

THE MODERN CONCEPT OF THE AUTONOMY OF ART: A
STUDY OF THE SECULAR ORIGIN OF MODERN AESTHETICS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical discipline, distinct from ethics and metaphysics, that focusses solely on art, took its definite form as part of an integral system in the late eighteenth century, in Kant's philosophy. Kant's aesthetics constituted the philosophical elaboration of a body of concepts developed in treatises in France and England first and in Germany later, over about a century(1). The term aesthetics was coined by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten but opinions differ as to whether he can be considered the founder of the discipline. However, as Paul O. Kristeller states, Baumgarten is the founder of aesthetics to the extent that he first conceived of - though he did not adequately develop - a general theory of the arts as a separate discipline within the system of philosophy(2).

Although historians generally recognize that aesthetics as a distinct discipline emerged in the eighteenth century, they also usually apply the term to earlier phases of Western thought, starting with Classical antiquity(3). This, however, should be done only with reservations, since such basic terms of modern aesthetics as "art" and "beauty" bore quite a different meaning in antiquity, as well as in Medieval times and the Renaissance.

2. ART AS CRAFT

The term art comes from the Latin *ars*, which is the equivalent of the Greek *techné*. *Techné* in Classical Greek means craft, skilled production(4). As Plato states it, *techné* proceeds from rational principles and rules, and, as defined by Aristotle, art is a kind of activity consciously

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controlled, reasoned and based on knowledge, that deals with the coming into being of a preconceived result(5). The stage of inspiration, connected with the art of poetry in particular, is conceived by Plato as "divine madness", something outside the artist; *techne* consists in the cognitive procedure that controls and brings into being the results of the poet's inspiration(6). The Greek term for beauty, *kalon*, on the other hand, was never distinguished from the moral good. It was associated with art, but only in a very general sense(7). When Plato discusses beauty in the Symposium and Phaedrus, he is not referring to works of art but to human persons, in the sense of natural beauty, beauty of the soul and beauty of cognitions without distinction(8). Similarly, the Latin equivalent *pulchrum* of the Greek *kalon* does not particularly denote aesthetic beauty in the modern sense.

Only in later thinkers does beauty start to acquire an increasingly aesthetic significance. In the third century A.D., the Neoplatonist Plotinus, in the *Ennead*, a treatise on beauty that exerted an immense influence in the development of the concept of aesthetics through the centuries, deals not only with the beauty of the soul, but with the beauty of sensuous things, as works of sculpture, architecture and music. The beauty of man-made objects is, according to Plotinus, a symbol of cosmic harmony and derives, ultimately, in common with the Soul, from the One cosmic principle, the Good(9). Plotinus' ideas about beauty permeated the works of Augustine, in the sixth century A.D. The speculation of these thinkers concerning the various arts, neither occupies a major place in their theories, nor implies a separate system of aesthetics in the modern sense(10).

As Tatarkiewicz discusses in a paper entitled "Classification of arts in antiquity", there were numerous classifications of the arts in ancient times, none of which faced the possibility of considering what we call fine arts as a separate group of arts. A widely known classification was that of the Sophists, who, considering the aim of art, distinguished between useful arts, which are necessary for life, such as architecture, and pleasurable arts, which are cultivated for amusement, like painting(11). Plato and Aristotle divided arts from the viewpoint of their relation to reality: those which produce real things and those which produce images. Architecture was considered to belong to the first category as it produces a new reality, while painting to the second as it imitates the existing reality(12). The best known and most generally accepted classification in antiquity nevertheless, was the division of arts into vulgar and liberal. The liberal were intellectual arts, superior to the vulgar that required physical effort.

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Galen's classification in the second century B.C., mentioned as liberal arts rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic and astronomy, as well as music(13).

The classification of the liberal arts was bequeathed to the early Middle Ages and retained down to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Architecture, sculpture and painting were listed among the subordinate mechanical arts, in the scheme of seven mechanical arts formulated by Hugo of St. Victor in correspondence to the seven liberal arts. Many important authors of the subsequent period, including St. Thomas Aquinas, adopted this classification(14). Whereas poetry and music, included in the liberal arts, were taught at many universities at that period, the visual arts were confined to the artisans' guilds. Furthermore, the treatises written either on the liberal or on some of the mechanical arts have a strictly technical character and do not attempt to connect these arts with others or with philosophy(15). The concept of beauty occasionally discussed by Aquinas and a few other thinkers, is not related to the arts but, as for instance in Augustine's theory, constitute a metaphysical attribute of God and his creation(16).

