

Aesthetics and Non-Western Aesthetics

HUMN2001 – VIDEO LECTURE – WK2
M. Curtis Allen

Context for the Emergence of European Aesthetics

- Political Turmoil
- Liberalism and Enlightenment
- The Bourgeois Class
- Institutions of Art

Political Turmoil in 18th Century Europe

- Increasing unease with the effectiveness of Monarchical and Aristocratic Rule
- Constitutional Monarchy vs. Absolute Monarchy
- The French Revolution and the end of Monarchy in France (for a bit)

Liberalism and Enlightenment in 18th Century Europe

- Enlightenment: Alongside these political transformations were changes in ideas about individuals and the relations and hierarchies between individuals
- Secularism: that political and economic institutions should be free of ecclesiastical influence. This meant big changes in how artworks and aesthetic experience were received in the West
- Egalitarianism: The idea that individuals were borne equal and should be treated equal according to the law. This put the individual and their experience at the forefront of thinking about viewing artworks or having an aesthetics experience.
- Liberalism: The idea that people should be able to engage in free economic enterprise, with minimal interference or regulation from external parties like the State. This again comes out of a tradition of thinking in terms of the individual as the principal site of experience, as well as where the law and rights should get attached and be enforced.

The Bourgeoisie

- A bourgeois middle class (between the peasants and the aristocracy) emerged, flush with mercantile, industrial, and colonial wealth with which they sought to gain prestige through investing in high art.
- Since they had no vested interest in maintaining the old Church or Aristocratic traditions of European High Art, they also slowly began to think about aesthetics experience in a new way, one based primarily on the individual's experience. They also changed the institutions of high art, moving away from the royal academies of Europe, and the model of apprenticeships, to the gallery, the exhibition, the museum, and eventually changing the models of art education in the 20th century.
- The way in which artworks were funded also changed. Moving from patronage (State/Aristocracy) and religious (Ecclesiastical) functions to the status of commodity (Mercantile/Bourgeois). The 'free' art market emerges.

The 'Fine' Arts

- The idea that there were arts separate from the sphere of the everyday, as well as the sphere of religion and politics was one also codified in the 18th century
- Abbé Charles Batteux in 1746, called these arts, 'fine arts' insofar as a they were produced more-or-less for our enjoyment or for their own sake. David Hume around the same time called these 'arts of luxury
- These included painting, music, sculpture, and poetry
- Before this point there was no systematic thinking in Europe about what belonged to the 'arts' and what didn't (say craft, fashion, the decorative arts, etc.)

18th Century Players

- David Hume
- Edmund Burke
- Alexander Baumgarten
- Immanuel Kant

18th Century Players

David Hume (1711–1776)

- Empirical Philosopher
- Part of the Scottish Enlightenment
- Interested in Empirical Psychological Theories of the Mind
 - Sense Impressions
 - Habit
 - Association
- His theory of beauty amounted to a theory of ‘taste’
 - i.e. what people found ‘agreeable’



18th Century Players

Edmund Burke

(1729 – 1797)

- Conservative Irish Statesmen and Philosopher
- Wrote on ideas about the Beautiful and the Sublime
- And focused on the imagination
- [LINK](#)



18th Century Players

Alexander Baumgarten

(1714 – 1762)

- German Philosopher in the post-Leibnizian Tradition
- Invented the modern use of the term ‘aesthetics.’
- He envisioned it as the ‘science of what is sensed and imagined’ (Baumgarten, *Meditationes* §CXVI, pp. 86–7).
- Here perceptual liveliness or richness is counterposed to cognitive clarity



18th Century Players

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1802)

- German Philosopher
- Inventor of
transcendental
Philosophy
- Synthesized the
developments of the
17-18th centuries.



Philosophical Problems with the Idea of Non-Western Aesthetics

- Concepts have histories (even categories)
- Cultural difference extends not just to content but also to form
- It's not clear there is a genus (aesthetics) of which various cultures express species (European aesthetics, Chinese, Indian, African, Pre-Columbian Indigenous Inhabitants of Turtle Island, etc.)
- It isn't obviously true that 'aesthetics' isn't a European construct through-and-through.
- Because of the legacy of colonialism, all cross-cultural aesthetics has been made in deference to the European tradition, taken as a benchmark against which to judge non-western cultures.

Reading Blocker's “Non-Western Aesthetics as a Colonial Invention”

“Assuming an essentialist, and perhaps racist or at least racialist, division of the world population into distinct groups, the assumption [by European thinkers] was that Indians look at the world in a unique way which is different from that of the Chinese who see the world in a different way from the Africans who see things very differently from Europeans whose outlook is different from all the others.” (Blocker 2001, 4)

Reading Blocker's “Non-Western Aesthetics as a Colonial Invention”

“But far from establishing differences between Western and non-Western thought systems, this merely projects onto non-Western cultures ancient Western dichotomies (binaries) of reason and emotion, science and poetry, logical and romantic, masculine and feminine, analytic and synthetic, and rational and intuitive; in which non-Western cultures are either idealized or stigmatized as sources of a more holistic, poetic, emotional, romantic, feminine, and intuitive vision of the world” (Blocker 2001, 5)

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“But [assuming that terms like ‘art’ or ‘aesthetics’ can be translated] may be a very mistaken assumption. Other cultures may simply not have words or concepts similar in meaning to our "art." One reason may be that these concepts in English and other European languages presuppose a division of society and culture into distinct functional roles.” (Ibid., 6).

Reading Blocker's "Non-Western Aesthetics as a Colonial Invention"

“They [non-European traditional cultures] may make wooden statues for ancestor spirits to temporarily "occupy," and to which they make offerings of food and drink, and of which they ask (that is, "pray") for help for a successful harvest, battle, or marriage; but they have no sense of which part of this complex ritual practice is their "art," which part is "religion," which part is "agriculture," and so on. These questions will make no sense to them, though they will, of course, make sense to us” (Ibid., 6).

Reading Blocker's “Non-Western Aesthetics as a Colonial Invention”

- But Blocker also falls back on a progressive model of cultural development within which European (and perhaps a few other cultures: Chinese, Indian, Japanese) have reached a culmination of aesthetic refinement and critical self-reflexivity and explicit theorization.
- This is the Eurocentric modern historical viewpoint *par excellence*.
- Let us read:

Reading Blocker's “Non-Western Aesthetics as a Colonial Invention”

“Here I think it is useful to distinguish a developmental hierarchy of stages of aesthetic consciousness.

[1] First, and surely common to all peoples, is a spontaneous, innate, elementary aesthetic response. [...]

[2] This common and widespread aesthetic response can then be culturally defined in terms of socially accepted meanings.

[3] It can then be isolated and heightened in certain societies like our own by social institutions surrounding fine art and aesthetic experience which focus on the aesthetic aspect of a situation in certain appropriate contexts, such as the museum or the theater...

Reading Blocker's “Non-Western Aesthetics as a Colonial Invention”

[4] This culturally defined basic aesthetic response may also be subsequently articulated verbally. [...] These verbalizations will inevitably involve criteria for acceptability, that is, **unspoken** standards for what is aesthetically good and bad (good because lustrous; bad because dull),

[5] and these standards and criteria can then be verbally ranked and prioritized, leading finally to

[6] an explicit theory of art criticism and aesthetics.)”

(Ibid., 11)