Introduction to Philosophy (HU110)

Chapter 6: Aesthetics

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Chapter Outline
1. Definition of Aesthetics
2. Aesthetics as Philosophy of Art
3. History of Aesthetic
4. Principle of Aesthetics
5. Aesthetics Judgments
6. Aesthetics Universals
7. Aesthetics in Particular Fields and Art Forms

Objectives
After studying this chapter, you will be able to answer the following questions:
• What is Aesthetics?
• What is art?
• What should we judge when we judge art?
• What should art be like?
• What is the value of art?
• What is the history of aesthetics?
• What are the principles of aesthetics?
• What is Aesthetic Judgment?
• What are Aesthetic Universal?
• What are the particular fields and art forms of Aesthetics?

I. Definition

Aesthetics: អស្ថិភាព សួយដ្ឋាន

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The term **aesthetics** comes from the Greek αἰσθητική "aisthetike" and was coined by the philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1735 to mean "the science of how things are known via the senses."

**Aesthetics** is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature of art and the criteria of artistic judgment.

• The classical conception of art as the imitation of nature was formulated by **Plato** and developed by **Aristotle** in his *Poetics*.

• While modern thinkers such as **Immanuel Kant**, **F. W. Schelling**, **Benedetto Croce**, and **Ernst Cassirer** have emphasized the creative and symbolic aspects of art.

Today the word "**aesthetics**" may mean:

1. the study of the aesthetic (all the aesthetic phenomena);
2. the study of perception (of such phenomena); and
3. the study of art (as a specific expression of what is perceived as aesthetic)

The major problem in aesthetics concerns the nature of the beautiful. Generally speaking there are two basic approaches to the problem of beauty:

**The objective approach** asserts that beauty inheres in the object and that judgments concerning it may have objective validity.

**The subjective approach** tends to identify the beautiful with that which pleases the observer.
Outstanding defenders of the objective position were Plato, Aristotle, and G. E. Lessing, and of the subjective position, Edmund Burke and David Hume.

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant mediated between the two tendencies by showing that aesthetic judgment has universal validity despite its subjective nature.

Among the modern philosophers interested in aesthetics, the most important are Croce, R. G. Collingwood, Cassirer, and John Dewey.

Aesthetic theory concerns itself with questions such as:

- What is a work of art?
- What makes a work of art successful?
- Can art be a vehicle of truth?

- Does art work by expressing the feelings of the artist, communicating feeling, arousing feeling, purging or symbolizing feeling?
- What is the difference between understanding a work of art, and failing to do so?

- How is it that we take aesthetic pleasure in surprising things: tragedies, or terrifying natural scenes?
- Why can things of very different categories equally seem beautiful?
• Does the perception of beauty have connections with moral virtue, and with seeing something universal or essential, and is the importance of aesthetic education and practice associated with this?

II. Aesthetics as Philosophy of Arts

2.1 What counts as "art?"
Art, the product of creative human activity in which materials are shaped or selected to convey an idea, emotion, or visually interesting form.

The word art can refer to the visual arts, including painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, decorative arts, crafts, and other visual works that combine materials or forms.
We also use the word *art* in a more general sense to encompass other forms of creative activity, such as *dance*, *drama*, and *music*, or even to describe skill in almost any activity, such as "the art of bread making" or "the art of travel." In this article *art* refers to the visual arts.

Artists, philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists and programmers all use the notion of art in their respective fields, and give it operational definitions that are not very similar to each other.

Further it is clear that even the basic meaning of the term "art" has changed several times over the centuries, and has changed within the 20th century as well.

The main recent sense of the word "art" is roughly as an abbreviation for *creative art* or "fine art."

It means that 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.

*Leo Tolstoy*, claims that what makes something art or not is how it is experienced by its audience, not by the intention of its creator.

*Monroe Beardsley* argue that whether or not a piece counts as art depends on what function it plays in a particular context: the same Greek vase may play a non-artistic function in one context (carrying wine), and an artistic function in another context (helping us to appreciate the beauty of the human figure).
2.2 What Should We Judge When We Judge Art?

• Every person might judge art separately on his or her own merits, and each costume or line is its own work of art (with perhaps the director having the job of unifying them all).

• Similar problems arise for music, film and even painting. For instance, are we to judge the painting itself, the work of the painter, or perhaps the painting in its context of presentation by the museum workers?

