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Kant on the Aesthetic Idea in Judgment and Creation

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Abstract

Kant's emphasis on the aesthetic idea permeates the judgment of beauty and the creation of beauty. This paper argues that both natural and artistic beauty are concrete expressions of aesthetic ideas. Regarding natural beauty, the subject appreciates the natural object through a dual grasp of the aesthetic normal idea and the rational idea. Regarding artistic beauty, the aesthetic idea can make the rational idea sensible, allowing the subject to derive aesthetic pleasure by reflecting on the aesthetic representations of rational ideas. Moreover, genius as a natural gift is capable of giving rules for creating artistic beauty, in which the spirit realizes the universal expression of the aesthetic idea. In Kant's framework, the combination of taste and genius provides a context for reflective judgment, which can thus be reconciled with the “free play of the imagination and the understanding.” In this way, the aesthetic idea embodies the dual perspective of subject and object, thereby furnishing a normative dimension to Kant's aesthetics.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant places the focus of aesthetic analysis on the “subject who judges and reflects,” which can be seen as an extension of the Copernican turn in the aesthetic domain. In contrast to the formation of empirical knowledge, the judgment of taste does not require a transition from intuition to concept, but is concerned solely with the “harmony of imagination and understanding” within the subject. According to Kant, beauty arises from the subject's concern with the state of mind, which contributes to subjective universal communicability.

However, in the discourse on the aesthetic idea, the centrality of the subject from an epistemological point of view is constantly being challenged. In his work, Kant presents beauty as “the expression (Ausdruck) of aesthetic

ideas” (KU 5:320).¹ He further argues that the subjective universality of beauty is grounded in the universal voice (Stimme) as an idea (KU 5:216). To “judge everything that is an object of taste” (KU 5:232), it is first necessary to produce an idea. Even the genius is called the creator of art because of the capacity to display aesthetic ideas. As can be observed, the subject no longer appears to contribute to the experience of beauty by reflecting inwardly, but rather by seeking out the aesthetic idea that the beautiful represents.²

In light of these considerations, the problems confronting this paper are: First, how is beauty an expression of aesthetic ideas? This is not limited to the domain of artistic beauty; it also pertains to natural beauty. Second, does the interpretation of aesthetics through the lens of the aesthetic idea contradict the traditional Kantian interpretation of aesthetics? In other words, does the aesthetic idea undermine the harmony between the mind's faculties?

To answer these questions, this paper explores three key dimensions: “the judgment of natural beauty,” “the judgment of artistic beauty,” and “the creation of artistic beauty,” examining the specific function of the aesthetic idea within each. On this basis, the paper argues that both natural beauty and artistic beauty express aesthetic ideas in their respective ways. Furthermore, aesthetic and rational ideas do not hinder the harmony between imagination and understanding, thus enabling the two interpretative paths to be reconciled in Kantian aesthetics. In conclusion, the paper demonstrates the coherence of the aesthetic idea in the judgment and creation of beauty, revealing the normative significance of the aesthetic idea in Kant's aesthetic theory.

2 | THE JUDGMENT OF NATURAL BEAUTY: A DUAL PATH TO THE IDEAL

At the beginning of the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” Kant defines the judgment of taste as aesthetic. This implies that the fundamental basis of the judgment of taste can only be subjective, and thus, representations are only related to “the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (KU 5:203). The feeling of pleasure arises from the state of mind in which the subject makes the judgment, i.e., “the state of mind that is encountered in the relation of the powers of representation to each other insofar as they relate a given representation to cognition in general” (KU 5:217), which includes “imagination for the composition of the manifold of intuition and understanding for the unity of the concept that unifies the representations” (KU 5:217). Here, “the state of mind in the free play of the imagination and the understanding” (KU 5:218) ensures the universal subjective communicability of the feeling of pleasure, while the concepts of objects and objective knowledge play no role.

The focus of analysis shifts from “what is judged (the beautiful)” to “judgment itself.”³ In other words, the emphasis moves from the object to the subject. At the same time, the concept of an “end” is absent in the production of the feeling of beauty. According to Kant,

Nothing other than the subjective purposiveness in the representation of an object without any end (objective or subjective), consequently the mere form of purposiveness in the representation through which an object is given to us, insofar as we are conscious of it, can constitute the satisfaction that we judge without a concept, to be universally communicable, and hence the determining ground of the judgment of taste.

(KU 5:221)

It is important to note that the previous portrayal is exclusively focused on the concept of free and pure beauty. As Kant distinguishes between “free beauty” (freie Schönheit) and “adherent beauty” (anhängende Schönheit):

There are two kinds of beauty: free beauty (pulchritudo vaga) or merely adherent beauty (pulchritudo adhaerens). The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it.

