
Introduction

Walter Gulick's introductory essay sets the stage for seeing how the following essays share in the encompassing tradition that is American Aesthetics. He roots this tradition in the aesthetic thought of the classic American philosophers, primarily Peirce, James, Whitehead, and Dewey, and in a later generation, Langer. American Aesthetics situates aesthetic judgment in two interconnected levels of experience: in precognitive normative feelings of rightness, and in reflective judgments tied to standards of excellence in perception. Aesthetic sensitivity is attuned to ideals of organization and structure with respect to thinking, creating, performing, and evaluating. More narrowly, those indwelling the spirit of American Aesthetics appreciate that aesthetic criticism legitimately considers all factors contributing to the creation and practice of the arts, including historical and cultural background and artist's experience and intentions.

Toward an American Aesthetics

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The discipline of “aesthetics,” which once referred to the study of beauty in the arts, has become increasingly blurred in the past two centuries. No longer are representational adequacy and beauty self-evident standards of high aesthetic worth. In fact, creative priority, novelty, and cultural or political critique seem to have largely dethroned beauty in the pantheon of artistic value. Where novelty reigns, unpredictability and challenges to traditional categories of understanding are present. Hence, it may be questioned whether it is possible to make legitimate claims about shared aesthetic patterns in today’s diverse and plastic artistic milieu. Generalization is suspect. Yet it is my intent in this essay to make such a claim.¹

I will argue that there is an identifiable pattern in aesthetic thought and practice that can be labeled “American,” and that such labeling distinguishes significant features in the entangled jungle of artistic expression. Within this pattern, aesthetics is understood broadly to elucidate not only the reception, but also the creation and production of art. Moreover, aesthetic factors are recognized not only in the arts, but also in perception, cognition, imagination, and indeed as flavoring experience in general. What I will term American Aesthetics incorporates this broad understanding of aesthetics. American Aesthetics is a living tradition that has greater interpretive power than found in more restricted versions of aesthetics. I argue that the tradition first came to explicit articulation in the writings of the classic American philosophers, especially John Dewey. I will characterize the tradition in terms of three increasingly comprehensive notions of aesthetic judgment, each grounded in feeling. Later

in the essay, I will contrast the richness of American Aesthetics with the understanding of aesthetics as found in the analytic tradition, New Criticism, and postmodernism.

For well over a century there have been many attempts by artists to describe and produce art works that are self-consciously American or are deeply immersed in characteristic American issues. Think of the attention to aspects of American life displayed in the works of such diverse artists as John Singleton Copley, Thomas Cole, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Scott Joplin, George Bellows, Charles Ives, Willa Cather, Alfred Stieglitz, Frank Lloyd Wright, William Faulkner, Georgia O’Keeffe, Walker Evans, Aaron Copland, Robert Frost, Jacob Lawrence, John Steinbeck, Thomas Hart Benton, Duke Ellington, Robert Frank, John Ford, Martha Graham, Tennessee Williams, James Baldwin, Pete Seeger, Maya Angelou, Woody Allen, Andy Warhol, Bob Dylan, Cindy Sherman, and countless, countless others. But to what extent have these works of art, distinctively American in theme, been inspired by aesthetic theories that are distinctively American?

Aesthetics—A Definition

To begin answering the foregoing question, it is necessary to specify how I, in reflection upon American philosophy, understand “aesthetics.” Broadly speaking, aesthetics is a normative discipline that identifies and assesses patterns, qualities, and relations arising in feeling that shape judgments in all the processes of perceiving, thinking, and making (see the articles by Wildman, Neville, and Shusterman).² Beauty, harmony, eloquence, coherence, completion, symmetry—or their negatives, such as ugliness, discord, fragmentation, etc.—such terms are representative of the many aesthetic words describing felt aspects of what we experience. To oversimplify a bit, I understand these aesthetic sensitivities to function at two interconnected levels of reality. At a lower level, they function tacitly in bringing sensation and conception to focal identity. Many of these abilities to discriminate, vaguely accessible as feelings, appear to be innate and shared with other animals. At a higher level of consciousness, many of these feelings have become crystalized into concepts and words, terms we may use in creating and evaluating art.

In its historical origins, aesthetics attended to qualities of excellence in what is perceived. Not all our senses have been accorded equal aesthetic

standing in the traditional language of aesthetics. Taste, touch, and smell have, until recent decades, generally been excluded from discourse about aesthetics. Certain kinds of felt satisfactions associated with vision and hearing have been preeminent along with some creative uses of language (for instance, poetry [Gaskill]). Traditionally, aesthetic satisfaction has to do with the pleasurable appreciation of works of art (or scenic beauty) in which appreciation is an end in itself. Aesthetic satisfaction is thus seen as different from satisfactions derived from the achievement of purposes (although an artist or performer may experience both types of satisfaction simultaneously when completing a beautiful work).