2.3 What should art be like?

• Many goals have been argued for art, and aestheticians often argue that some goal or another is superior in some way.

• Formal goals, creative goals, self-expression, political goals, spiritual goals, philosophical goals, and even more perceptual or aesthetic goals have all been popular pictures of what art should be like.

2.4 What is the value of art?

• Closely related to the question of what art should be like is the question of what its value is. Is art a means of gaining knowledge of some special kind?

• Does it give insight into the human condition? How does art relate to science or religion?

• Is art perhaps a tool of education, or indoctrination, or enculturation? Does art make us more moral?

• Can it uplift us spiritually? Is art perhaps politics by other means? Is there some value to sharing or expressing emotions?
• Might the value of art to society be quite different than its value to individuals? Do the values of arts differ significantly from form to form?

• Working on the intended value of art tends to help define the relations between art and other endeavors.

III. History of Aesthetics

Ancient Aesthetics
• We have examples of pre-historic art, but they are rare, and the context of their production and use is not very clear, so we can little more than guess at the aesthetic doctrines that guided their production and interpretation.

• Ancient art was largely, but not entirely, based on the six great ancient civilizations: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, India, and China.

• Art clearly does have spiritual goals in many settings, but then what exactly is the difference between religious art and religion per se? Is every religious ritual a piece of performance art, so that religious ritual is simply a subset of art?

• Each of these centers of early civilization developed a unique and characteristic style in its art.

• Greece had the most influence on the development of aesthetics in the West

• This period of Greek art saw a veneration of the human physical form and the development of corresponding skills to show musculature, poise, beauty and anatomically correct proportions.
• 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. Similarly, in the Metaphysics, Aristotle found that the universal elements of beauty were order, symmetry, and definiteness.

• According to Kapila Vatsyayan, "Classical Indian architecture, sculpture, painting, literature (kaavya), music, and dancing evolved their own rules conditioned by their respective media, but they shared with one another not only the underlying spiritual beliefs of the Indian religio-philosophic mind, but also the procedures by which the relationships of the symbol and the spiritual states were worked out in detail."

Indian Aesthetics

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

Islamic Aesthetics

• Islamic art is perhaps the most accessible manifestation of a complex civilization that often seems enigmatic to outsiders. Through its use of color and its balance between design and form, Islamic art creates an immediate visual impact.

• Its aesthetic appeal transcends distances in time and space, as well as differences in language, culture, and creed. Islamic aesthetics emphasized the decorative function of art, or its religious functions via non-representational forms. Geometric patterns, floral patterns, arabesques, and abstract forms were common, as was calligraphy. Order and unity were common themes.
Chinese Aesthetics

- Chinese art has a long history of varied styles and emphases. In ancient times philosophers were already arguing about aesthetics.
- Confucius emphasized the role of the arts and humanities (especially music and poetry) in broadening human nature and aiding "li" (etiquette, the rites) in bringing us back to what is essential about humanity.
- His opponent Mozi, however, argued that music and fine arts were classist and wasteful, benefiting the rich but not the common people.

African Aesthetics

- African art existed in many forms and styles, and with fairly little influence from outside Africa. Most of it followed traditional forms and the aesthetic norms were handed down orally as well as written.
- Sculpture and performance art are prominent, and abstract and partially abstracted forms are valued, and were valued long before influence from the Western tradition began in earnest. The Nok culture is testimony to this. The mosque of Timbuktu shows that specific areas of Africa developed unique aesthetics.

Western medieval aesthetics

Surviving medieval art is highly religious in focus, and typically was funded by the Church, powerful ecclesiastical individuals, or wealthy secular patrons. Often the pieces have an intended liturgical function, such as altar pieces or statuary. Figurative examination was typically not an important goal, but being religiously uplifting was.

IV. Principles of Aesthetics

1. No reasoned argument can conclude that objects are aesthetically valuable or valueless.
2. Objects are aesthetically valuable if they possess a special aesthetic property or exhibit a special aesthetic form.
3. Objects are aesthetically valuable if they have the capacity to convey meaning or to teach general truths.
4. Objects are aesthetically valuable if they have the capacity to produce pleasure in those who experience or appreciate them.
5. Objects are aesthetically valuable if they have the capacity to convey values or beliefs central to the cultures or traditions in which they originate, or important to the artists who made them.

6. Objects are aesthetically valuable if they have the capacity to help bring about social or political change.

7. Objects are aesthetically valuable if they have the capacity to produce certain emotions we value, at least when the emotion is brought about by art rather than by life.