3. ART AS AN INTELLECTUAL ACTIVITY

It was not until the late Renaissance that the three visual arts, painting, sculpture and architecture were separated from the crafts. The term *Arti del Disegno* coined by Vasari, was the predecessor of the *Beaux Arts*. It was in Florence in 1563 that the first Academy of Art, *Accademia del Disegno*, was formed by the painters, sculptors and architects who no longer belonged to the craftsmen's guilds(17). Scientific subjects as geometry and anatomy were included in the teachings of the Academy. The major significance that some sciences played for the visual arts was generally emphasized. The institution of the Academies was the outcome of an attempt introduced in fifteenth century Florence to define the visual arts as requiring intellectual activity, that is to say as liberal. This was probably seen as a means to enhance the social and cultural position of the visual arts. Hence, a particular type of literature, quite different from the technical treatises of antiquity and the Middle Ages, appeared as a necessary support to the work of art(18).

In fifteenth century Florence, in Alberti's and Leonardo's writings alike, the relation of art to such natural sciences as optics and anatomy is emphasized. In his paper "On the Emergence of Aesthetics", Richard Woodfield states that Alberti's *De Pictura*, the first Western art theoretical

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text, manifests an application of the humanist principles of rhetoric to an analysis of painting(19). The work of art is treated as an extension of the physical world in terms of science, at the expense of its direct connection to the divine and the metaphysical. The continuum between the physical and the divine worlds however is not yet broken, but through its mundane representations the divine is drawn rather towards the phenomenal world than the opposite. Thus in "*De re aedificatoria*", the first architectural treatise of the Renaissance, Alberti justifies his preference for round forms in sacred architecture on the ground of nature's love for the round. Nature, as understood by Alberti, "aspires to absolute perfection, she is the best and divine teacher of all things"(20) This can probably be considered as the first step towards the release of the visual image into an autonomous world.

4. THE EMANCIPATION OF ART FROM THE DIVINE AND THE EMPIRICAL WORLD

It was in the age of Mannerism in the first half of the sixteenth century, that the work of art was finally separated from its relation to the divine world. The visual arts gradually lost their meaning as crafts and turned into a world in themselves, constituted in showpieces of the virtuosity of the artists. Architecture at that period lost its Renaissance clarity and became partially, displaying the virtuosity of the artist for its own sake rather than for any religious significance(21). The emancipation of the visual arts from the crafts was interrelated with the increase of their social prestige and the rise of an amateur public to which they were addressed. In fifteenth century Florence, patrons shifted their interest from the works of art as pieces of craftsmanship to works as *demonstrazioni*, that is to say as a display of mental ingenuity from the artists(22). It has been argued in Marxist terms by the social historian Hauser that this change in the commodity function of art introduces its role in modernity(23).

As Richard Woodfield argues in the article already referred to, it was Catholic Church itself, with the Counter-Reformation that forced the separation between religious and secular art during the period of Mannerism. The spiritual world of the Renaissance, where the secular was more or less extended to incorporate the divine, was succeeded by a severe disruption of the unity of the two worlds brought about by the Protestant reformation. Protestant iconoclasm, with its attack on visual imagery as

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materially corrupt could be considered as the first step towards stripping visual arts of their relation with the divine world as it had been established by the Renaissance. The Classical thematology of the Renaissance was no more subjected to Christian allegorization; it tended to be regarded as a "perversion of thought", instead(24).

In a reaction to the Protestant reformation, the Council of Trent maintained the utility of images, "not, however that any divinity or virtue is believed to be in them ... but ... the honour ... is referred to the prototypes which they represent ..."(25). Although the Council intended to re-assert a direct emotional relation between image and spectator, patrons inclined to be antipathetic towards religious representations, and, in terms of patronage, a rigid distinction between religious and secular art was established. And while religious art followed the role prescribed by the Council of Trent, secular art became the playground of artistic skill and a source of pleasure in this sense(26). The disengagement of art from its bondage to the divine during the period of Mannerism, Woodfield argues, marks its emergence into an autonomous world.

