

CHAPTER THREE

What Is an Aesthetic Object?

I want to begin this chapter by doing two things. First, I need to answer the question posed in the title, as least in a preliminary way so that we can talk about it. Second, I have said on several occasions that aesthetic objects and art objects are two different things. A particular object can be both, and many are, but the terms refer to different sets of objects. In this chapter, I need to explain and explore the differences. We will likely spend more time talking about art objects than aesthetic objects, truth be told. The first reason is simple: for most of us, when we first think of aesthetic objects—objects with which we connect primarily or at least initially through sensing them and their properties—we think of works of art. The second reason for our spending so much time with art in this chapter is that apparently there are simply more puzzles about art than about aesthetic objects that are not art; and so, in this sense, we want to follow where curiosity takes us.

An aesthetic object is any object one regards or considers aesthetically. And regarding or considering an object aesthetically is (1) to pay attention to its aesthetic properties, and/or (2) to have an aesthetic experience that takes as its content—or is focused on—the object in question. The next chapter of the book will explore the nature of aesthetic experience. The former considered aesthetic properties.



To view the artworks discussed in this chapter (look for )
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Some examples of common aesthetic objects might include:

- Birds, birdsong, and feathers
- Bodies of water like oceans, lakes, and waterfalls—and the edges of bodies of water like the beach
- Cats and dogs
- Clouds
- Flowers—both the look and the smell—and other foliage
- Forests and woods
- Gardens and meadows
- Hills and hillsides
- Human beings (in appropriate circumstances)
- Mountain ranges
- Seashells
- Sunrises and sunsets
- Valleys

This list comprises natural objects. Once we begin to include “artifactual objects”—objects made by humans—we start to get into the vicinity of art. There are a number of things that may not be commonly thought of as “fine art” that we regularly consider from an aesthetic point of view:

- Cars and boats
- Clothes and jewelry
- Foods and beverages, including wine and spirits
- Games
- Household decorations, cookware, storage containers
- Mechanical devices like appliances, watches, and eyeglasses
- Perfumes and objects that are perfumed, like soap

We start getting close to the vicinity of art with architecture, furniture, gardens, pottery/ceramics, and religious objects. These may well be “artforms”—classifications of objects that are indeed “art”—but that still needs discussion. After this, we enter the realm of things that are commonly regarded as art:

- Calligraphy
- Dance
- Film
- Literature and poetry

- Mosaics
- Musical performances of all sorts, including opera
- Paintings, drawings, and prints
- Photography
- Sculptures
- Theatre/plays

It may be that objects that fit this list are still not regarded as “art”—a fingerpaint work made by a four-year-old, a ceramic ashtray made by a seven-year-old (does anyone still make ashtrays?). But, again, this area still needs some discussion, which we will take up later in this chapter.

Can any object be an aesthetic object? The short answer is yes. And the reason is because any object can be considered aesthetically or considered from an aesthetic point of view. Even the most mundane object—say, a piece of crumpled up paper thrown in a waste-paper basket—has a shape, lines, shadows, dimensionality, and so forth. These properties can give rise, when viewed aesthetically, to an aesthetic experience the focus of which is that crumpled up bit of paper. The same is true for any sound, for instance. The sounds of New York City—voices quiet and raised, car engines, car horns, whistles for taxis, and so forth—can be regarded aesthetically. I do not say these sounds constitute music, but this collection of sounds has a variety of properties that, taken all together, can form the basis of an aesthetic experience.

The other day I was out walking and a pack of dogs started barking at me. In the United Kingdom, church bells typically ring out in a very distinctive way—they don’t play tunes or melodies in the way some American carillons do—and for a few moments the dogs hit exactly that UK style of bell ringing with their barking. I’d have given a lot to have recorded that on my phone.

 3.1 “Westminster Abbey Bells Toll on Queen’s Birthday,” unknown, 2016, recording.

A longer answer to the question “Can any object be an aesthetic object?” might be: mostly yes, but in some cases it depends. The examples offered above are of objects we can sense. What about objects we cannot sense? What about abstractions or concepts? What about relationships?

For someone who thinks narrowly about what constitutes aesthetic properties—that is, for someone who thinks that aesthetic properties are only perceptually-based properties—the answer is likely that abstract objects cannot be aesthetic objects. On the other hand, there are many mathematical and scientific theories that are described with aesthetic words like “elegant.” If a theory can be “elegant,” and

the use of this word is not wholly metaphorical, then that would suggest that some things that are abstract may be considered from an aesthetic point of view.

The passage of time is something that can be measured mechanically. Some of us wear watches, have clocks on our walls, and have calendars on our desks. But the passage of time, despite being able to be regarded in mechanical terms, is not experienced this way. When we are having a good time, we might say that time passes quickly. If we are in a boring talk, we might say that time seems to creep forward. If we are consumed with a thought, or with something like playing a video game, time can slip away. If it is true that we experience time this way, it is possible to think of a given passage of time as having a start, a middle, and an end—like a film, a concert, or like reading a novel. Thought about this way, a stretch of time could form the basis of an aesthetic experience.

