

On Aesthetics—An Overview

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and appreciation of **art, beauty** and **good taste**. It has also been defined as "**critical reflection** on art, culture and nature". The **word** "aesthetics" derives from the **Greek** "aisthetikos", meaning "of sense perception". Along with [Ethics](#), aesthetics is part of **axiology** (the study of **values** and **value judgments**).

In practice, we distinguish between **aesthetic judgments** (the appreciation of any object, not necessarily an art object) and **artistic judgments** (the appreciation or criticism of a work of art). Thus aesthetics is broader in scope than the **philosophy of art**. It is also broader than the **philosophy of beauty**, in that it applies to **any** of the responses we might expect works of art or entertainment to elicit, whether **positive** or **negative**.

Aestheticians ask **questions** like "What is a work of art?", "What makes a work of art successful?", "Why do we find certain things beautiful?", "How can things of very different categories be considered equally beautiful?", "Is there a connection between art and morality?", "Can art be a vehicle of truth?", "Are aesthetic judgments objective statements or purely subjective expressions of personal attitudes?", "Can aesthetic judgments be improved or trained?"

In very general terms, it examines what makes something **beautiful, sublime, disgusting, fun, cute, silly, entertaining, pretentious, discordant, harmonious, boring, humorous** or **tragic**.

Aesthetic Judgements

[Back to Top](#)
[Links to an external site.](#)

Judgements of aesthetic value rely on our ability to discriminate at a **sensory** level, but they usually go beyond that. Judgments of beauty are **sensory, emotional, and intellectual** all at once.

According to [Immanuel Kant](#), beauty is **objective** and **universal** (i.e. certain things are beautiful to everyone). But there is a second concept involved in a viewer's interpretation of beauty, that of **taste**, which is **subjective** and varies according to **class, cultural background** and **education**.

In fact, it can be argued that all aesthetic judgments are **culturally conditioned** to some extent, and can **change over time** (e.g. Victorians in Britain often saw African

sculpture as ugly, but just a few decades later, Edwardian audiences saw the same sculptures as being beautiful).

Judgments of aesthetic value can also become linked to judgments of **economic**, **political** or **moral** value (e.g. we might judge an expensive car to be beautiful partly because it is desirable as a status symbol, or we might judge it to be repulsive partly because it signifies for us over-consumption and offends our political or moral values.)

Aestheticians question how aesthetic judgments can be **unified across art forms** (e.g. we can call a person, a house, a symphony, a fragrance and a mathematical proof beautiful, but what characteristics do they share which give them that status?)

It should also be borne in mind that the **imprecision** and **ambiguity** arising from the use of **language** in aesthetic judgments can lead to much **confusion** (e.g. two completely different feelings derived from two different people can be represented by an identical expression, and conversely a very similar response can be articulated by very different language).

What is Art?

[Back to Top](#)

[Links to an external site.](#)

In recent years, **the word "art"** is roughly used as an abbreviation for **creative art** or **fine art**, where some **skill** is being used to express the artist's creativity, or to engage the audience's aesthetic sensibilities, or to draw the audience towards consideration of the "finer" things. If the skill being used is more lowbrow or practical, the word "**craft**" is often used instead of art. Similarly, if the skill is being used in a commercial or industrial way, it may be considered "**design**" (or "**applied art**"). Some have argued, though, that the difference between fine art and applied art or crafts has more to do with **value judgments** made about the art than any clear definitional difference.

Since the **Dadaist** art movement of the early 20th Century, it can **no longer** even be assumed that **all art aims at beauty**. Some have argued that whatever art schools and museums and artists **get away with** should be considered art, regardless of formal definitions (the so-called **institutional definition of art**).

Some commentators (including [John Dewey](#)) suggest that it is the **process** by which a work of art is created or viewed that makes it art, not any **inherent** feature of an object or how well received it is by the institutions of the art world (e.g. if a writer **intended** a piece to be a poem, it **is** one whether other poets acknowledge it or not, whereas if exactly the same set of words was written by a journalist as notes, these would **not** constitute a poem).

Others, including **Leo Tolstoy** (1828 - 1910), claim that what makes something art (or not) is **how it is experienced by its audience**, not the intention of its creator.

Functionalists like **Monroe Beardsley** (1915 - 1985) argue that whether or not a piece counts as art depends on what **function** it plays in a particular **context** (e.g. the same Greek vase may play a **non-artistic** function in one context - carrying wine - and an **artistic** function in another context).

