one. If there are any questions, please ask them now."

What reasons do we have for considering these judgements to be 'aesthetic'? There are positive and negative reasons. In the first place, most of the non-aesthetic grounds for judgements which are ever-present in everyday life situations are absent here. Such judgements might be made in terms of the fame of the painter, preference for the type of subject matter painted (nude, seascape, still-life), the estimated financial value of the work, or even the type of frame used; none of these obviously apply in the present case. Neither is there any evidence that irrelevant features of the individual, such as personality or intelligence, play any part; correlations with intelligence and various personality traits have been found universally to be low or non-significant. Thus the major irrelevant sources of judgement are ruled out empirically.

On the positive side we may say that to the original artist, the painters who acted as judges and the majority of artistically trained people who have undergone the test, the items seem to possess genuine aesthetic qualities, and they made their judgements explicitly in terms of aesthetic considerations. On the whole, therefore, we may conclude that the test measures some form of aesthetic sensitivity, and possesses some form of face validity at least.

Can it be argued that the choices are a function of training, and do not indicate any form of objective, innate 'good taste'? If that were so, we would expect that children who had artistic training would do better than those who did not. However, the differences found were quite small and mainly insignificant; thus aesthetic training of the usual type given in school did not seem to determine the scores of the children investigated.

We might expect, if the hypothesis of training as being instrumental in obtaining high scores were true, that older children, who presumably would have had more training than young ones, would do better on the test than young children. On the whole the changes in scores are quite small, and show poor correlation with age. This hypothesis, too, would therefore have to be abandoned.

It might be supposed that adults, having a much longer period of formal or informal training in aesthetic sensitivity than children, would do better than children, but on the whole, although they do a little better, the differences are quite small and often insignificant. Certainly the results do not give any support for the hypothesis that educational and 'training' factors are largely responsible for differences in the scores on the test.

Possibly the most important reason for not believing that formal or informal training had much to do with scores on the test is the fact that children and adults growing up in different cultures obtain scores similar to those of children and adults growing up in the same culture as the originator of the test, and the artists who constituted the panel whose decisions endorsed the choice of items. One of our early studies dealt with the cross-cultural comparison on our test of English and Japanese subjects [10]. The hypothesis to be tested was that: "If the properties which constitute aesthetic superiority in one country are different from those in another country, being produced by training and experience rather than by innate factors, then considerable differences might be found in comparing English with Japanese students and children".

One hundred and seventy-one Japanese boys and 156

Japanese girls, aged 11 to 14 years, were tested using the same method as previously used on 204 male and 165 female English children of similar age. Also tested were 145 male Japanese students and 163 female Japanese students, compared with 38 male and 73 female English students. Table 1 gives the scores for the Japanese children. These should be compared with the mean of the English children, which was 30.40, with a standard deviation of 4.88. The mean scores of the Japanese boys and girls are significantly higher than those of the English children, and indeed every age group in the Japanese sample has higher scores than the English children, with the exception of the 12-year-olds; it is not clear why this particular group has fallen behind the Japanese average.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations by age for boys and girls

Age	Sample size	Mean	Standard deviation
Boys			
11	39	32.41	5.11
12	46	30.57	4.73
13	46	33.80	5.06
14	40	35.75	3.35
Total	171	33.07	5.01
Girls			
11	38	33.16	5.36
12	42	30.88	5.18
13	40	36.25	3.95
14	36	35.64	3.99
Total	156	33.91	5.16

Table 2 gives corresponding data for the English and Japanese students. Here it will be seen that the English students are significantly superior by *t*-test ($p < 0.001$), both the male and female groups. In fact, the Japanese children are superior to the Japanese students, both males and females, while the English students are superior to the English children, both males and females. It is not clear why there should be such age differences, running in opposite directions for the Japanese and English groups. It is possible that chance sampling differences might have produced this effect, but it is of course also possible that the original aesthetic sensitivity of Japanese children is spoiled by their education, while that of English children is enhanced. This does not seem a very likely hypothesis, and we must await further evidence before admitting the effect to be a real rather than an artificial one.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of English and Japanese students

Group	Sample size	Mean score	Standard deviation
English male students	38	35.79	4.66
Japanese male students	145	31.72	4.48
English female students	73	34.68	5.26
Japanese female students	163	32.38	4.09

The comparison of English with Japanese children and adults suggests that the Japanese are certainly not inferior with respect to their visual aesthetic sensitivity, and may indeed be superior. At least as far as the fairly large samples of children are concerned, the superiority of the Japanese seems fairly clear. As far as the students are concerned, the English sample is perhaps too small to be definite about their superiority, although the significance level of the difference is acceptable. It might be best

to leave any final decision about relative superiority until the findings of this study have been replicated. Any differences which might be found would not be likely to be large on the basis of present results, and there certainly seems to be ample evidence here for cross-cultural similarity in the evaluation of the test objects included in our test.

A similar study was undertaken with Chinese children and adults in Hong Kong [11]. "The results suggest considerable similarity in the aesthetic reactions of Hong Kong, Japanese and English children but with less than perfect agreement. There is no evidence of greater similarity of the two racially similar Chinese and Japanese groups, as opposed to the English group" (p. 1326). Thus Chinese and Japanese children and adults give similar scores, sometimes higher, sometimes lower, as compared with English and German children and adults. It is difficult to believe that the formal or informal training which they have received in visual aesthetics can be sufficiently similar to account for these similarities.

One further argument supports this conclusion. We can look at the difficulty levels of the 42 items and compare them from one culture to another. Given the different types of training and experience of Oriental and Occidental children and adults, one would not expect these difficulty levels to be similar or identical. In actual fact correlations between different groups are quite high in this respect, an item which appears difficult to a German or English child or adult also being difficult for a Japanese or Chinese child. These data, too, therefore support the view that we are dealing with an ability which is relatively independent of training, and does not pay heed to cultural boundaries.

The VAST (Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test) is still in the early stages of development, but it would seem that it taps one important aspect of human ability, which, independently of

intelligence and personality, determines the degree of good or bad taste. Future work with this test should show to what extent this conclusion is justified.

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