8. Objects are aesthetically valuable if they have the capacity to produce special non-emotional experiences, such as a feeling of autonomy or the will suspension of disbelief.

V. Aesthetic Judgments

(1) Judgments of aesthetic value clearly rely on our ability to discriminate at a sensory level.

(2) Immanuel Kant, writing in 1790, observes of a man that "If he says that canary wine is agreeable he is quite content if someone else corrects his terms and reminds him to say instead: It is agreeable to me," because "Everyone has his own (sense of) taste".

The case of "beauty" is different from mere "agreeableness" because, "If he proclaims something to be beautiful, then he requires the same liking from others; he then judges not just for himself but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things."
(3) Aesthetic judgments usually go beyond sensory discrimination.

For David Hume, delicacy of taste is not merely "the ability to detect all the ingredients in a composition", but also our sensitivity "to pains as well as pleasures, which escape the rest of mankind." Thus, the sensory discrimination is linked to capacity for pleasure.

For Kant "enjoyment" is the result when pleasure arises from sensation, but judging something to be "beautiful" has a third requirement: sensation must give rise to pleasure by engaging our capacities of reflective contemplation. Judgments of beauty are sensory, emotional, and intellectual all at once.

5.1 What Factors Are Involved In An Aesthetic Judgment?

Thus aesthetic judgments might be seen to be based on the senses, emotions, intellectual opinions, will, desires, culture, preferences, values, subconscious behavior, conscious decision, training, instinct, sociological institutions, or some complex combination of these, depending on exactly which theory one employs.

5.2 Are Different Art Forms Beautiful, Disgusting, Or Boring In The Same Way?

• A third major topic in the study of aesthetic judgment is how they are unified across art forms.

• We can call a person, a house, a symphony, a fragrance, and a mathematical proof beautiful.

• Aesthetic judgments may be culturally conditioned to some extent

• Sensory detection is linked in instinctual ways to facial expressions, and even behaviors like the gag reflex.

• Evaluations of beauty may well be linked to desirability, perhaps even to sexual desirability.

• Judgments of aesthetic value can become linked to judgments of economic, political, or moral value.

• Aesthetic judgments seem to often be at least partly intellectual and interpretative.
VI. Aesthetic Universal

The philosopher Denis Dutton identified seven universal signatures in human aesthetics:

1. Expertise or virtuosity. Technical artistic skills are cultivated, recognized, and admired.

2. Non-utilitarian pleasure. People enjoy art for art's sake, and don't demand that it keep them warm or put food on the table.

3. Style. Artistic objects and performances satisfy rules of composition that place them in a recognizable style.

4. Criticism. People make a point of judging, appreciating, and interpreting works of art.

5. Imitation. With a few important exceptions like music and abstract painting, works of art simulate experiences of the world.

6. Special focus. Art is set aside from ordinary life and made a dramatic focus of experience.

7. Imagination. Artists and their audiences entertain hypothetical worlds in the theater of the imagination.

VII. Aesthetics in Particular Fields and Art Forms

7.1 Film, Television, and Video

Film combines many diverse disciplines, each of which may have their own rules of aesthetics.

The aesthetics of cinematography are closely related to still photography, but the movement of the subject(s), or the camera and the intensities, colors, and placement of the lighting are highly important.
Sound recording, editing, and mixing are other, highly important areas of film, often closely related with the musical score. As in Theatre, art direction, in the design of the sets and shooting locations also applies, as well as costume design and makeup. All of these disciplines are closely inter-twined and must be brought together by the aesthetic sensibilities of the director.

7.2 Two-Dimensional and Plastic Arts

- Aesthetic considerations within the visual arts are usually associated with the sense of vision.

- A painting or sculpture, however, is also perceived spatially by recognized associations and context, and even to some extent by the senses of smell, hearing, and touch. The form of the work can be subject to an aesthetic as much as the content.

7.3 Digital Art

- A new art form struggling for acceptance is digital art, a by-product of computer programming that raises new questions about what truly constitutes art.

- Although paralleling many of the aesthetics in traditional media, digital art can additionally draw upon the aesthetic qualities of cross-media tactile relationships; interactivity; autonomous generativity; complexity and interdependence of relationships; suspense; and playfulness.

