

# Aesthetic Properties and their (Non-)Contribution to Artistic Value

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## Abstract

What makes us experience artworks and their aesthetic properties? Can all aesthetic properties be found in all artworks? What aesthetic qualities are required to evaluate artworks? How do we differentiate between aesthetic and artistic values and is there any relationship between the two? This paper aims to answer these questions by examining influential arguments mainly about aesthetic concepts introduced by Frank Sibley and which were later developed by several other contemporary aestheticians including Robert Stecker, Peter Lamarque and Jerrold Levinson.

This paper briefly glances at the historical development of aesthetic properties, from Classical to contemporary times. To avoid speculation and vagueness, the paper proceeds to define some of the aesthetic properties as opposed to non-aesthetic ones and applies them to different literary and visual artworks. Such aesthetic qualities are attributed to a particular experience especially when considering literary works. This aesthetic experience, which includes mainly pleasure, plays an important role in the process of judging and evaluating art. It can also lead to several non-aesthetic values such as the cognitive value which is discussed in this paper. All these conceptions are open to perennial discussion. However, one cannot deny that there is a close connection between the aesthetic and the artistic value which do not exclude one another, especially in the process of identifying and evaluating artworks.

**Keywords:** *artworks, aesthetic properties, aesthetic experience, artistic value.*

## Introduction

When a work of art is produced, it must stand on its own regardless of the conditions in which it was created. This means that to assess its aesthetic nature, the circumstances of the work's origin such as the artist's intentions, when and where it was created, are not important. Such aspects do not contribute to aesthetic judgements. Works of art are what they are and this separation is quite sharp. On the one hand, artworks have their histories and on the other, one can look at works of art as simple objects with various properties which are perceptual - audible properties

especially when speaking about music, visual properties in painting and sculpture, and communicative qualities when it comes to language. Such perceptual properties can be both aesthetic and non-aesthetic, for example the pity and sorrow of an elegy twinned with its metre and rhyme. According to Walton, 'aesthetic properties are features or characteristics of works of art just as much as non-aesthetic ones. They are in the works, to be seen, heard, or otherwise perceived there.' (2004, p.142-3) Walton continues to argue that facts about the artwork's history can be important for aesthetic judgements. Therefore, it would be misleading to claim that a work of art can be simply judged for what can be perceived in it although the idea of judging from the aesthetic viewpoint only can prove to be also right.

For the purposes of this paper, I am going to limit myself only to aesthetic properties. However, reference will also be made to non-aesthetic properties by which I mean the technical aspect of a work of art such as colours, descriptions and rhyme. (Sedivy, 2018) At this point, you must be wondering about which artistic properties can be aesthetic. Most aestheticians agree that perception plays a crucial role in defining aesthetic properties. However, such properties are not only perceptual. As Kivy suggests, 'the core aesthetic properties... are objects of the external senses, principally, but not exclusively, the senses of sight and hearing. And many of those aesthetic qualities that are not perceptual can... be seen to be derivative... on them.' (2011, p.345) Kivy seems to be avoiding the use of the term 'metaphorical.' Aesthetic qualities are crucial when one is evaluating an artwork because they can guide the observer towards its artistic value.

## **Towards a definition and identification of aesthetic properties**

The discussion about aesthetic properties can go on and on without ever reaching a definite conclusion. The reason is that the fundamental concepts which are involved when judging or evaluating artworks are psychological. This means that the aesthetic experience has to do with states of mind. Iseminger identifies two concepts in such a process. In his chapter entitled 'Aesthetic Experience', he refers to the phenomenological concept of aesthetic experience which transmits the feeling of what it is like to go through such a feeling. This concept was discussed by early twentieth-century aestheticians such as Clive Bell and John Dewey but later on, it was dismissed as such theory was not suitable enough to evaluate any artwork. As a result, aestheticians had to develop other related ideas. The second concept is the epistemic perspective of aesthetic experience which according to Iseminger, 'is a conception of a non-inferential way of coming to know something... which deserves to be thought of as aesthetic.' (as cited by Levinson, 2003, p.100) This view seems to be more feasible as recent theories tend to defend the notion of aesthetic experience within this tradition. Beardsley himself, one of the main exponents of aesthetic tradition of the later-half of the twentieth century, began to follow the

phenomenological idea of aesthetic experience. However, later on, his theories evolved in the direction of the epistemic claim after Dickie criticized strongly the phenomenological view.

