

Do we need contextual information about the origins of an artwork to interpret or evaluate it?

Contextualising Information about Aesthetics

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Abstract: the process of contextualising the information around an artwork is a necessary component in fully understanding the message being interviewed by the artist. While many native viewers of artworks can display enjoyment in pure sentimentality, the message portrayed in high art is often lost without a detailed understanding of the context as to how the artwork has been created and where it is displayed. As Wittgenstein demonstrated, art and music form a type of language, and as with exchanges of words, the contextual information surrounding those communicating is important. Without this contextual information, the message can become jumbled or lost. The consequence is the creation of “termite art” and the loss of moral meaning throughout society. This lost form of education and communication further diminishes the message being broadcast by the artist.

Keywords: philosophy of art, contextualisation, art education, Wittgenstein, art as language

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Contextualising Information about Aesthetics

The importance of the contextualisation of art has been debated extensively¹.

Researchers and art historians are taught² that it is important to understand the aspects of life which have influenced the artwork or the maker, including those that are external to the artwork itself. This understanding and the provision of contextual information concerning artwork are said to deepen and improve our understanding of both the artist and the art³. By incorporating contextual information concerning the timeframe, culture of dominance during the production of the artwork, any subcultures that may have swayed the artist and the psychological and historical information concerning the artist themselves, it is said that we can become more informed.

These increased hedonic properties are said to be self-rewarding and aid in creating a positive aesthetic experience⁴. However, one component of art is attributable to disseminating information and emotions, and when complex stimuli incorporate cognitive challenges that may be associated with abstract art or art from foreign cultures, people may lack understanding and hence fail to contextualise the message of an artwork. As a result, scholars have created models around aesthetic experiences noting that people go through “five stages: perception, explicit classification, implicit classification, cognitive mastering and evaluation”⁵.

Such a model of aesthetic judgement differs between intellectual and emotional assessments. While these are separate, they each overlap. Further, the intellectual information

¹ Anne D’Alleva, *How to Write Art History* (Laurence King Publishing, 2006).

² Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (SAGE, 2016).

³ Nicolas J. Bullot and Rolf Reber, ‘The Artful Mind Meets Art History: Toward a Psycho-Historical Framework for the Science of Art Appreciation’, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 36, no. 2 (April 2013): 123–37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X12000489>.

⁴ Helmut Leder et al., ‘A Model of Aesthetic Appreciation and Aesthetic Judgments’, *British Journal of Psychology* 95, no. 4 (2004): 489–508, <https://doi.org/10.1348/0007126042369811>.

⁵ Leder et al., 489.

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covers various distinct areas, including the technical aspects and those associated with the art history elements. The historical context relates to the time and place when the art was created and aids in explaining why the artist created the work and what it captures. Conversely, the context of the artist includes the culture, geography and perspective or worldview of the artist. Through this, the viewer may understand the artist's identity better.

Finally, the context of an artwork needs to embrace the viewing experience, which can include the location or the nature of the display. Rose⁶ argues that there are vast differences in where artwork is situated. Consequently, viewing a Caravaggio in a major museum would be qualitatively different from viewing such an artwork on a high input digital canvas in one's home. In part, how we interact with art varies based on who we're with and where we are. Equally, different locations provide different information concerning the artwork they display.

Museums often provide contextual information, including captions and audio or video overlays. These readings and viewing aids may direct the individual's experience interacting with the art. For example, in art history studies, students look to the artist's life, training, and patronage to understand both the political and religious circumstances around the art and any philosophical movements of the time. Further, understanding the original setting in the original use of the work can help contextualise why the work was created.

Does Understanding Improve Aesthetic Satisfaction?

A question is whether the aesthetic satisfaction associated with an artwork relates directly to the ability to interpret or evaluate the art. While it is clear that students of art history and individuals who find enjoyment in studying and researching the development of artworks put effort into classifying, documenting and understanding art, it is arguably no

⁶ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 127.

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different from how researchers and scholars classify biological specimens in other fields of study.