As culture has evolved and become more complex, the notion of aesthetics has expanded. Some objects and works of art—perhaps especially music—are primarily evocative. They move the heart and elicit aesthetic experience. A concert hall, vista point, theater, art museum—such venues may be the loci of enthralling experiences of aesthetic pleasure that soar to the heights of peak experiences, to use Maslow's phrase. We humans also actively apply aesthetic sensibility to create works of art and refined experience in general. Aesthetic sensitivity is now understood, especially from the perspective I am labeling American Aesthetics, as applicable to intellectual and active pursuits in daily life in addition to creation, production, and assessment of the traditional arts. Aesthetic judgments can be expressive-of as well as appreciative-of. Communal and cultural flesh are now seen to surround the traditional core of aesthetics restricted to perception and the arts. This volume's essays have been selected to examine telling aspects of that fleshy diversity. A holistic sampling of how aesthetic sensitivity is expressed in America requires that, in addition to ongoing theoretical reflection, attention needs to be given to how that theory is taken up in practice (Stewart, Hart). Theory without practice is impotent; practice without theory is arbitrary.

I develop this essay by emphasizing felt aesthetic sensitivity as a normative force guiding judging and creating. While feeling and judging are among the most subjective aspects of aesthetics, they apply aesthetic sensitivity to physical and mental *objects* of various sorts. However, any quasi-Cartesian emphasis on subjectivity in contrast to objectivity is both simplistic and problematic. Subject and object are fused in aesthetic experience,³ although they may be distinguished in analysis. Moreover, a rich notion of context is needed to provide the frameworks and meanings that give sense to aesthetic judgments and practices. The lessons of past experiences, biological urgings and processes, natural and built environments,

social and cultural influences, personal habits and goals—such are among the many indwelt contextual influences that are molded by aesthetic sensitivities into the felt rightness of particular aesthetic judgments.⁴ Attention to context is a crucial aspect of American Aesthetics.

A person's aesthetic feelings and judgments not only derive from the embodied lessons of past experiences, they also exhibit intentionality. They are about something. Aesthetic attention may be devoted primarily to hues, aromas, timbres, and other perceived properties of objects one engages in the world, or to more comprehensive patterns or relationships one experiences.⁵ A beautiful rainbow; the three-dimensional form of a sculpture; the attractive arrangement of a website; the pattern of a fugue; a well-crafted architectural rendering; a graceful leap for a rebound in basketball; the unfolding plot of a drama—such are examples of the structures and events *in the world* that may elicit aesthetic responses and judgments.

Authentic engagement with any of the arts may sometimes involve one shifting from mundane everyday consciousness into what sometimes has been called the “realm of the imagination.”⁶ Imagination in all its gracious mystery must be considered in any comprehensive treatment of aesthetics. Imagination is intimately involved in the creation of art, but it can assist with its appreciation as well. I understand imagination to arise from the incessant and unbidden production of ideas and images in the stream of consciousness. As Susanne Langer notes, a spontaneous feature of human mentality is that it constantly produces symbols and accompanying conceptions.⁷ Even when we sleep, the inner fountain of symbols is not turned off. We are immersed in the imagery and thoughts comprising dreams. Artistic imagining can direct nascent images and ideas into novel pathways that produce aesthetic delight or solve aesthetic problems. Imagination is a creative force that becomes art when disciplined by aesthetic judgments, especially those sensitive to socially apt aesthetic categories.

At least three different motivational goals lead to distinct ways of imaginatively engaging a work of art. Most broadly, a person may examine a work to see how it relates to some personal interest external to the object. For example, a historian may want to examine a seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting carefully to see if it artfully illuminates some aspect of life during Holland's Golden Age. That interest guides how the painting is perceived and judged. Secondly, a person may attend to a work of art in terms of favored aesthetic categories in order to experience aesthetic pleasure. Thirdly, aesthetic assessment of a work of art may focus strictly on appreciating *an object or event* and its meaning more fully for its own

sake. In the literature influenced by Kant, an approach focusing on the object in and for itself has been called “disinterested.” Any pleasure derived would be almost an accidental byproduct of the attention rendered.

The above distinctions provide a basis for evaluating whether the so-called aesthetic attitude toward a work of art has a place in American Aesthetics. The aesthetic attitude relates to an artwork like the third approach I just delineated. In an influential article, George Dickie argues that whatever a person’s motivation for viewing an artwork closely, perception is perception, and nothing distinguishes the aesthetic attitude from any other perceptual act of closely examining an art object. That is, his dismissal of the aesthetic attitude is also a rejection of Kantian disinterested attention. There is only attention or inattention. Consequently, he thinks reference to the aesthetic attitude is extraneous and should be eliminated.⁸ Well, the actual act of perceiving may not vary from case to case, but what we seek in perceiving includes an intentional, purposive element that does vary. Close perception governed by the aesthetic attitude focuses on the qualities of the art object disconnected from (disinterested in) issues external to the object, such as whether what the object depicts exists or what its practical value might be. If the aesthetic attitude is narrowly defined as a concentration on a person’s felt experience of an object’s aesthetic qualities (especially such formal qualities as harmony, proportion, unity, and the like), then its purpose is distinguishable from other types of purposeful attention and the term worth retaining. To be sure, our reasons for viewing art closely seem usually to be complex. Judging a painting for its market value, assessing profundity in music, interpreting the political thrust of some performance art, or evaluating eloquence in writing, gracefulness in ballet, the sublime feeling of a cathedral—these diverse judgments include aesthetic elements to different degrees. So it is useful to apply the aesthetic attitude to ascertain the strictly artistic elements at play among impure judgments.