Let's say two people are in love with one another. Can that relationship be regarded aesthetically? On the face of things, it seems it can. One can describe a loving relationship in aesthetic terms—sweet, tender, passionate, wild, and so forth. On the other hand, it is possible one could say that a loving relationship only has its reality through the concrete events that demonstrate that loving relationship. "Passionate" may not, one could claim, describe the relationship *per se* but rather particular events in that relationship. One might claim that an event or a series of events could be properly described as "passionate," but the relationship itself, as an abstraction, cannot.

Whether abstractions can or cannot be regarded aesthetically in the same way that tangible, sensible objects can be is debatable. If they can be, then it seems the answer to the question "Can anything be an aesthetic object?" is an unqualified yes. If they cannot—or only some subset of them (like mathematical and scientific theories) can be—then the answer to our question is a qualified yes.

Are Aesthetic Objects Always Aesthetic Objects?

The answer to this question is no. An object must be regarded aesthetically to be an aesthetic object. So there is—technically speaking—no such thing as a "permanent" aesthetic object. If an object is not the focus of aesthetic consideration, it ceases to be an aesthetic object. It only becomes one—or becomes one again—when someone is focusing on its aesthetic properties.

This makes classifying something as an aesthetic object tricky. Certainly, there are many objects, both natural and human-created, whose purpose and identity are closely tied to being considered aesthetically. A perfume is created to be lovely to smell. Are perfumes always aesthetic objects?

The argument for claiming perfumes and the like are always aesthetic objects is that they have no reason for existing, apart from being the focus of aesthetic attention. Whenever they are the focus of any experience, that experience is aesthetic, and they are aesthetic objects. The argument against claiming they are always aesthetic objects lies in the qualifier in the sentence directly above: “whenever.” Their aesthetic properties are not objective—no aesthetic properties are purely objective—and so it requires someone to exercise their taste to bring the perfume’s aesthetic properties into reality or into focus. So, while a perfume sits on a shelf, on a counter, in a cabinet, it is not an aesthetic object; it is waiting to be. But once it is picked up and sprayed, its aesthetic character is unmissable.

If by “aesthetic object” we mean that an object is designed exclusively to be the focus of aesthetic attention, then we might say that in a “soft” way, there are objects that are always aesthetic objects. In other words, if an object has no purpose apart from being the focus of aesthetic attention, for the sake of simplicity we might call that object an aesthetic object, and we might do so without qualification. But this can be done only in this “soft” way. If we mean the term “aesthetic object” technically and theoretically, then the answer at the top of this section is the right answer.

What Is the Difference between an Aesthetic Object and an Art Object?

Finally, we get to this question!

If any object can be regarded from an aesthetic point of view, then every art object can be an aesthetic object when it is considered aesthetically. But what do we do with art objects that are “conceptual”? Is it possible to consider a conceptual work of art aesthetically? I think the answer is yes and in two different ways.

Let’s take a classic conceptual work of art.

We saw this in Chapter One. It is called *Fountain* or *Fountain by R. Mutt*, and it was presented to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 by artist Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp was already a well-known artist at this time, one of his most famous pieces being the 1912 cubist¹ painting entitled *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*.

1 Cubism is an early twentieth-century art movement where artists depicted objects by (1) breaking up the image into various elements and reassembling the image to convey some representational truth that would not have been conveyed through simple representation or (2) assembling a variety of perspectives of the object—spatial or temporal or both—into a single image.



3.2 *Fountain*, Marcel Duchamp, 1917, ceramic, glaze, and paint.



3.3 *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, Marcel Duchamp, 1912, oil on canvas.

This cubist work is widely regarded today as a masterpiece of modern art, so there is no question that Duchamp was already an artist of great reputation when he presented *Fountain*.

Fountain is a “readymade,” an object not created by the artist but rather “found” (or in this case probably bought). Can we regard *Fountain* aesthetically—that is, in a classic aesthetic way? Certainly. The urinal has many traditional aesthetic properties. It is shiny, smooth, has a variety of interesting curves, and casts a variety of interesting shadows. It is symmetrical, and so on its “back” as it is, many would consider it well balanced. The holes in the urinal provide some contrast and so add to the interest. They are placed in ways that enhance the balance.

So, *Fountain* can be appreciated in a classic aesthetic way. But if this piece were not in a gallery but rather in a men’s restroom, would it be? While public restroom fixtures are made in ways that are not aesthetically offensive, it is unusual to think that such an object would be regarded as an aesthetic object. Can you imagine what it would be like to go into a public restroom and find someone in the room admiring a fixture for its aesthetic qualities? I think most of us would make a quick exit and return later.

When Duchamp picked out the urinal for exhibition, did he intend that viewers would consider it in this classic aesthetic way? Likely not. We imagine Duchamp intended the work to be a challenge to the nature of what is considered art. He likely meant the work to be considered as a catalyst for an idea, and that idea focuses on the nature of art and the nature of what could count as art: “Can the ordinary and everyday be art?” If we accept a “readymade” as art, then the question seems settled. But, of course, it took a while before those in the world of art were ready to accept *Fountain* as a work of art. Today there is no doubt about it: *Fountain* is an iconic work of art.