(KU 5:229)

In particular, a flower, a bird, and certain marine crustaceans are inherently beautiful, and their beauty is not contingent on the internal perfection or purposiveness of the species. Conversely, a man or a horse must be based on a concept of end that prescribes what things should be. Thus, there are two distinct modes of judging natural beauty. The distinction between the “judgment of free natural beauty” and the “judgment of adherent natural beauty” is crucial, as it hinges on the concept of the end. As Kant explains, “A judgment of taste in regard to an object with a determinate internal end would thus be pure only if the person making the judgment either had no concept of this end or abstracted from it in his judgment” (KU 5:231).

For Kant, the concept of the end points to objective purposiveness, which can only be recognized through the relation of the manifold to a determinate end and, therefore, only through a concept. In the context of objective purposiveness, there are two different forms: external purposiveness, which concerns the utility of the object, and internal purposiveness, which pertains to the perfection of the object. Given that the concept of utility as a second-order existence is incompatible with the immediacy of the pleasure of beauty, adherent beauty is solely concerned with the internal purposiveness of the object. This internal purposiveness defines “what a thing should be” (KU 5:227). It can be argued that only when the various elements of a thing are in harmony with its internal purpose does it achieve qualitative perfection or objective purposiveness. Therefore, for adherent beauty, an object can be judged as a beauty only after it conforms to what the object should be.

The concurrence of aesthetic and intellectual pleasure in natural beauty gives rise to the formulation of “rules for the unification of taste with reason, i.e., of the beautiful with the good” (KU 5:230). This is the only basis upon which an ideal for beauty can be established. In other words, “the beauty for which an ideal is to be sought must not be a vague beauty, but must be a beauty fixed by a concept of objective purposiveness. Consequently, it must not belong to the object of an entirely pure judgment of taste, but rather to one of a partly intellectualized judgment of taste” (KU 5:232). For Kant, the archetype (Urbild) of taste is a mere idea, which implies a concept of reason, i.e., “reason's indeterminate idea of a maximum” (KU 5:232). In contrast, the ideal is the representation of an individual being as adequate to an idea. Through the ideal, the idea can be represented in an individual presentation. As can be seen, the emergence of the Idea and the Ideal is rooted in the distinction between free and adherent beauty. This distinction is based on the internal purpose of the aesthetic object, as specified by the rational idea.

However, it is worth noting that a considerable number of scholars exhibit no concern whatsoever with the aesthetic idea of natural beauty. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the discussion of the “aesthetic idea” is concentrated in the chapters related to the beauty of art. This prompted these scholars to propose a dichotomy between the “aesthetics of production” and the “aesthetics of reception.” In this framework, the aesthetic idea is exclusively associated with the “aesthetics of production” (the field of art) and is not concerned with the judgment of natural beauty.⁴ This interpretation tends to circumvent, touching upon a controversial assertion in Kant's text: “Beauty (whether it be beauty of nature or of art) can in general be called the expression of aesthetic ideas” (KU 5:320). Consequently, to focus solely on the aesthetic idea as it pertains to art would be, in essence, to evade the issue rather than to resolve it. To fully and accurately understand the importance of the aesthetic idea within Kantian aesthetics, it is essential to examine its role in natural beauty as well.

With regard to the ideal of beauty, Kant discusses two paths involved: the empirical path to the aesthetic normal idea (Normalidee) and the intellectual path to the rational idea (Vernunftidee). On the one hand, the empirical path allows for the superimposition and merging of a multitude of portraits, as well as the recognition of the contours of the average figure in a manner analogous to an optical effect. The subject is not derived by means of fixed rule, but rather through “a dynamic effect, which arises from the repeated apprehension of such figures on the organ of inner sense” (KU 5:234). The formation of the aesthetic normal idea necessitates not only external empirical intuition but also internal imagination. According to Kant, “the mere reflection on a given intuition, without a concept of what the object ought to be, is sufficient for arousing and communicating the idea” (KU 5:320), and beautiful nature can be seen as an expression of the aesthetic normal idea. The reflective capacity enables us to intuit the formal regularity underlying the infinite diversity of nature.⁵ This is despite the possibility that no single representation in nature may

perfectly align with the aesthetic normal idea. Nevertheless, the aesthetic normal idea remains the foundation for all conditions of beauty and the exemplification of “correctness in the presentation of the species” (KU 5:235).