The American Background

Until the past several decades, relatively little attention has been devoted to the possibility of a distinctly American tradition in aesthetics. Self-reliance and problem solving have seemed more American than aesthetic reflection and enjoyment. The high value Americans tend to place on individual freedom can be traced historically to experiences of escape

from tyranny in Europe. The perceived opportunity to settle a “wilderness” has fostered an emphasis on the importance of personal initiative and Emersonian self-reliance. The memory of oppressive European social and political hierarchies sustains the ideal of egalitarianism, informality, and the democratic participation of all. The business and trade-generated rise of the middle class has tended to honor competition and practicality more highly than cooperation and display.

But in addition to such essentially middle-class values, upper-class aesthetic sensitivities of a different sort tended to dominate art criticism prior to the twentieth century. In the late nineteenth century, the several movements often jointly termed “aestheticism” were largely borrowed from Europe. Aestheticism’s notion of “art for art’s sake” emphasized beauty as the highest criterion of aesthetic worth. In practice, however, aestheticism’s championing of elitist fine art was supported by wealthy patrons often for reasons of pecuniary value and status. This fine art tradition ignored the service art might provide ordinary persons within democracy. The growth and consolidation of native thought about aesthetics can thus be seen as at least partially an antiestablishment critique of the marriage between the aesthetic perspective and the flaunting of wealth in the Gilded Age. The classic American philosophers, rejecting the reduction of the arts to issues of effete pleasure, decoration, and status seeking, investigated ways the arts could better contribute to broad social and cultural health. American Aesthetics was born.

The works of the many artists mentioned earlier express different reactions to American historical experience. The nineteenth-century reliance on inherited European aesthetic criteria (especially Kantian aesthetics) gradually declined in the twentieth century. Studies of particularistic cultural contexts became more common, as did concern about establishing distinctive American art. Creative work in aesthetic theory was carried out by the classic American philosophers. However, after the devastation of World War II, when America became recognized as the world leader in many of the arts, the urgency of interpreting the new art was mainly carried out in the idiom of either of the two leading philosophical traditions of the time, analytic or continental philosophy. It seems that the resulting aesthetic interpretation was not generally seen as constituting an American tradition, but was, rather, interpreted as just being another expression of Western culture. Distinctive American art, yes; thoughtful work in art history and criticism by Americans, yes; distinctively American aesthetic theory, not so clear.

Classic American Philosophers

It is my contention that conceptions produced by the so-called classic American philosophers provide systematic insights supporting an explicit tradition of American aesthetics. Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, George Santayana, Alfred North Whitehead, and John Dewey are generally seen as the classic American philosophers.

It is not the case that these thinkers produce a unified body of aesthetic theory. Their philosophical approaches are varied, even as American culture is varied, and the extent to which they consider aesthetic themes ranges widely. However, Peirce, James, Whitehead, and Dewey are classic American philosophers whose thought about aesthetics largely coheres and reverberates with distinctive American themes. To engage in some useful oversimplification, I see these four thinkers as collectively taking a naturalistic stance that balances empirical evidence with axiological insight, stresses the importance of an aesthetic dimension in experience (especially at its felt, formative stage), is alert to artistic expression as a dynamic affair, and attends to the pragmatic significance of the arts. These four American thinkers and the pragmatic and process traditions they inspire are primary philosophical influences on the following essays.

To this list of American philosophers Susanne Langer should be added. Whitehead is a primary influence on Langer (as is Cassirer), but unlike Whitehead or the other three classic philosophers, she focuses systematically upon the different kinds of aesthetic judgments evoked by different artistic disciplines and specific works of art. Her emphasis on expression, feeling, form, and symbol is consistent with themes in classic American philosophy.

By claiming that the four classic American philosophers provide the most profound and original thought about aesthetics in an American vein, I do not mean to suggest that there were no worthy precursors prior to the late nineteenth century. Jonathan Edwards, Walt Whitman, and especially Ralph Waldo Emerson are examples of writers who successfully married American themes with aesthetic reflection. In his essay "Art," Emerson stresses the importance of producing useful objects that are beautiful so there is no split between the fine and useful arts. He sees the potential among American artisans and artists to rival the work of the great Italians insofar as Americans do not become stuck in previous modes of aesthetic understanding. Emerson secured a lasting place in the world of letters (Goodson); his thought was responded to by Peirce, James,

and Dewey among the classic American philosophers. His transcendental view of nature's instructive majesty comes to expression in the paintings of the Hudson River School, although the landscapes of Cole and Church seem better interpreted as American versions of Eurocentric Romanticism rather than as indebted to Emerson. While it is not clear that his aesthetic ideas in "Art" ever had much influence among visual artists, his work as a whole is aesthetically significant.