Consequently, in asking whether understanding improves aesthetic satisfaction, it is necessary to understand people's reactions when provided with information concerning artwork and whether this differs significantly from an uninformed assessment. Krauss et al.⁷ conducted a psychological study concerning the impact of contextual information and the influence that this has on your responses to art. This research noted that artworks displayed in museums had measurable physiological impacts on the individuals who viewed the art, including changes in heart rate, skin conductance changes and other emotional effects.

The study by Krauss et al.⁸ did not demonstrate a significant change in the viewer's emotional state with contextual information compared to the viewer of art who was not provided with elaborative information or descriptive information concerning the artwork. Concurrently, other artists looked at the aesthetic evaluation of digitally reproduced images and noted that the changed tone saturation that occurs in digital artwork copies negatively influenced the reception of the image⁹. Unfortunately, these differences could account for some of the aesthetic perceptions and changes in how artwork is perceived.

Unless digital art is viewed in the same condition, measuring how people perceive aesthetics and why they see the difference remains debatable. The study noted above by Krauss et al.¹⁰ could partly be attributable to presentation, and in a future world where holographic artwork could be displayed visually in VR augmented reality, such a result may

⁷ Luisa Krauss et al., 'Impact of Contextualizing Information on Aesthetic Experience and Psychophysiological Responses to Art in a Museum: A Naturalistic Randomized Controlled Trial.', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 15, no. 3 (August 2021): 505–16, <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000280>.

⁸ Krauss et al.

⁹ Claire Reymond et al., 'Aesthetic Evaluation of Digitally Reproduced Art Images', *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.615575>.

¹⁰ Krauss et al., 'Impact of Contextualizing Information on Aesthetic Experience and Psychophysiological Responses to Art in a Museum'.

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be returned differently. However, other researchers¹¹ continue developing frameworks designed to capture and empirically measure aesthetic experiences. While such goals are laudable, the ability to provide insight into human motivation and to capture and understand aesthetic appreciation scientifically remains largely outside scientists' ability to measure objectively.

While it was not demonstrated that providing information concerning the artwork in a museum aided in changing the aesthetic satisfaction associated with viewing a work, other researchers have demonstrated that increased exposure, understanding and education concerning art leads people to better discriminate between artworks¹². Further, education in the selected schemes and forms of art enables the participant to detect the meaning and purpose of highly abstracted paintings.

Further, studies by Hekkert and Van Wieringen¹³ showed that training and knowledge allowed for the better dissemination and discernment of the quality of the art. This study showed significant agreement between experts and non-experts concerning questions of originality but that experts understood craftsmanship and quality at a far deeper level. Further, experts were shown to attach more value to originality in determining aesthetic quality than were less trained individuals. Of course, a further explanation could be that highly trained individuals have learnt to disseminate certain types of artwork and may have developed habits that cause them to reject works that are aesthetically pleasing to others.

¹¹ Ryan D. Kopatich et al., 'Development and Validation of the Aesthetic Processing Preference Scale (APPS)', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 2021, No Pagination Specified-No Pagination Specified, <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000449>.

¹² Camilo J. Cela-Conde et al., 'The "Style Scheme" Grounds Perception of Paintings', *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 95, no. 1 (1 August 2002): 91–100, <https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.2002.95.1.91>.

¹³ Paul Hekkert and Piet C. W. Van Wieringen, 'Beauty in the Eye of Expert and Nonexpert Beholders: A Study in the Appraisal of Art', *The American Journal of Psychology* 109, no. 3 (1996): 389–407, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1423013>.

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The naïve view of artwork has been shown to prefer “popular art”, which is perceived as warmer and more pleasant than high art¹⁴. Conversely, those experienced and trained within art prefer high art and rate this for the complexity. While Krauss et al.¹⁵ measured the psychophysiological impact of knowledge and context on viewing artworks, these researchers did not differentiate between novice and experienced viewers. Therefore, the differences in the viewing preferences of popular art versus high art and the level of experience and understanding of the viewer were not taken into account in the form conducted by Winston and Cupchik¹⁶.