On the other hand, in the intellectual path, the end itself, which cannot be empirically quantified, may serve as the principle of judgment. This is evidenced by the fact that the human end can be exemplified in the image of the human being. According to Kant, only human beings possess an existing end in themselves. This is to say that only humans can specify their ends through reason. For the human figure, the ideal of beauty is found in the “expression of the moral (Sittlichkeit)” (KU 5:235). In evaluating the aesthetic judgment of a person, it is necessary to utilize the power of the imagination to integrate moral ideas with physical expressions. This also implies that the aesthetic ideal based on rational ideas is, in fact, a depiction and expression of the moral goodness of human beings.⁶ Conversely, it is impossible to conceive of an aesthetic ideal of an object in the absence of any internal end, or in which the internal end is not sufficiently specified. Therefore, the ideal of adherent natural beauty can only be found in the realm of human beings, given that human ends are inherently and fully determined by reason. Overall, the true ideal must presuppose the concept of an end that is determined by human reason, i.e., grounded in the idea of reason as morality.

Strictly speaking, the empirical path is concept/end-free. However, the empirical path is still concerned with the natural purposiveness of species, and it is inspired by a teleological framework. We can conceive of “the greatest purposiveness” (die größte Zweckmäßigkeit) in any natural species, as the subject can extract the most probable embodiment of the end from a given empirical image. As Kant points out:

the greatest purposiveness in the construction of the figure, which would be suitable as a universal standard for the aesthetic judging of every individual of this species, the image which has as it were intentionally grounded the technique of nature, to which only the species as a whole but not any separate individual is adequate, lies merely in the idea of the one who does the judging, which, however, with its proportions, can be represented fully *in concreto* as an aesthetic idea in a model image.

(KU 5:233)

This purposiveness is not a physical law of nature, but rather a teleological perspective within aesthetic judgment. In fact, both the aesthetic normal idea and the rational idea are relevant to purposiveness, but they operate on different levels. The aesthetic normal idea involves an idealized form of a species, derived from empirical observation but abstracted into a universal aesthetic standard for that species. It is not concerned with moral or rational ends, but with the natural purposiveness of the species as a whole. The rational idea, on the other hand, is uniquely human and pertains to moral virtue and freedom. Humans can demonstrate morality through their behavior, and only humans can demonstrate the objective reality of freedom by obeying the moral law. It represents a higher form of purposiveness that transcends natural ends and is rooted in reason.

In general, the aesthetic normal idea in the empirical path embodies the aesthetic idea of natural beauty. In the realm of natural beauty, there exists a space for the aesthetic idea. This space relies on the understanding that nature “really is art (albeit superhuman)” (KU 3:311), which implies that the aesthetic judgment must be concerned with teleological judgment.⁷ The aesthetic normal idea and the rational idea together represent a dual grasp of the natural beauty. In this dimension, nature is not the nature studied by physics, but the nature experienced by the subject — nature as it is open to us. By adopting a teleological perspective, we interpret nature as an expression of ideas in an artistic manner, engaging with it not only through scientific analysis but also as a manifestation of purposiveness.

It is important to note that the concept of “harmonious state of mind of the faculties of representation,” which is emphasized in free (pure) natural beauty, remains significant in the context of adherent natural beauty. This harmonious state is the source of the feeling of pleasure that underlies the feeling of beauty. In both free and adherent beauty, the subject must engage in reflective judgment rather than determining judgment. This process results in a harmonious relationship between imagination and understanding, which is characteristic of both free and adherent beauty. The difference, however, is that free natural beauty exhibits purposeless purposiveness, while adherent natural beauty exhibits purposive purposiveness. Although the judgment of “human” is subject to the concept of end,

the end it implies is derived from the idea (concept) of reason. In contrast to the concept of understanding, the concept of reason cannot yield determinate knowledge of an object, and thus cannot serve as a genuine constraint on the free play of the imagination and understanding.

3 | THE JUDGMENT OF ARTISTIC BEAUTY: FOUR MOMENTS FOR REVISION

In addition to the distinction between “free beauty” and “adherent beauty,” Kant also distinguishes between “natural beauty” and “artistic beauty.”⁸ In contrast to nature, art (Kunst) is defined as a “production through freedom, i.e., through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason” (KU 5:303), which means that “art always has a determinate intention of producing something” (KU 5:306). The products of art, therefore, are also “intentional (absichtlich)” (KU 5:306).

As can be observed, the concept of adherent beauty can be directly embodied in any work of art, and both presuppose a determinate concept of end. It can even be argued that “the concept of adherent beauty was introduced primarily to explain the beauty of the work of art.”⁹ Meanwhile, as with natural beauty, artistic beauty is also “the expression of aesthetic ideas.” The idea can be occasioned by “a concept of the object” (KU 5:320). However, these accounts raise more complex problems than those encountered in the realm of natural beauty.