Besides Emerson and Whitman, America produced strong literary voices in such persons as Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Mark Twain. The content of their writings is deeply embedded in American experience, but the degree to which this work was inspired by native aesthetic reflection is debatable. America produced such skilled landscape artists as Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran, but these figures can be seen as following in a tradition set by seventeenth-century Dutch artists, as well as Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, and expressed in the nineteenth century by such figures as John Constable, Caspar David Friedrich, J. C. Dahl, and the Barbizon painters. More to the point, America produced no influential aestheticians comparable to England's Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Morris, John Ruskin, and Walter Pater. The aestheticism that came to prominence in the United States during the last quarter of the nineteenth century was most directly inspired by the aesthetic theory of such nonnative thinkers.

Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) is arguably the first groundbreaking comprehensive work on aesthetics by an American. It is surely the most influential single work shaping American Aesthetics. His holistic approach to aesthetics sees it as emerging from bodily based engagement with the world in which perception is conjoined with emotionally charged feeling, intellectual discrimination, and pragmatic concern about meaning and impact. As a fundamental dimension of *experience*, Deweyan aesthetics is not restricted just to the fine arts but is also applicable to pop culture, technological developments, and indeed to daily life (Leddy). Dewey's promotion of democracy and progressive thought, partly a remnant of his early Hegelian leanings, must have a significant place in any tradition of American aesthetics.

None of the three classic American philosophers besides Dewey provides a full, explicit rendering of aesthetics in its various useful permutations. Moreover, the changing understanding of the arts requires ongoing adjustment of the aesthetic theory of Dewey and the other classic

American philosophers. In order to show the continuing relevance of the classic American philosophers, it is important to see how they fit into the worldwide historical flow of aesthetic thought and artistic ingenuity. For an American tradition in aesthetics is far from a completely novel philosophical achievement. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) has had the greatest impact of any Western theory of aesthetics. While I am not claiming Kant's aesthetics directly influenced American Aesthetics in any significant way, I will use it for several purposes:

1. It can serve as a reference point for illuminating how American Aesthetics forms a distinctive tradition in contrast to the traditional dominance of Kantian aesthetics.
2. Kant's thought in his above referenced third *Critique* has less noticed elements that are consistent with and can contribute to American Aesthetics.
4. Kant's claims, modified as appropriate to contemporary experience, helpfully serve as a framework for articulating three progressively inclusive uses of aesthetic judgment.

The Kantian Framework and First Domain of Aesthetic Judgment

Kant's aesthetic theory productively contains elements of Enlightenment attention to reason and a foretaste of Romantic emphasis on imagination and feeling. In his first *Critique*, Kant calls his exposition of the spatio-temporal framework within which empirical knowledge is possible the "Transcendental Aesthetic," alluding to the Greek term *aesthesis*, a reference to sensory perception. He only develops his analysis of the quality inherent in perceiving in his third *Critique*, the *Critique of Judgment*. American Aesthetics follows Kant in paying less attention to the traditional emphasis on the perceived aesthetic object of aesthetic judgment and more attention to that judgment itself and its aesthetic qualities. The judgment that some perceived object is beautiful is based on a feeling that arises prior to the experience being classified and structured through concepts.⁹ For beauty as Kant discusses it does not arise from reflection upon pleasure stimulated by perception. That merely gives rise to subjective experience he calls "pleasant" (*CJ* 39, ¶ 3). Recognition of beauty precedes any experience of

pleasure (see *CJ* ¶ 9). Beauty results from a primordial harmony between the imagination (in its free play of representation) and the understanding, a harmony Kant thinks is objectively present in all people's perception of an object judged beautiful even though it is subjectively experienced (*CJ* 52, ¶ 9). He claims that beauty is inherent in some sensed objects, and all should agree it is beautiful because the same process of forming a percept is found in all humans. Any pleasure we experience is its own end. We are disinterested in whether the beautiful object exists or not, or whether it is useful (*CJ* 38, ¶ 2). Thus, for Kant the judgment of beauty is based on a self-justified, self-rewarding experience.

Aesthetic theories in the nineteenth century usually followed Kant (and sometimes Schopenhauer) in focusing upon beauty, although generally not understanding beauty in the rarified pure way Kant did. Neither does American Aesthetics believe Kant's grasping for objective purity is sustainable. One problem with Kantian beauty is that he never incorporates the vast range of aesthetic feelings mentioned earlier into his aesthetic analysis, not even when he concocts impure versions of beauty, such as dependent versus adherent beauty. James is especially adept at recognizing the rich varieties of aesthetic judgment needing recognition. Still, the impetus Kant gave to understanding the significance of beauty—or occasionally sublimity, our reaction to something that elicits wonder or awe—is worthy of respect. Tethering aesthetic theory to disinterested judgments of beauty or sublimity represents the first and most common understanding of aesthetics. This first understanding of aesthetics, which I argued earlier applies to the so-called aesthetic attitude, is acceptable, even if of limited use, in American Aesthetics.