Without these distinctions, it remains difficult to differentiate whether the native viewer merely treats an artwork “as if it were an everyday object evaluated momentarily to the purely perceptual level”¹⁷. The more highly trained viewer appreciates the artwork as a “created aesthetic entity”,¹⁸ whereas the novice viewer fails to explore all of its aspects in interrelations looking at the artwork at an everyday level that captures and understands the work subjectively. The argument is that trained viewers enjoy a far deeper aesthetic experience due to possessing a “more elaborate and complex categorisation of art.”¹⁹

High art is said to balance subject matter in style, while popular artwork captures pleasing subject matters. In addition, high art explores a greater range of emotions, while popular art focuses on soothing experiences²⁰. Consequently, while each form of artwork has its place, Billota and Lindauer²¹ argue that “taking a nonelitist and more democratic position, responsiveness to the arts may depend less on special background and more on cognitive processes related to aesthetics, physiognomy, and imagery”. Finally, while “Socrates had suggested that fine art is a third-rate human

¹⁴ Andrew S. Winston and Gerald C. Cupchik, ‘The Evaluation of High Art and Popular Art By Naive and Experienced Viewers’, *Visual Arts Research* 18, no. 1 (1992): 1–14.

¹⁵ Krauss et al., ‘Impact of Contextualizing Information on Aesthetic Experience and Psychophysiological Responses to Art in a Museum’.

¹⁶ Winston and Cupchik, ‘The Evaluation of High Art and Popular Art By Naive and Experienced Viewers’.

¹⁷ Dilman Walter Gotshalk, *Art and the Social Order* (Dover Publications, 1962), 159.

¹⁸ Gotshalk, 159.

¹⁹ Gotshalk, 293.

²⁰ Winston and Cupchik, ‘The Evaluation of High Art and Popular Art By Naive and Experienced Viewers’.

²¹ Joseph Bilotta and Martin S. Lindauer, ‘Artistic and Nonartistic Backgrounds as Determinants of the Cognitive Response to the Arts’, *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society* 15, no. 5 (1 May 1980): 354–56, <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03334556>.

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enterprise and should have only incidental place in a social order founded on scientifically trained”²² people, this aimed to create a controlled society.

While Dickie²³ argues against an aesthetic attitude, noting that it is a myth that this time has come and passed, there are aspects of our further based on beauty and those that form sentimental memories. The subject being displayed by the artist may require understanding. For instance, artistic works based on the story of Cupid and Psyche may seem beautiful, but individuals who do not know the story will lose information concerning the artist’s meaning and will not be able to evaluate whether the artist has captured or modified the story in any way.

Contextualisation in Interpretation and Evaluation

Scruton²⁴ took a non-traditional form of empiricism in the matter, which Wittgenstein would refer to as aspect perception and “seeing as”. The work contains an argument that each artwork contains descriptive measures that are bound up with the truth conditions. This book poses a question as to whether aesthetic matters need an agreement? In answering this question, Scruton states that there are close ties between aesthetic and moral values and that the judgements we hold in society arrive from this experience.

“To be certain in matters of taste is, therefore, to be certain in matters of morality: ethics and aesthetics are one”²⁵. From this, we can see that Scruton held that reasoned discrimination and moral values exist across a conjoined system. Moreover, it is argued that modern philosophy has ignored aesthetic education and training²⁶. While the classical Greeks sought to argue and debate questions of aesthetics, bringing reality, political and

²² Gotshalk, *Art and the Social Order*, xiv.

²³ George Dickie, ‘The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1964): 56–65.

²⁴ Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (St. Augustine’s Press, 1974).

²⁵ Scruton.

²⁶ Roger Scruton, ‘Modern Philosophy and the Neglect of Aesthetics’, in *The Symbolic Order* (Routledge, 1989).

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metaphysical concepts into the debate, many modern and post-modern philosophers have taken the approach of relativist concerns and have abandoned the moral aspects of art.

In Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*²⁷, art has been promoted into the role of theology and religion. Schiller represents the artist's realm as an individual who aids in preparing society's youth for a moral life and one where they understand and ingrain virtue. In seeking to overcome the Kantian dualism of nature and morality and freedom, Schiller is aligned with other philosophers such as Hölderlin in promoting the concept of beauty and the place of a deity²⁸. However, this secular religion needs to be contextualised to be understood.²⁹

Outside of context, the artwork looks "pretty" but fails to capture the core aspects of moral virtue to be disseminated to the viewer. The use of art in disseminating moral lessons using stained glass within the Gothic age was not only to provide good lateral illumination³⁰ but to also act as a medium of educating a largely illiterate population. Rorimer and Grancsay each provide evidence of how Gothic stained glass was designed "to impart religious and moral instruction"³¹. Yet, such instruction did not merely occur through uninformed viewing.

Goldman argues that "the aesthetic value of artwork lies in the experience of them",³² and the necessity to guide the experience is critical in forming evaluations of an artwork.

²⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Penguin UK, 2016).

²⁸ Stefanie Hölscher, 'Schiller and Hölderlin: From Beauty to Religion', *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 75, no. 2 (1 September 2006): 83–94, <https://doi.org/10.1179/174962806X115262>.

²⁹ Elizabeth Kingsbury, 'Religion of Schiller' (M.A., United States -- Nebraska, The University of Nebraska - Lincoln), accessed 18 July 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/894196167/citation/6691A27D8DDF4FEBPQ/1>.

³⁰ Francesca Dell'Acqua, "'Lux et Vitrum': The Evolution of Stained Glass from the Late Roman Empire to the Gothic Age", *Lux et Vitrum: The Evolution of Stained Glass from the Late Roman Empire to the Gothic Age*, 2004, 1000–1030, <https://doi.org/10.1400/47885>.

³¹ Stephen V. Grancsay, 'A Stained Glass Saint Michael in Armor', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 23, no. 11 (1928): 271, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3255676>.

³² Alan H. Goldman, 'The Experiential Account of Aesthetic Value', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 3 (2006): 333.

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Importantly, many fine artworks in either beautiful nor sublime³³. Further, as Budd states, the appeal to art being merely a matter of taste follows the “doctrine of aesthetic nihilism—the view that such claims are never warranted—does not merit serious attention”³⁴. Rather, art is a form of communication and shared experience. This experience requires an interaction between the artist, critics, society and the gallery viewer.

Cohen et al.³⁵ present art as an educational medium and note that art can be used as a language in teaching young children. While this is a very simplistic approach, the use of art as language has been promoted for high art in transferring complex psychological and philosophical ideas.³⁶ Finally, Wittgenstein argues that context sensitivity doesn’t only apply to art and music but also language³⁷. As a form of language, art suffers the common problem of disintermediation and the loss of meaning when taken outside of a known context.

Context sensitivity is in considerable part developed through relational interconnections. For example, without the ability for participants viewing an artwork to find explanations, the analysis of the artwork will be at a disadvantage and as with individuals speaking in different languages or even the same language but from different cultures, the message can become garbled. While the untrained viewer of art can see beauty, the message encapsulated in forming the artwork may be lost.

Csikszentmihalyi et al. argue the aesthetic experience and encounter to be one of developing the art of seeing and compare the account of Jefferson watching an artwork over

³³ Malcolm Budd, ‘Artistic Value’, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition, An Anthology*, 2018, 236.

³⁴ Malcolm Budd, ‘The Intersubjective Validity of Aesthetic Judgements’, *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 47, no. 4 (1 October 2007): 333–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/aym021>.

³⁵ Elaine Pear Cohen and Ruth Straus Gainer, *Art: Another Language for Learning. Third Edition* (Heinemann, 361 Hanover Street, Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912 (\$23, 1995).

³⁶ G. L. Hagberg, *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

³⁷ Garry L. Hagberg, ‘Wittgenstein, Music, and the Philosophy of Culture’, in *Wittgenstein on Aesthetic Understanding*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg, Philosophers in Depth (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 61–95, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40910-8_3.

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time to the sense of flow that occurs when doing strenuous activities such as rock climbing³⁸.