Fountain is a “conceptual” work of art. Understood this way, it is not the aesthetic features of the physical work that are important to experiencing it as art. It is rather the idea behind the work, the idea that is catalyzed by the physical object. Duchamp reproduced copies of *Fountain*, and he did so presumably believing that the physical object was not the point of the artwork—the *idea* was the point—so since the physical work is not the focus, whether there is one or many is not much of an issue. *Fountain* is frequently held up as a good example of a work of art that is not an aesthetic object (under normal consideration). If we found someone whose description of *Fountain* was purely classically aesthetic, we might even say that this person is “missing the point.”

This case is made even more strongly with a 1961 work of art by Piero Manzoni entitled *Merda d’artista*, a title I decline translating here. (You can look it up yourself.)

 3.4 *Merda d'artista*, Piero Manzoni, 1961, assemblage.

Regarded in classic aesthetic terms, this object is pretty revolting. But it makes the point that to regard the object in classic aesthetic terms is to miss the point of the value of the work as art. So, for this reason, and for others I will examine directly below, there are some works of art that are not—typically or normally—aesthetic objects.

Before moving on, however, I said at the top of this section that there may be a second way to regard conceptual art objects aesthetically. If abstractions, like mathematical and scientific theories, can be regarded aesthetically—if such theories can be referred to as “elegant” with the term having all the substance as any other aesthetic description utilizing that term—then it may be possible to regard the concept that is at the heart of a conceptual work of art aesthetically. How this is done, whether it can be done, or to what degree it can be done, would be a matter for deeper consideration than space allows here. But if we can regard some abstractions—as abstractions—aesthetically, then perhaps the concepts behind conceptual art can be regarded this way as well.²

Returning to the main point: there are other reasons for separating the category of “aesthetic object” from the category “art object.” One of those reasons lies in what we find relevant when considering an object. When I aesthetically consider a mountain range, a cloud, or a sunset, my focus is on classic aesthetic properties like those in the long list at the start of Chapter Two. It would be odd to think about these natural objects in the same terms employed in regard to a work of art. When I consider a work of art, it is relevant to consider who the artist is, when the work was created, under what conditions it was created, where it was introduced, and who has owned it. These “contextual” properties may not have an obvious correlate when it comes to aesthetic objects from nature. Since the relevance of what I consider when describing and valuing aesthetic objects and art objects is different, this contributes to the case for saying that these two kinds of objects are not the same.

Another reason for treating aesthetic objects and art objects as different kinds lies in the fact that a work of art—as we saw in the cases of Duchamp, Manzoni, and, in the first chapter, Picasso—may incorporate elements that are non-aesthetic specifically to achieve their value or their meaning as works of art. That is, a work of art might intentionally be “ugly” (or possess some negative aesthetic features) to meet its goal.

² For an in-depth look at the aesthetic properties of conceptual works of art, see James Shelley’s “The Problem of Non-Perceptual Art” in the “Suggested Readings” section at the end of this chapter.

We see something like this in contemporary music as much as in other kinds of artworks. Igor Stravinsky's famous 1913 work entitled *The Rite of Spring* deliberately—and some would say importantly, powerfully, and effectively—included elements that were discordant. Considered in purely classic aesthetic terms, discordant elements in a musical work should diminish the aesthetic quality of that work. But the opposite is the case here.

 3.5 *The Rite of Spring*, Igor Stravinsky, 1913, performance.

Just as there are conceptual works of visual art, there are also conceptual musical works. Perhaps the most famous is the 1952 John Cage work entitled *4'33"*—read “four minutes, thirty-three seconds” and referring to the length of the work. During this work, the performers do not play their instruments. The sounds heard by the audience—and the performers—are the ambient sounds of the auditorium. Either that or silence. If a chair squeaks, if someone coughs—these are the sounds that are heard during a performance of *4'33"*. So, in this case, it is not the sounds that carry the value; a classic aesthetic consideration of the sounds one would hear is not the point. The point is rather an idea that Cage was providing an occasion for considering.

 3.6 *4'33"*, John Cage, 1952, performance.

What Makes an Object (or Event) a Work of Art?

If an aesthetic object is any object that is experienced aesthetically, what is an art object? What is a work of art or artwork?

Before we get into answering this question, I want to be clear that there are many theories that propose answers. We will look at the most historically popular ones, and we will look at them chronologically as they were proposed. It is likely that not all of them can be true. It is possible that only one of them is true, and it is possible that none of them is true. That will be up to you to decide.

The one element every work of art seems to share in common with every other one is that it was made. Or, to use the more technical word, every art object is “artifactual” or is an “artifact.” The temptation is to say that the maker of the object must be a human being, and there is good reason for saying that, but we have examples of paintings made by gorillas, chimpanzees, elephants, and other non-human animals, and if we are casting our definitional net as widely as possible, then it might include these objects as well. We will return to this topic.