The Second Domain of Aesthetic Judgment

As just suggested, American Aesthetics rejects limiting aesthetics to beauty and sublimity alone as aesthetic ideals. An extended usage of aesthetic judgment is important to flesh out if aesthetic theory is to be comprehensive enough to be helpful in interpreting the changing functions and types of art that have emerged since Kant's time. Such cultural expressions as cinema, performance art, political art, and even cuisine, ritual, or landscaping evoke aesthetic responses that should be considered in an inclusive theory. Moreover, artistic creation often produces expressions that are significant but not beautiful. Tragedy in drama, conceptual art, atonal

music, war photography—such are among the many artistic expressions to which beauty as commonly understood is not relevant.

Aesthetic responses to all the arts are quite complex, not merely disinterested and formal as in Kant's understanding of beauty. The typical creative artist is very much interested in the content she produces and its success in attracting attention. And the artist is sensitive to past creative experiences, intends outcomes that may shift during the creative process, is influenced by what is or is not going on in the art world, relies upon certain personal skills, and so on. Context again. Does Kant simply dismiss all these factors that contribute to the creative process as not being aesthetic? No, but he diverts from the language of "aesthetic" and the experience of beauty. Rather, he relies upon the concept of "genius." He claims that "genius is a talent for producing that for which no definite rule can be given; it is not a mere aptitude for what can be learned by rule. Hence originality must be its first property" (*CJ* 150, ¶ 46). Genius for Kant is thus creative talent, not just brilliance of mind. The sources of the genius's artistic productivity being mysterious, it might seem that Kant's understanding of creativity tails off into a black box.

This is not the case. Genius is the creative result of what Kant calls spirit, "the name given to the animating principle of the soul" (*CJ* 157, 160, ¶ 49). Spirit produces aesthetical ideas. "And by aesthetical ideas I understand that representation of the imagination which occasions much thought, without however any definite thought, i.e. any *concept*, being capable of being adequate to it; it consequently cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language" (*CJ* 157, ¶ 49). Aesthetical ideas, then, would seem to be creative images or perhaps even intimations that inspire one toward developing adequate expression of the originating feeling or vague concept. Prosaic language of complete description cannot adequately capture the meaning of an aesthetical idea, but a poem might approximate it. So might dance, a sonata, a sculpture, or a painting, depending on the nature of the aesthetical idea and how it is framed.

Kant's notion of spirit relates in a subterranean and thus generally unacknowledged way to American aesthetic theory. Dewey named his now lost PhD dissertation at Johns Hopkins "The Psychology of Kant." In a letter to W. T. Harris about the dissertation, Dewey writes that Kant "had the conception of Reason or Spirit as the centre and organic unity of the entire sphere of man's experience, and that in so far as he is true to this conception that he is the true founder of modern philosophic method."¹⁰ To be sure, the young Dewey devoted himself more to the

Hegelian expression of spirit than he relied on Kant. Nevertheless, Kant's recognition of the signal importance of aesthetic meaning that exceeds language provides an influential alternative in modern philosophy (and for American Aesthetics) to narrow forms of empiricism centered on mechanistic explanation and the search for certainty.

How does Kant understand the process by which aesthetical ideas and their artistic expression come into being? He suggests that a certain sensitive relation between one's imagination and understanding (the same faculties involved in sensing beauty) generates the work of art. It presumably follows threads of proportion, resemblance, harmony, aptness, association, and the like in its creative thrust, although Kant says little about such leadings other than that the process is bound by no rule. Neither reason nor imagination knows from whence it comes. But the lack of a rule need not imply the lack of standards of judgment. Kant ties the productivity of spirit to the creation of beautiful works of art. However, there is no reason this spirit-driven process should be excluded from broader applications of aesthetic judgment. The felt standards of such aesthetic notions as proportion, resemblance, harmony, aptness, association, and similar qualities of relationship may influence any judgment. These standards are tacitly relied upon in shaping creative work and guiding evaluation. So by extending Kant's notion of spirit slightly we arrive at the second domain of aesthetic judgment, one that interprets art in many normative ways beyond beauty alone.

In his later references to Kant's aesthetics, Dewey seems to forget his earlier appreciation of Kantian spirit and instead pejoratively restricts his treatment of Kantian aesthetics to disinterested judgments of art. He claims Kantian aesthetic judgment is not reflective (wrong) and operates in a mode of isolated contemplation. Dewey states that "the psychological road was opened leading to the ivory tower of 'Beauty' remote from all desire, action, and stir of emotion."¹¹ These comments by Dewey reflect the common rejection in American Aesthetics of Kant's notion of beauty as the unquestioned standard of aesthetic judgment. Thus Dewey says that Kant's theory of aesthetics

not only passes over, as if it were irrelevant, the doing and making involved in the production of a work of art (and the corresponding active elements in the appreciative response), but it involves an extremely one-sided idea of the nature of perception. It takes as its cue to the understanding of per-

ception what belongs only to the act of recognition, merely broadening the latter to include the pleasure that attends it when recognition is prolonged and extensive.¹²