At the **metaphysical** and **ontological** level, when we watch, for example, a play being performed, are we judging one work of art (the whole performance), or are we judging **separately** the writing of the play, the direction and setting, the performances of the various actors, the costumes, etc? Similar considerations also apply to music, painting, etc. Since the rise of **conceptual art** in the 20th Century, the problem is even more acute (e.g. what exactly are we judging when we look at **Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes**?)

Aestheticians also question what the **value** of art is. Is art a means of gaining some kind of **knowledge**? Is it a tool of **education** or **indoctrination** or **enculturation**? Is it perhaps just **politics** by other means? Does art give us an insight into the **human condition**? Does it make us more **moral**? Can it uplift us **spiritually**? Might the value of art for the **artist** be quite different than its value for the **audience**? Might the value of art to **society** be different than its value to **individuals**?

Aesthetic Universals

[Back to Top](#)
[Links to an external site.](#)

The contemporary American philosopher **Denis Dutton** (1944 - 2010) has identified seven **universal signatures** in human aesthetics. Although there are possible exceptions and objections to many of them, they represent a useful **starting point** for the consideration of aesthetics:

- **Expertise or Virtuosity** (technical artistic skills are cultivated, recognized and admired)
- **Non-Utilitarian Pleasure** (people enjoy art for art's sake, and don't demand practical value of it)
- **Style** (artistic objects and performances satisfy rules of composition that place them in recognizable styles)
- **Criticism** (people make a point of judging, appreciating and interpreting works of art)
- **Imitation** (with a few important exceptions (e.g. music, abstract painting), works of art simulate experiences of the world)
- **Special Focus** (art is set aside from ordinary life and made a dramatic focus of experience)

- **Imagination** (artists and their audiences entertain hypothetical worlds in the theatre of the imagination)

History of Aesthetics

[Back to Top](#)
[Links to an external site.](#)

The **Ancient Greek** philosophers initially felt that aesthetically appealing objects were beautiful **in and of themselves**. [Plato](#) felt that beautiful objects incorporated **proportion, harmony** and **unity** among their parts. [Aristotle](#) found that the universal elements of beauty were **order, symmetry** and **definiteness**.

According to **Islam**, human works of art are **inherently flawed** compared to the work of **Allah**, and to attempt to depict in a realistic form any animal or person is insolence to Allah. This has had the effect of narrowing the field of Muslim artistic possibility to such forms as **mosaics, calligraphy, architecture** and **geometric** and **floral** patterns.

Indian art evolved with an emphasis on inducing special **spiritual** or philosophical states in the audience, or with representing them **symbolically**.

As long ago as the 5th Century B.C., **Chinese** philosophers were already arguing about aesthetics. **Confucius** (551 - 479 B.C.) emphasized the role of the arts and humanities (especially music and poetry) in broadening human nature. His near contemporary **Mozi** (470 - 391 B.C.), however, argued that music and fine arts were classist and wasteful, benefiting the rich but not the common people.

Western **Medieval** art (at least until the revival of classical ideals during the **Renaissance**) was highly **religious** in focus, and was typically funded by the **Church**, powerful ecclesiastical individuals, or wealthy secular patrons. A religiously uplifting message was considered more important than figurative accuracy or inspired composition. The skills of the artisan were considered **gifts from God** for the sole purpose of disclosing God to mankind.

With the shift in Western philosophy from the late 17th Century onwards, **German** and **British** thinkers in particular emphasized **beauty** as the key component of art and of the aesthetic experience, and saw art as necessarily aiming at beauty. For **Friedrich Schiller** (1759 - 1805), aesthetic appreciation of beauty is the most perfect **reconciliation** of the **sensual** and **rational** parts of human nature. [Hegel](#) held that art is the first stage in which the **absolute spirit** is immediately manifest to sense-perception, and is thus an **objective** rather than a subjective revelation of beauty. For [Schopenhauer](#), aesthetic contemplation of beauty is the most **free** that the pure intellect can be from the dictates of **will**.

British [Intuitionists](#) like the **3rd Earl of Shaftesbury** (1671 - 1713) claimed that beauty is just the sensory equivalent of **moral goodness**. More analytic theorists like **Lord Kames** (1696 - 1782), **William Hogarth** (1697 - 1764) and [Edmund Burke](#) hoped to reduce beauty to some **list of attributes**, while others like **James Mill** (1773 - 1836) and **Herbert Spencer** (1820 - 1903) strove to link beauty to some **scientific theory** of psychology or biology.