To achieve the peak experience that can come from being immersed in great art requires an insight into the work. Consequently, providing art education is necessary to truly understand and truly experience an artwork.

While it is demonstrated how naïve viewers of art and joy pictures, it is also noted that experienced viewers who are trained gain a deeper aesthetic experience³⁹. Allen extends this argument to note that high art can become part of a guide to spiritual fulfilment and aid on a path to self-knowledge⁴⁰. Whilst Tolstoy⁴¹ attempted to argue that simple art was superior to high art, the reasoning was more of a romanticised concept of individuals living in a Communist utopia and was not something readily achievable in the real world. In some ways, Tolstoy embraced a platonic political structure⁴² that could also be aligned with thinking in Thomas More's utopia⁴³.

Importantly, there are different models of aesthetic understanding, and the salience, intensity and diagnostic components of an artwork possess different levels of arousal and contemplation⁴⁴. Yet, the understanding of the artwork and the conceptual information from its development allows the viewer to understand Mondrian's conceptual representative paintings as more than mere "coloured squares". While a painting may seem sentimental or pretty to the casual viewer, the artwork may not contain any significant message beyond sentimentality.

³⁸ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick Emery Robinson, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (Getty Publications, 1990).

³⁹ Winston and Cupchik, 'The Evaluation of High Art and Popular Art By Naive and Experienced Viewers'.

⁴⁰ Pat B. Allen, *Art Is a Way of Knowing: A Guide to Self-Knowledge and Spiritual Fulfillment through Creativity* (Shambhala Publications, 1995).

⁴¹ Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy, *What Is Art and Essays on Art* (Read Books Ltd, 2020).

⁴² Plato. and D. J Allan, *Republic* (Bristol Classical Press, 1993).

⁴³ Thomas More, *Utopia: Second Edition* (Yale University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300195224>.

⁴⁴ Cela-Conde et al., 'The "Style Scheme" Grounds Perception of Paintings'.

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As such, the ability to determine high art from more derivative works provides opportunities to engage with the artist in a message concerning their take on the meaning of life or perspectives on humanity. Unfortunately, many of these aesthetic experience aspects can be overlooked without context. For this reason, training in contextual information concerning artworks helps develop the aesthetic experience and deepen an individual's interaction with an artwork.

Conclusion

While it is possible to enjoy art without knowledge and contextual information, the experience is diminished. For example, many spectators viewing Gothic stained glass windows will find them beautiful. However, without the context surrounding the stories being presented, many people fail to understand and evaluate the message being presented. High art, in particular, is designed to provide more than a mere pleasant and warm feeling. As Wittgenstein contended, art is a form of language and, like all other languages and means of communication, loses perspective without introducing contextual information.

More critically, the avoidance of "aesthetic disinterestedness"⁴⁵ is important if we are to avoid a path to a nihilistic state of solipsism. Such a state of abeyance avoids the message and the moral lesson embedded within an artwork. Without this message, art becomes derivative, even "termite art"⁴⁶ developed through a rote process and without purpose or message. While modern high art has at times abandoned the common person⁴⁷, the necessity to understand detailed contextual information contained within an artwork has been lost due to changing education⁴⁸. In a world where humanities courses are relegated to a secondary place against maths and science, the concept of teaching people to understand

⁴⁵ Jerome Stolnitz, 'On the Origins of "Aesthetic Disinterestedness"', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 2 (1961): 131–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/427462>.

⁴⁶ Lance Olsen, 'Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (22 June 1993): 199–216.

⁴⁷ Benjamin R. Tilghman, *Wittgenstein, Ethics, and Aesthetics: The View from Eternity* (SUNY Press, 1991).

⁴⁸ Jeffrey A. Stickney, 'Seeing Trees: Investigating Poetics of Place-Based, Aesthetic Environmental Education with Heidegger and Wittgenstein', *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54, no. 5 (2020): 1278–1305, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12491>.

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contextual information around artwork would seem to be a losing battle. However, to ensure the dissemination of cultural values, we must also teach people how to understand art.

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