But in order to gain its autonomy, art had to cut its ties to the empirical world as well. It was during the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, the century of Galileo and Descartes, that arts were separated from sciences and in this way from the empirical world. This gives ground to the view that the origins of modern aesthetics lay in this separation(27). The famous *Querelle des Anciens et Modernes* during the last quarter of the century, was largely due to the great development of the natural sciences(28). In the attempt to shake off the authority of Classical antiquity, the Moderns developed a systematic comparison between the various fields of human endeavour and tried to identify the reasons why some intellectual activities which we now call Fine Arts could not follow a similar kind of progress to the sciences.

With Charles Perrault's *"Parallele des Anciens et des Modernes"* (1688-96) the separation of the fine arts from the sciences is almost complete(29). In another of his writings, *"Le Cabinet des Beaux Arts"* (1690), Perrault opposes the concept of *Beaux Arts* to the *Arts Liberaux* and reaches a system of seven fine arts which is very close to the Modern system of Fine Arts, the only difference being the inclusion of Optics and Mechanics. The split between the Humanist principles of the Enlightenment and man's increased capacity to exercise control over nature, or, between Fine Arts and Mechanics, could be dated to the foundation of the first engineering school, *L' Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées*, in Paris, in

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1747(31). This split was bequeathed to Modern Movement architecture as an inner contradiction between its aesthetic and its practical self, that has not yet been resolved.

Despite the separation of the fine arts from the sciences due to their lack of progress in the scientific sense, the character of art as an intellectual activity was emphasized by the Academies which dominated artistic creation from the seventeenth till the nineteenth centuries. As a result, the organic growth that characterized the continuity of art in the earlier ages, was replaced by a convention of classicism and eclectic imitation of Renaissance models(32). The modern expression of the autonomy of art was accomplished on a theoretical ground with the development of aesthetics into a distinct philosophical discipline during the Enlightenment.

5. THE AUTONOMY OF ART DEFINED IN TERMS OF THE HUMAN SUBJECT

It may seem strange that the emergence of art into an autonomous world distinct from the divine and from nature, was actually defined in terms of the human subject. This was probably implicit in the decision of the Council of Trent, where pictorial religious art was treated from the point of view of the emotions it was intended to arise in the spectator, but finds an explicit form mainly in the philosophy of the British Empiricists and in Kant, during the Enlightenment.

While the Aristotelian concept of *entelecheia* indicated that the principle and end of the Classical work of art was inherent in the work, now the principle and end of art is situated within the mind of the human subject: that is to say, the artist on the one hand and the spectator on the other. Within the shift in the nature of human knowledge from religious and metaphysical to epistemological, which is accomplished in the eighteenth century, questions about the ontology of art are transferred into the exploration of the psychology of the human subject(33).

The implicit relativity in any evaluation of a work of art constitutes the major obstacle for a definition of the aesthetic. This results to the rise of art criticism, which attempts to bring sensation and taste into the light of pure knowledge. David Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste", and Immanuel Kant's book "The Critique of Judgement", are considered to be the best texts dealing with the evaluation of art in modernity(34). Although they both maintain the principles of art as universal, they

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disengage the beautiful from the good and relate it to the human senses(35).

For Hume, beauty belongs to the domain of psychology. The mind is relatively passive and its operation entirely explicable in terms of the association of ideas. "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them;"(37). But since the sentiments of men vary, he seeks for a "Standard of Taste", the universal principles of beauty.

The general principles of taste are uniform in human nature. In order that any judgement of a work of art be true, it has to be based on delicate sentiment, to be aided by practice, improved by comparison, and cleared of prejudice(38). Variations in judgement are due to defect or perversion of the above faculties. However, Hume admits, a certain degree of diversity in judgement is still unavoidable because of preferences of taste: some persons are pleased by simplicity, others by ornament, for instance. These, nevertheless, are "innocent" variations, for which there is no standard(39).

As far as moral principles and religion are concerned, Hume asserts that the critic has simply to overlook them when he expresses a judgement on art in regard to a certain historical period, since they are in constant flux and revolution(40). Hence the work of art is considered by Hume as universal and ahistorical, detached from morality, and subjective in the sense that human judgement substitutes for objective principles.