While he ignores Kant's discussion of artistic creativity, Dewey sets forth a robust theory that develops potential left unrealized in Kant's account of artistic creation. Thought, emotion, sense, purpose, impulsion—all bound in a passionate pressing forward—are involved in the making of art for Dewey (Innis). Such ideation resonates with the traditional value structure that emerged in American history and became resident in its culture. Thus, aesthetics has for Dewey an extended reach that includes, for example, “subject-matter that is enjoyed in the case of architectural structures, the drama, and the novel, with all their attendant reverberations.”¹³ Moreover, the felt reach of aesthetic understanding may appropriately involve knowing how the biography of the creator is relevant to the creator's artistic style and intentions. The background experience, sociological status, and psychological state of the creator; historical and cultural conditions in America at the time of creation; artist's intention—all such contextual factors are fair game in aesthetic analysis. Therefore, the traditional American commitment to democracy, endorsement of hard work and the “common man,” and suspicion of elitist evaluation of “fine art” frequently underlie aesthetic assessment in the American tradition. “Underlie” is a key term here. For these typical American values, while not abstract and formal like the “pure” aesthetic categories, contribute to the rich evaluation of art characteristic of American Aesthetics.

The Third Domain of Aesthetic Judgment

The making of art can be seen, in Dewey's instrumentalist perspective, as not so different from the taming of a frontier, the founding of a new business, or the solving of a crossword puzzle. Indeed, aesthetic factors are embedded in such exploits. There is no reason Kantian spirit and genius could not be extended beyond the arts to a third domain, one in which aesthetic sensitivity is recognized as being involved in all acts of thinking, making, and doing. In the second half of the third *Critique*, Kant gingerly opens the door to such extension by referring to the satisfactions arising in purposive behavior. Satisfactions arise in intellectual as well as sensible experience. He sees such satisfactions to be generated by, for instance,

the *beauty* of numbers and geometrical figures. However, he is reluctant to speak of “intellectual beauty,” as then the term *beauty* would “lose all determinate significance” (CJ 212, ¶ 62).¹⁴

Dewey is not reluctant to speak of aesthetic elements in intellectual endeavor. He states that “*an* experience of thinking has its own esthetic quality. It differs from those experiences that are acknowledged to be esthetic, but only in its materials. . . . Nevertheless, the experience itself has a satisfying emotional quality because it possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement.”¹⁵ His version of *an experience* is like a greatly enlarged version of intuition in its unifying function. Dewey in effect claims that each instance of what he calls having *an* experience has a unique aesthetic structure marked by completion and consummation.

An experience has a unity that gives it its name, *that* meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constitutive parts. This unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can make within it. In discourse *about* an experience, we must make use of these adjectives of interpretation. In going over an experience in mind *after* its occurrence, we may find that one property rather than another was sufficiently dominant so that it characterizes the experience as a whole.¹⁶

Dewey has been criticized by Susanne Langer and others for focusing aesthetic assessment on subjective experience rather than on the object or event that generates the aesthetic experience. In reaction against an overemphasis on psychological interpretations of the aesthetics of art, Langer says that “we might do better to look upon the art object as something in its own right, with properties independent of our prepared reactions—properties which command our reactions, and make art the autonomous and essential factor that it is in every human culture.”¹⁷ With respect to the evaluation of art, Langer’s criticism seems legitimate for what an art critic might write. Indeed, because art criticism makes essential use of aesthetic categories, it is appropriate to regard it as a species of the holistic genus American Aesthetics. However, perhaps it is best to recognize two related points. Yes, certain objects, created or natural, have

the power to elicit glorious aesthetic experiences. But also, a person with an aesthetically sensitive predisposition can recognize in objects aesthetic features to which others are blind. Neither object alone nor person alone can generate aesthetic experience; both are needed.

While Dewey's notion of *an* experience provides a promising basis for the expanded third domain of aesthetic judgment, his illustrations are routinely devoted to works of art. We must turn to others among the classic American philosophers for a dynamic, comprehensive notion of aesthetic sensitivity as relevant to many of the processes of living, not just to art. Thus, Peirce sees aesthetics as the most basic of the normative sciences, fueling even ethical judgments (Rohr). Whitehead writes, contra Kant's disinterested approach, "The concept of completely passive contemplation in abstraction from action and purpose is a fallacious extreme. It omits the final regulative factor in the aesthetic complex."¹⁸ William James contrasts his pleasant, relaxed stay at Chautauqua with an alternative he experiences as more aesthetically compelling.