7.3 Maps

- Aesthetics in cartography relates to the visual experience of map reading and can take two forms: responses to the map itself as an aesthetic object (e.g., through detail, colour, and form) and also the subject of the map symbolised, often the landscape (e.g., a particular expression of terrain which forms an imagined visual experience of the aesthetic).
7.4 Marketing

- As opposed to Industrial Design which focuses on the aesthetic qualities of consumer products (see below), the use of aesthetics in marketing concerns itself with the "trade dress" of a product, such as its branding, its commercial representation, or the reputation of its producer.

- Marketing professionals may tickle the consumer's aesthetic appreciation of sassiness, sophistication, color harmony, stylishness, catchy jingles, slogans, craftsmanship, soothingness, attentiveness, authenticity, or the related perceived experiences associated with product consumption.

7.5 Music

- Some of the aesthetic elements expressed in music include lyricism, harmony, hypnotism, emotiveness, temporal dynamics, volume dynamics, resonance, playfulness, color, subtlety, relatedness, depth, and mood (see musical development).

- Aesthetics in music are often believed to be highly sensitive to their context: what sounds good in modern rock music might sound terrible in the context of the early baroque age.

7.6 Performing arts

- Performing arts appeal to our aesthetics of storytelling, grace, balance, class, timing, strength, shock, humor, costume, irony, beauty, drama, suspense, and sensuality.

- Whereas live stage performance is usually constrained by the physical reality at hand, film performance can further add the aesthetic elements of large-scale action, fantasy, and a complex interwoven musical score. Performance art often consciously mixes the aesthetics of several forms.

7.7 Literature

- In poetry, short stories, novels and non-fiction, authors use a variety of techniques to appeal to our aesthetic values. Depending on the type of writing an author may employ rhythm, illustrations, structure, time shifting, juxtaposition, dualism, imagery, fantasy, suspense, analysis, humor/cynicism, and thinking aloud.
7.8 Gastronomy

• Although food is a basic and frequently experienced commodity, careful attention to the aesthetic possibilities of foodstuffs can turn eating into gastronomy.

7.9 Information technology

• Aesthetics in information technology has focused upon the study of human-computer interaction and creating user-friendly devices and software applications; aesthetically pleasing "graphical user interfaces" have been shown to improve productivity.

Chefs inspire our aesthetic enjoyment through the visual sense using colour and arrangement; they inspire our senses of taste and smell using spices, diversity/contrast, anticipation, seduction, and decoration/garnishes.
Software itself has aesthetic dimensions ("software aesthetics"), as do information-technology-mediated processes and experiences such as computer video games and virtual reality simulations.

• Digital culture is a distinct aesthetic to judge the appeal of digital environments such as Web browsers, websites, and icons, as well as visual and aural art produced exclusively with digital technologies. The notion of cyberspace has sometimes been linked to the concept of the sublime.

### 7.10 Industrial Design

Designers heed many aesthetic qualities to improve the marketability of manufactured products: smoothness, shininess/reflectivity, texture, pattern, curviness, color, simplicity, usability, velocity, symmetry, naturalness, and modernism.

The staff of the Design Aesthetics section focuses on design, appearance and the way people perceive products.

### 7.11 Architecture and interior design

• Although structural integrity, cost, the nature of building materials, and the functional utility of the building contribute heavily to the design process, architects can still apply aesthetic considerations to buildings and related architectural structures.
• Common aesthetic design principles include ornamentation, edge delineation, texture, flow, solemnity, symmetry, color, granularity, the interaction of sunlight and shadows, transcendence, and harmony.

7.12 Urban life

Nearly half of mankind lives in cities; although it represents a lofty goal, planning and achieving urban aesthetics (beautification) involves a good deal of historical luck, happenstance, and indirect gestalt.

7.13 Landscape Design

• Landscape designers draw upon design elements such as axis, line, landform, horizontal and vertical planes, texture, and scale to create aesthetic variation within the landscape.

• They may additionally make use of aesthetic elements such as pools or fountains of water, plants, seasonal variance, stonework, fragrance, exterior lighting, statues, and lawns.
7.14 Fashion Design

Fashion designers use a variety of techniques to allow people to express the truth about their unconscious minds by way of their clothing.

• To create wearable personality designers use fabric, cut, color, scale, references to the past, texture, color harmony, distressing, transparency, insignia, accessories, beading and embroidery.

• It is also used to find the average size of things, to make a product suitable for a high number of customers.

Thank You!