Kant goes further in the direction of the modern notion of the autonomy of the aesthetic and defines *taste* as "the faculty of estimating an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest*. The object of such a delight is called *beautiful*" (41). The judgement that comes forth in this way is called aesthetic judgement and is conceived of as distinct from cognitive judgement which is based on reason. It is based on *a priori* principles and related not to the object, but to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure of the human subject(42).

The autonomy of the aesthetic dimension of the work of art from the empirical as well as from the divine world is defined by Kant in terms of the human subject "apart from any interest". Which is to say that the enjoyment involved in the experience of the aesthetic is not conditioned by any external, practical interest. "Interestedness" is "practical" in the sense that it refers to an anticipated goal. Kant considers the "delight in good" for instance as a "practical" interest, since it implies an end. As such, it is

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alien to the aesthetic judgement(43).

The concept of "aesthetic disinterestedness" is taken by Kant to be the "first moment in the judgement of taste". From this he deduces the definition of the beautiful as universal(44). Hence, it constitutes the basis of the relation between the viewer and the work of art. The significance of "disinterestedness" in modern aesthetic theory and criticism is vital.

Like Hume, Kant conceives of beauty as subjective and tries to overcome the implied relativity in judgement. Thus, according to his third definition of the beautiful, the shape of an object must indicate final purpose in terms of perception and this is not to be related to any end whatever: "Beauty is the form of *finality* in an object, so far as perceived in it *apart from the representation of an end*" (45). So beauty in architecture for instance lies beyond the practical or functional purposes a building has to fulfil, and derives from the feeling of pleasure it creates in the human subject.

In his "Critique of Pure Reason" Kant investigates the subjective principles upon which aesthetic judgement is based(46). He asserts that the representation of an object in the mind requires Sensation through which a multiplicity of distinct feelings arrives at the mind, Imagination which composes these feelings into perception, and finally, Understanding which unifies perception into concepts. In this way perception is transformed into objective knowledge. Imagination is described as a "blind but indispensable function". The word "blind" indicates the freedom of imagination and means that it "cannot anticipate its own results by conceiving them as purposes in advance of executing them"(47).

Aesthetic judgement is involved before understanding. It cannot be related to a sensation or concept in terms of causality, so far as it is based on *a priori* principles, while causal relations are *a posteriori*. It is founded only on the "form of finality" of an object. Since it is not a cognitive judgement, it deals only with the relation between the representative powers imagination and understanding(48). The feeling of pleasure is "the consciousness of mere formal finality in the play of the cognitive faculties of the Subject, attending a representation whereby an object is given"(49). Through the formal finality of the object the feeling of pleasure is related to beauty. From the definition of beauty in terms of formal finality derives the necessity, and from this the universality of the judgement of taste(50). Necessity is represented as objective "under the presupposition of a common sense"(51). Common sense is "the effect arising from the free play of

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our powers of cognition"(52). The rest two definitions of beauty are drawn: "The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, is cognized as object of a *necessary* delight"(53), and "The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, pleases universally"(54).

6. CONCLUSION

With Kant, the autonomy of the aesthetic from reason and morality, and in this sense from both the empirical and the divine world, is accomplished. The question of the ontology of art is replaced by the exploration of the psychology of the human subject. On this ground, the aesthetic strives to maintain an objective, universal, intersubjective expression. With the shift, however, from the question "What is art?" to the postulate of a peculiarly aesthetic attitude displayed by the subject, the essential qualities of the work no longer determine whether or not it is art. The boundaries of the aesthetic are indeed open to anything. Anything can be considered as art to the extent that it be experienced through the aesthetic attitude. And while the universality of the aesthetic attitude proves rather an idealistic standpoint in practice, the distinction between art and non-art remains undecidable. The origin of modern aesthetics in art criticism constitutes an expression of this situation.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. W. Tatarkiewicz gives a detailed account of the meaning of the terms *techné* and *ars* in his "Classification of the Arts in Antiquity", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. XXIV, April 1963, pp. 231-40; for a discussion of the term see also: R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1958(c/1938), pp. 5-7, 15f.
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