Accounts of what is distinctive about the aesthetic attitude and experience continued to be elaborated especially from the cognitive viewpoint. Scruton believed that imaginative thought was important for aesthetic experience which forms conceptions of objects. An object, which in this case can be either an artwork or a natural object or phenomenon, must be consciously conceived, otherwise it will lack aesthetic satisfaction. Levinson developed Scruton's theory by stating that the cognitive aspect must be central to aesthetic pleasure. This happens when pleasure 'is grounded in a perception of and reflection on the object's individual character and content.' (Levinson, 2003, p.11) Such a theory implies that the climax of aesthetic appreciation of an artwork lies within the relation between its perceivable form and its resultant character and content.

Actually, it was Frank Sibley who further developed this relation of qualities in his essay 'Aesthetic Concepts'. He claims that the observer's sensitivity is extremely important. When looking at a particular painting, the observer might comment on the shades of colours or on the scenery or figures. Such non-aesthetic qualities which any observer can visualize in a painting, can become the basic references of aesthetic qualities if observed by an individual with a developed sense of taste because they can go beyond the painting itself and perceive what is not actually represented in the picture, for example a sense of serenity. Therefore, aesthetic concepts require taste or sensibility in a much higher degree than normal so that they can be applied correctly. Moreover, Sibley believes that aesthetic concepts are 'non-condition-governed' in that 'there are no non-aesthetic features which serve in any circumstances as logically *sufficient conditions* for applying aesthetic... terms.' (2004, p.128)

I fully agree with Sibley's belief that aesthetic judgements require taste, perception or sensitivity. On the other hand, I have my doubts about his statement about aesthetic qualities which are not governed by any condition. In fact, I do not attach much importance to this matter. It is more necessary to establish whether aesthetic properties are perceptual or not so that artworks can be more appreciated and valued.

Sibley, who fully supports the epistemic view of aesthetic experience, emphasizes the fact that to reach aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation and judgement of artworks, one has to perceive the artwork for themselves. This can happen at once or after several readings, viewings or hearings or by the help of critics. Ultimately they have to be involved when they feel the power of a novel or see the unity of a work or notice a particular colour scheme. Sibley believes that to learn from others about such sensibility is not enough to value artworks. It is the observer him/herself who has to be struck by these qualities as perception cannot be transferred from an individual to another. Perception helps the individual to reach aesthetic value

(2001, p.34). According to Sibley, without aesthetic perception, one cannot make an aesthetic judgement.

Sibley's theory has two important aspects. The first one is the epistemic aspect which highlights specific features in an artwork through its direct experience, that is by perceiving it directly. This brings to mind Kant's claim in his *Critique of Judgement* when he stated that 'People wish to subject the object to their own eyes...' (2007, p.50). Since I have already referred to this epistemic claim, I am going to discuss the other aspect of Sibley's theory which in my view, can be referred to as the ontological aspect. This aspect emphasizes the aesthetic experience one goes through when defining aesthetic properties. The fact that direct perceptual acquaintance is needed to appreciate and enjoy aesthetic properties is uncontroversial. But here, Sibley is stating that aesthetic properties are perceptual properties. It is actually this statement which concerns me and which brings to my mind this two-fold question: Are aesthetic properties necessarily perceptual ones and what does a perceptual property mean? For example, in a poem, I can perceive the redness in the sky during sunset, I can perceive one's point of view and I can also perceive the feeling of sorrow associated to the setting. This example demonstrates three different experiences of perception.

Undoubtedly the dominance of sight and hearing is evident in Sibley's theory of aesthetic properties. This means that his interpretation of perception is to perceive through the five senses. Such a belief reminds me of Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry* in which he distinguished between 'to know' and 'to perceive': the former has to do with the superior faculty of logic while the latter refers to the inferior faculty of perception (1954, p.78). At this point, I agree with both Peter Kivy as well as James Shelley when the latter wrote 'Sibley does not claim here that aesthetic properties necessarily depend on 'perceptual entities' or 'appearances'. His main point is merely that aesthetic properties are perceived.' (2003, p.371) I understand here that by the term 'perceived', he means to experience through direct engagement with the artwork which involves one or more of the five senses.