Kant’s discussion of art is situated in sections 43–53 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which is classified outside the “Analytic of the Beautiful.” The reason for this categorization may lie in the apparent tension between the ideas of “without a concept” (the second moment) and “purposiveness” (the third moment), as espoused in the Analytic, and the definition of artistic beauty. Nevertheless, the discussion of the four moments for the judgment of taste is interspersed with examples of artworks.

This raises an important question: is the portrayal of the judgment of taste in the “Analytic of the Beautiful” equally applicable to artistic beauty? Moreover, since the central purpose of the art of beauty is to ensure that “it (pleasure) accompanies these as kinds of cognition” (KU 5:305), namely, to be grounded in the free feeling of the purposive play of the cognitive faculties, what then is the relationship between the state of mind of the subject at the time of judgment and the aesthetic ideas embedded in the object being judged?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to return to the four moments for the judgment of taste as outlined in the Analytic. Firstly, Kant summarizes the first moment, viewed qualitatively, as “taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest. The object of such a satisfaction is called beautiful” (KU 5:211). For Kant, “interest” is associated with the faculty of desire and “combine (s) with the representation of the existence of an object” (KU 5:204). Unlike the agreeable or the good, the subject is indifferent to the existence of the beautiful as an object of a judgment of taste. This reveals the contemplative (kontemplative) state in which the subject is placed in the process of judgment.

In conjunction with Kant’s analysis of works of art as beautiful, the subject is similarly “judge of only the forms (without regard to an end) as they are offered to the eye, individually or in their interconnection, in accordance with the effect that they have on the imagination” (KU 5:324), which implies that the work of art is merely “to be viewed” (KU 5:323). In other words, “in all beautiful art what is essential consists in the form, which is purposive for observation and judging.....hence makes it receptive to several sorts of pleasure and entertainment – not in the matter of the sensation (the charm or the emotion)” (KU 5:326). Thus, the stipulation of “without any interest” in the first moment can be applied to the beauty of art as well.

This paper shares with Reiter and Geiger (2023: 9–10) the preliminary view that judgments of artistic beauty are indeed disinterested. It is worth noting their further clarification of this point. They argue that the experience of artistic beauty is substantively cognitively edifying. As Kant emphasized, we can “entertain the imagination in free play with ideas” (KU 5:323), in other words, we are able to engage with ideas in the entertainment of beauty. However, the cognitively edifying role of artistic beauty is not intrinsic to the enjoyment of artistic pleasure; artistic

pleasure, in their view, has its end in itself alone. Works of art ultimately provide meaning only aesthetically, and this meaning cannot be fully determined.

This implies that it is impossible to gain cognitive knowledge of the object in an aesthetic judgement, and therefore impossible to directly link any judgment of taste to a cognitive judgment. The grasp of rational ideas in artistic beauty remains aesthetic, not a cognitive grasp of rational ideas. In general, both free and adherent beauty presuppose a lack of desire for the object's existence, preserving the core principle of disinterestedness. However, adherent beauty introduces a unique cognitive dimension: it engages rational ideas to enrich the aesthetic experience. Adherent beauty complicates disinterestedness by integrating conceptual content without collapsing into desire.

Then, viewed in terms of quantity, the second moment concludes, "That is beautiful which pleases universally without a concept" (KU 5:219). This reveals the subjective universality involved in the judgment of taste, namely that for every subject, the relationship between representation and cognitive faculties should lead to the feeling of pleasure. As previously stated, universal communicability is not contingent upon the concept of an object; rather, it is founded upon the establishment of a state of free play achieved through the interaction of imagination and understanding with a given representation.

In contrast, art is concerned with concepts: "Art always presupposes an end in the cause (and its causality), a concept must first be the ground of what the thing is supposed to be, and, since the agreement of the manifold in a thing with its inner determination as an end is the perfection of the thing, in the judging of the beauty of art the perfection of the thing will also have to be taken into account" (KU 5:311). Kant asserts that the genuine artist should imbue the artwork with spirit, or, in other words, exercise "the faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas" (KU 3:313). These aesthetic ideas, which are representations of the imagination, correspond to rational ideas. The former are intuitions without the mediation of concepts, while the latter are concepts without the mediation of intuitions. In the act of creating a work of art, the artist (for example, the poet) "ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings" (KU 5:314). Thus, the work of art is a successful presentation of the aesthetic idea, which is the counterpart of the rational idea.¹⁰

