Making Sense of Taste

Carolyn Korsmeyer

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999

This is a book about taste--the thing your tongue (and nose) do. It's also a book about Taste--the thing the art critic has. It's a book about food, art, and the relations between food and art. Do those two categories overlap? Where and how? How we might best understand and appreciate food in light of the way we understand and appreciate art? It's a book about how the divergent histories of taste and Taste have left us with an impoverished understanding of the former--and thus a deep skepticism about the aesthetic worth of food. Korsmeyer suggests that her project will illuminate readers' understanding of food--and observes that it might well illuminate our understanding of art as well. She succeeds on both counts.

Korsmeyer's approach in this book might be described as Aristotelian. Rather than elucidating a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the category Art and then going on to select just those examples of food and taste that (however remote, arcane or rare) perfectly meet the criteria, she instead looks seriously and deeply at some of the ways food actually is understood, at the ways in which it is experienced, appreciated, meant.

But *is* it art? While Korsmeyer does conclude that food is not an art--in the sense of fine art that we employ in western culture today--she argues that the question "is it art?" is not the most important or interesting question to ask. "Certainly food does not qualify as a fine art; it does not have the right history, to make a complex point in shorthand. Culinary art can still be considered a minor or a decorative art, or perhaps a functional or applied art (for we should not minimize the fact that eating is a daily aspect of living in the most literal sense of that term). ...

However, this warrant for the label 'art' is not the most important link between food and art. It is much more significant that both form symbolic systems with similar components..." (p.144).

What is a symbolic system, and what does it have to do with aesthetics? In searching out an aesthetic framework within which food and taste might have a fighting chance of being understood in their richness and multifacetedness, Korsmeyer adopts Nelson Goodman's understanding of art and other aesthetically relevant activities as symbol systems, and she extends Goodman's analysis to show that food constitutes such a symbol system. A symbol system is aesthetically relevant if it manifests a number of "symptoms" of the aesthetic (a phrase which rejects the notion that objects must meet a number of necessary and sufficient conditions in order to count as an aesthetic object). Korsmeyer shows that several of these symptoms--representation, exemplification, relative repleteness, and expression--are manifested time and again in foods and in eating experiences. Chicken soup, to take just one small example, is expressive insofar as (in some cultures) it "*is* a home remedy and *means* that one is being taken care of. The expression of care that soup exemplifies is supported by the literal properties that soup also has: a rich but not taxing flavor, ingredients that are easy to swallow, and so on" (p.132). Korsmeyer's book is filled with examples--familiar and unusual, simple and complex--that attest to the many ways that food *means.*

Korsmeyer nevertheless argues that food is not art. She does so not because of something intrinsic or inherent about food or tasting or smelling--though she also does not seek to elevate tasting and smelling to the ranks of hearing and seeing (a move which would upset the usual hierarchy of senses whose genesis she so carefully charts historically). Rather, she rejects the categorization because of something about *history*, about the way that both food and art have emerged as cultural practices. ("Aha! It's historically contingent! So, it *could* have been

otherwise," I hear the defender of food-as-art shouting triumphantly. "Well yes, it could have, but it didn't, and what I am interested in is food as it actually is experienced and appreciated in our various cultures today," Korsmeyer might respond. "We are doing food no favor by slicing and dicing it to fit the narrow parameters of the category of art.")

Reading this argument about the deeply cultural nature of categories like art, I am led to reflect on the ways in which cultural institutions like art museums often do violence to the works of other cultures, by, say, defining ceremonial objects as "fine arts" in an attempt to show respect to them. (In eras that are hopefully now coming to a close, those with the power to annoint something as a work of art--curators, critics, artists--often disregarded the fact that such "respect" often felt like deep disrespect, even violence, to members of the cultures from which these objects were extracted, cultures operating with dramatically different categories into which objects belong.) What if (*per impossibile*) there had been no food in the Euroamerican context in which the concept of fine art arose? Would well-intentioned art curators be attempting to put the culinary creations of other cultures into their fine or decorative art museums? Would they be developing special ways to preserve and experience these ephemeral creations that require so much bodily contact in order to be fully appreciated--and which are literally destroyed in the very act of appreciation? Perhaps so. And Korsmeyer's book shows just how impoverished would food be, were we required to understand it only in terms afforded us by the category of fine art.

Korsmeyer's book is beautifully, lucidly, engagingly written. It's just so *interesting* on so many levels. It includes a succinct history of the emergence of the notion of Taste as an aesthetic sense (and its corresponding *di*vergence from the notion of taste, the thing one does with one's mouth and nose). There's a wonderfully interesting chapter on the science of taste which puts to rest the denigration of taste as a sense that is entirely subjective, entirely inward-looking.

(Korsmeyer argues that taste is an *intimate* sense, one that is both inward- and outward-looking; "its mode of operation requires that objects become part of oneself. Its exercise requires risk and trust" (p.101).) And she concludes with two chapters that explore the ways in which bona fide arts (painting and literature) employ the meanings of food to achieve their own aesthetic aims. Her reading of "Stubbs' Supper," the chapter in *Moby Dick* in which that character dines on whale steak, illuminated by a whale oil lamp, while in view of the great whale's body, is engrossing, and deeply illuminating of her thesis.

The book is interlarded with interesting details about everything from the physiology of the tongue to the origin of the croissant (a Viennese creation designed to celebrate victory over the Ottoman Turks, whose flag featured a crescent moon). Reading it is deeply enjoyable as well as philosophically satisfying.

Korsmeyer, well known for her feminist work in aesthetics, does not explore in any detail some of the questions that one might have expect to find in such a work. This is not a book vindicating the aesthetic significance of cooking as "women's work." Nevertheless, her argument is a feminist one--sometimes implicitly so, sometimes explicitly. Perhaps her most significant, most extended discussion of an explicitly feminist theme comes in a section entitled "Representing Appetite," in which she explores the various ways in which painting has expressed appetites for food and for sex, and the ways in which women's bodies have been put to work for both purposes.