## **Aesthetic experience**

Similar to his contemporary aestheticians, Lamarque claims that while no one denies that art offers some kind of experience, the nature of that experience is a 'perennial controversy.' (2009, p.19) While discussing the aesthetic experience of literature, he maintains that such an experience might take the form of detachment which does not help in the evaluation of literature. Lamarque seems to agree with Livingston who believed that aesthetic experience includes thought, imagination, perception and sensation. When it comes to literature, he argues that perceptual experience is not essential to literary value. This idea suggests that literature, especially poetry, goes beyond sensual perception. In order to attain the full

appreciation of a literary work, the meaningful content must engage the reader. Non-aesthetic properties such as the pleasant sounds of a poem when read aloud and its layout on the page, do not contribute much to its literary value. Hence, thought and imagination can make the experience stronger. But can thought and imagination be considered as aspects of aesthetic experience? Aesthetically speaking, such an experience is related to perception. However, when applied to literature which is the art of language, perception is not always conscious. As Lamarque claims, 'reading is not characterized by any particular feeling or sensation but there is a kind of 'appreciation' which draws attention to literary mechanisms similar to aesthetic experience.' (2009, p.20)

Aesthetic properties are important for the aesthetic experience especially when considering literary works. Frank Sibley listed a number of concepts such as balance, serenity, unity, vividness and so on, which he considered as aesthetic aspects of artworks including literary works. When analysing such concepts, it becomes clear that aesthetics is not only about beauty but that it goes beyond this conception. Talking about beauty nowadays is quite outdated. Sibley shows that aesthetic qualities are not always relevant to evaluate artworks. However, they can lead to several effects such as the particular appearance of a work, its salient features, the impact it leaves and what features merit aesthetic attention. These aesthetic descriptions interact with the aesthetic qualities. In the literary context, these qualities become more evident and they surpass mere sensory perception. As Lamarque suggests, '[a] mere grasp of the language is not sufficient to appreciate a work aesthetically.' (2009, p.20) I agree with this statement because the reader must go beyond his linguistic competence, implying that literary appreciation needs 'a trained mode of discernment.' (2009, p.21) This means that the reader is involved in the literary work's unity, its quality and its achievement.

Sibley seems to draw a clear line between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties with no relation between them whatsoever. According to him, non-aesthetic properties, whether they are structural, grammatical or physical, stand on their own without any dependence on the aesthetic ones. Keeping in mind that Kivy has challenged strongly the idea that aesthetic properties are not condition-governed, in literature, aesthetic features cannot be found in textual mechanisms only. For example, we cannot conclude that a poem is effective and moving simply because we can identify a number of metaphors, repetition, imagery and rhyme patterns. Moreover, these non-aesthetic qualities are not proof enough that the work is literary. The artistic or literary status of a work does not depend on its appearance.

In the literary context, there is no general rule which links linguistic features such as syntax or meanings to literary aesthetic achievement. A mechanism that is suitable for a particular novel may not function well in another. This means that aesthetic judgements cannot be generalized. It is wrong to claim that the aesthetic properties of literary works relate closely to formal features. An aesthetic approach does not depend on formalism. Literary works are not an end in themselves a means to some

effect or other. According to Lamarque, 'formal... devices are in themselves textual features... They acquire aesthetic significance only when assigned a function within an artistic structure.' (2009, p.22) Therefore, any formal or rhetorical devices do not possess intrinsic aesthetic value. However, they do contribute to a particular end. Such mechanisms may be also found in non-literary texts such as texts containing information. The end-result of these devices is different as in this case, they do not produce aesthetic pleasure. Textual features alone do not lead to appreciation, but their effect and inter-relationship within a literary context can conduct to the evaluation of literature.

## **Artistic Value**

According to Ingarden (1987),

artistic value... is something which arises in the work of art itself and has its essential ground in that. Aesthetic value is something which manifests itself only in the aesthetic object and as a particular moment which determines the character of the whole' (p.14).