[W]hat our human emotions seem to require is the sight of the struggle going on. The moment the fruits are being merely eaten, things become ignoble. Sweat and effort, human nature strained to its uttermost and on the rack, yet getting through alive, and then turning its back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still—this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us, and the reality of which it seems to be the function of all the higher forms of literature and fine art to bring home to us and suggest.¹⁹

The Felt Aspect of Aesthetic Judgment

The view that feeling is an essential element in connecting person with environment (including artworks) is central to the epistemology of several of the classic American philosophers.²⁰ James writes, "Through feelings we become acquainted with things, but only by our thoughts do we know about them. Feelings are the germ and starting point of cognition, thoughts the developed tree."²¹ Whitehead describes feeling as constituting the first phase of perception (McTernan). "The crude aboriginal character of direct perception is inheritance. What is inherited is feeling-tone with evidence of its origin: in other words, vector feeling-tone. In the

higher grades of perception vague feeling-tone differentiates itself into various types of sense—those of touch, sight, smell, etc.”²² But perhaps it is Susanne Langer who best articulates the broad provenance of feeling within which aesthetic elements may mold judgments. “[T]he thesis I hope to substantiate here is that the entire psychological field—including human conception, responsible action, rationality, knowledge—is a vast and branching development of feeling.”²³ She explains that feelings are appropriately regarded as actions rather than entities. “[T]he phenomenon usually described as ‘a feeling’ is really that an organism feels something, i.e., something is felt. What is felt is a process, perhaps a large complex of processes, within the organism.”²⁴ Aesthetic discernment is such a process.

It is important to differentiate several connotations of “feeling” in order to link it properly with aesthetics.

1. Feeling is what is experienced actively or passively in the physical realm of touching and being touched: “The dress feels silky smooth.” Feeling can apply within this embodied sense of the word either to the self-initiated process of feeling something or to the experience of an impact on one.
2. Feeling involves a largely tacit process of retrieval. A felt sensation can have an identity, a particularity that cues the explicit memory of a place, an event, or even an appropriate word: “Hearing my friend talk about his youth evoked feelings about the coziness of my childhood bedroom and the thrill of climbing the back yard tree.”
3. Feeling is an intimation or adumbration of an impending coherence or discovery. Peirce’s notion of abduction as a form of vague rational intuition is an example of this sort of feeling that is more than a guess but less than a well-founded cognitive state. Feeling in this sense has a place in scientific discovery. Thus, based on a felt intuition of increased coherence, Einstein “adopted a vision in which the electro-dynamics of moving bodies were set beautifully free from all the anomalies imposed on them by the traditional framework of absolute time and space.”²⁵
4. Feeling is a vague process of discrimination that judges between rational or perceptual alternatives according to

norms of appropriateness, proportion, elegance, profundity, compatibility, beauty, fit, and similar essentially aesthetic terms.

The last two enumerated senses of feeling are most clearly associated with what I am terming the third domain of aesthetic judgment. As felt, this third function of aesthetic judgment has sensitivities that occur in moments of reflective attention. Felt judgments are subjective and not in themselves adequately amenable to logical examination issuing in proof or disproof. The reach of this third function of aesthetic judgment is broad and weighty; it is not limited to the arts. It describes a felt sensitivity to the resources judgment may rely upon in rendering a verdict. Indeed, it gives some intelligibility to the uprising springs of rationality Kant calls “mother wit”²⁶ and despairs of understanding. That is, the aesthetic norms just suggested in the fourth notion of feeling supply a sort of felt under-ground nourishment guiding judgment to apt assessments, inferences, or conclusions (Auxier). Here is where noncognitive feeling and cognitively based logic interact, for it is through felt appropriateness to a topic that logic is legitimately employed.

The content of imagination often appears spontaneously, sometimes in the form Kant called aesthetic Ideas. In massaging these Ideas into explicit form, aesthetic categories such as enumerated in the fourth point about feeling are often relied upon. As an example, the cognitive act typically called “intuition” reaches its conclusions through reliance on aesthetic criteria—typically, such criteria as fittingness, completeness, elegance, or harmony. Indeed, it seems as if intuition, as commonly understood, is at its core an aesthetically guided act of recognizing coherence, that is, a basic way of coming to conclusions that is different from logical deduction. If so, then one way of looking at intuition is to see it as the product of a process of integration during which aesthetic criteria act both as filters eliminating extraneous ideas or perceptions and as guides leading the experience to consummation.

Three domains of aesthetic judgment have now been identified. The first domain is the disinterested approach to art that identifies beauty as the aesthetic ideal. American Aesthetics, while it acknowledges beauty as one among many aesthetic standards, reacts strongly against the apotheosis of beauty as *the* aesthetic standard. The second domain, central to American Aesthetics, recognizes that creative imagination, aesthetic sensibility, contextual savvy, and normative vocabulary conjoin in the creation and

judging of art in its evolving diversity. The third domain, grounded in the thought of the classic American philosophers, involves the recognition that felt aesthetic criteria can influence any and all judgments, not just judgment about art. Each succeeding aspect is more inclusive than its predecessor.