One can deduce from Ingarden's statement that there exists an interdependence between the value of art and aesthetic value. In fact, Stecker agrees with this idea when he rejects the theory of formalism, claiming that besides being out-dated, it is inadequate as it fails to specify the aesthetic value of art. (2003, p.312) He states that aesthetic value helps to identify artistic value and that there are three different ways to do so which include (i) the aesthetic properties of an artwork, (ii) the aesthetic experience which the artwork provides and (iii) the characteristic pleasure which is derived from the work itself. The last two characteristics go together as an aesthetic experience is typically pleasurable. Also such an experience is derived from a close observation of the artwork.

It seems that the essentialist conception identifies artistic value with aesthetic value. Lamarque and Olsen introduced the idea of appreciating literature as literature when the reader goes through a stance in search of a certain kind of value. However, it is not clear that all artforms can be defined by this theory. We must be aware that art is not replaceable. Therefore, we need to interpret the artistic value in the unique experience art can offer. This is the reason why artistic value is closely related to aesthetic experience. On the other hand, it is undeniable that art can be valuable in a non-aesthetic way because art can possess a significant cognitive value. Stecker summed up this idea very clearly when he stated that 'art is instrumentally valuable beyond the provision of experience valued for its own sake.' (2003, p.315) Hayman and Budd do not agree with Stecker as they believe that art is unable to do this or is unreliable to do this. Their conclusion is obvious: artistic value must be only limited to the aesthetic.

But can art possess cognitive value which is distinct from aesthetic value? Actually, cognitive value is a non-aesthetic value. A number of aestheticians such as Collingwood, Danto and Goodman, are in favour of art having some sort of cognitive value, whether direct or indirect. Cognitive value may include different ways of thinking, imagining or perceiving. All these are intellectual benefits which help the observer form concepts which are related to an experience of the artwork. For example, experiencing a particular emotion on reading a poem can help the reader identify certain emotions which of which they were not aware, thus leading to new self-knowledge.

If art is capable to transmit knowledge which forms a conception, this may mean that in reality this concept can be either true or false. This claim can be doubtful for a number of reasons. The first one is about the evidence art can provide to demonstrate that its concepts are true. If art cannot provide such evidence, then it cannot communicate knowledge. According to Stecker, 'the cognitive value of art lies in providing new ways of thinking or perceiving or bringing home to us the significance of already familiar ways.' (2003, p.316-7) Secondly, where should one search for artistic value? The concepts presented by a work may eventually result in either familiar truths or obvious falsehoods. Emphasizing too much on truth and falsehood is wrong because artworks cannot be reduced to simple morals. Artworks tend to present particular situations and characters. But to contribute to the search for knowledge, they must present sufficient generality that goes beyond the artworks themselves. The final reason is about the topic of replaceability as mentioned previously. Can we acquire knowledge from other ways than art? If the answer is in the affirmative, it means that art is not indispensable. Keeping in mind that what we appreciate is so closely related to the experience of the work and its mode of expression, the artistic value in this case, is irreplaceable as is its aesthetic value.

## Final Remarks

As Alcaraz León states, there is no common factor which can properly demonstrate that aesthetic merits always contribute to moral or cognitive values (2018, p.25). However, it is quite reasonable to say that many artworks possess cognitive value, whether direct or indirect. Moreover, this value forms an essential part of the artwork both from the creator's point of view and from that of the audience. At this point one has to be careful not to identify a work's artistic value with its cognitive one. A case in point are musical compositions. If some of these works have cognitive value, for sure this could hardly be their most important value. Stecker states that 'we have no reason to dismiss aesthetic value as part of artistic value.' (2003, p.317) This statement implies that not all artworks can possess both kinds of value and also that the topic of artistic value has not yet been exhausted because there are

several other types of value that can be found in artworks such as the emotional response of the audience to a particular work or, from the historical perspective, the work's contribution to the development of art, which can result in a particular form or genre. Such concepts of artistic value are pluralistic and go much beyond the essentialist conception. Artistic value is valuable in an artwork if such a possession leads to the artistic value of the work itself. This idea helps in distinguishing artistic value from non-artistic value. Such a distinction can also be reached when, in the process of identifying art, one also identifies artistic value.

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## Bio-note

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