Characteristics of American Aesthetics

What characteristics would criticism of art consistent with American Aesthetics display? Here are likely attributes: (1) the historical, social, and cultural factors that shape the interpreter's judgments are acknowledged; (2) the particular contextual features that illuminate the meaning of the artwork are explicated; (3) insofar as possible, the specific abstract aesthetic standards used in assessing excellence are identified; (4) the fallible, personal character of judgments would be acknowledged; and (5) how the aesthetic aspects of the artwork(s) lead to conclusions about meaning and significance of the work would be highlighted. Several additional factors are noteworthy: (6) in some arenas of creation, such as literature or creative reflection, aesthetic feeling appropriately takes on linguistic form; but (7) in the visual arts, dance, and music, for instance, creative expression is mediated nonlinguistically and tends to resist adequate translation into language. Nevertheless, (8) all aesthetic theorizing and explicit evaluation must necessarily be discussed in language, so (9) critics with a poetic capacity to communicate felt meanings successfully are worthy of special acclamation.

Those individuals carrying out work in the tradition of American Aesthetics employ relatively abstract aesthetic judgments as indicated in the three domains. But because context is so important in American Aesthetics, American culture and history and social settings also contribute to aesthetic processing. Creation and criticism based on American Aesthetics tend to support and appreciate art with some of the following aspects or characteristics:

- Art that is democratic and anti-hierarchical in its sympathies—art that the informed common person can appreciate—is valued more than art that is pretentious, promoted as an investment, or seen as a producer of status.
- Popular culture, vernacular art, and the aesthetics of everyday life are included within the democratic holism of American

Aesthetics, although with varying degrees of affirmation and acceptance.

- Appreciation does not generally extend to the bland, twee or effete (Norman Rockwell, Grandma Moses, elevator music, classically American though they are). Americans tend to see themselves as hard working, practical persons not overly given to sentimentality.
- The traditions of different cultures and classes are attended to in American Aesthetics, given its openness and egalitarianism. Postmodern attention to voices that have been excluded from attention, while perhaps especially stimulated by such thinkers as Derrida and Foucault, is consistent with American Aesthetic sympathies.
- Novelty of expression is valued as dynamic and perhaps progressive, future-oriented. This aesthetic value may be connected to the American support for individualism and for entrepreneurs, those who challenge established practices and authorities.
- Social, historical, and cultural contexts are seen as important in understanding art, and the life experiences of the artist are part of those contexts. So artistic background and intention have a role to play in assessing the meaning of art works.
- Art with a social message is embraced, especially that which sympathetically examines poverty or racism, critiques commercial excess, and offers positive alternatives to the status quo.
- Nature tends to be viewed as the great source and restorer of spiritual values in art.

Many of the values expressed in this list derive from America's religious heritage. For from the time of the first European intrusions into native soil, religious thought, with its attendant idealism, has shaped the dominant American ethos.²⁷ Religions tend to be especially sensitive to how all the senses can be utilized as doorways to the sacred. The use of incense, hands-on ordination, holy wafer ingested, the sound of bells, sacred dance—such is the richness of religious aesthetics (Slater). Beyond such

experiential aesthetics, the various European denominations bequeathed fine art aesthetic standards to their American counterparts, but the physical, social, and economic conditions prevalent in America often promulgated alternative expressions of those standards. For instance, the traditional white New England Congregational church continued the iconoclastic tradition of its Reformed forebears in England and the continent, but it valorized light in a way that differs from the dusky Dutch Reformed sanctuaries. Music, painting, and sculpture in America usually bypass explicit Christian depiction as found in the Bach cantata and motet or the Renaissance-inspired Madonna and Child. Joshua Taylor notes that “art has rarely served in America as an illustration of religious thought, but rather has often striven to create that environment of mind that makes religion possible. . . . Eventually art itself became both symbol and proof of a persistent human spirituality.”²⁸ Dramatic renderings of nature were seen to proclaim the glories of God’s creation.

The important American theologian Jonathan Edwards is one who extolled the beauty of God’s beneficent creation; he saw such beauty as physical evidence of divine presence (Raposa). Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalism detached religion from denominationalism. He privileged the individual’s direct experience of the divine in nature. Different versions of refined spirituality play significant roles in the thought of Peirce, James, Whitehead, and Dewey. Aesthetic and moral sensitivities, as two species of the ideal, have often been intertwined within American religious contexts. Aesthetic judgment is a primal form of valuing, and religion often functions as a storehouse and champion of those values. American Aesthetics, as a comprehensive approach to aesthetics including attention to social and cultural context, provides some correction to the relative lack of attention given to religion and theology in philosophical aesthetics. Several of the essays in this volume address the intersection of aesthetics and religion.

American Aesthetics is a living tradition that includes content that goes beyond the felt formal purity of much traditional aesthetic theory. Two contemporary philosophers who are exemplars of American Aesthetics are Arnold Berleant and Richard Shusterman. Berleant writes, “It was important for Dewey to set himself apart from the common understanding of experience as a subjective, atomistic, even exotic occurrence and to reclaim its biological and social content and continuity; experience is a natural activity of the human organism in the ordinary activities of living.”²⁹ Shusterman’s *Pragmatist Aesthetics* is notable for how it extends