According to Kant, the end of a work of art is to convey the rational idea through the aesthetic idea.¹¹ This interpretation is also at odds with the conclusion of the third moment in the judgment of taste: "Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it without representation of an end" (KU 5:236), because the subject must consider the end of the object of the artistic work during the process of judgment. However, how can connoisseurs of art grasp rational ideas as the end of work during the process of judgment? In response to this question, Kant assigns an important mediating role to "aesthetic attributes":

Those forms which do not constitute the presentation of a given concept itself, but, as supplementary representations of the imagination, express only the implications connected with it and its affinity with others, are called (aesthetic) attributes of an object whose concept, as an idea of reason, cannot be adequately presented. Thus Jupiter's eagle, with the lightning in its claws, is an attribute of the powerful king of heaven, as is the peacock of the splendid queen of heaven. They do not, like logical attributes, represent what lies in our concepts of the sublimity and majesty of creation, but something else, which gives the imagination cause to spread itself over a multitude of related representations, which let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words; and they yield an aesthetic idea, which serves that idea of reason instead of logical presentation, although really only to animate the mind by opening up for it the prospect of an immeasurable field of related representations.

(KU 5:315)

As can be observed, the subject's imagination is capable of expanding upon exposure to aesthetic attributes. This process of expansion is how the aesthetic idea is gradually reached and ultimately linked to the rational idea. In particular, the aesthetic attribute "Jupiter's eagle" can be regarded as a trigger for the subject's imagination, prompting the subject to imagine the appearance that the object itself does not have. This further connects with the aesthetic

concept of the “king.” The connection between the aesthetic attribute and the aesthetic idea is constructed by using the aesthetic object as a mediator.¹² In this process, the aesthetic attribute enlivens the mind and invigorates the imagination, while the aesthetic idea serves as a direction to guide the expansion of the imagination.

An aesthetic idea, created by the imagination to present a concept, also inspires new reflections that expand the concept itself. In this sense, aesthetic ideas are not meant to conform to rational concepts but to extend them.¹³ This extension originates in the active state of the “faculty of intellectual ideas (reason)” (KU 5:315), in which the subject is no longer confined to the determinate content defined by the concept, but goes beyond the representation to think of richer and unrestricted content. In other words, while the aesthetic idea serves the rational idea, it serves “really only to animate the mind by opening up for it the prospect of an immeasurable field of related representations” (KU 5:315).

In Kant's view, the primary criterion in artistic beauty shifts toward the aesthetic idea expressed in the work of art.¹⁴ In light of this, it is necessary to revise the second and third moments of the analytic to define the judgment of taste that applies to artistic beauty. What is clear is that for artistic beauty, the state of mind has to be about concepts. However, the concept of beauty in art differs from that of the good. As in the case of judgments of adherent natural beauty, the subject is still applying reflective rather than determining judgment. In the domain of art, the object of reflection is no longer the purely aesthetic form of the object itself, but rather the aesthetic representation of the rational idea inherent in the object.¹⁵

The aesthetic representation of a work of art prompts us to reflect on the rational idea behind it, and in this process, aesthetic attributes and aesthetic ideas are combined. In this sense, the second moment of artistic beauty can be formulated as follows: that which is universally pleasing due to the presence of rational ideas (concepts) is beautiful in art. Similarly, the third moment of the beauty of art can be expressed as follows: The beauty of art is the purposive form of an object. This form is perceived in the object as a representation of the end of the rational idea.¹⁶

However, incorporating rational and aesthetic ideas into the analysis of artistic beauty may result in a significant tension between artistic and natural beauty, or between adherent and free beauty. Kant asserts, “That is beautiful which pleases universally without a concept” (KU 5:219), but in adherent or artistic beauty, the subject is required to consider the concept of the object's end, which is centralized in aesthetic ideas and the rational ideas. In this context, the relationship between adherent beauty and free beauty becomes a problem. Gotshalk (1967:260) earlier explicitly states that “Kant holds a formalist theory of Natural Beauty and an expressionist theory of artistic beauty,” which implies that adherent beauty is fundamentally different from free beauty. In contrast, Guyer (1997) and Janaway (1997) attempt to incorporate conceptual elements into pure aesthetic judgments, thereby trying to eliminate the distinction between adherent and free beauty. More directly, Budd (2002) and Rueger (2007) contend that judgments of adherent beauty are judgments of free beauty in conjunction with judgments of perfection, thus establishing a singular judgment of beauty.

If we assume that adherent beauty is entirely separate from free beauty, then concepts would play a fundamental role in the judgment of adherent beauty. This reliance on concepts would threaten its sensual quality as a judgment of taste. In other words, judgment of taste would no longer be aesthetic, i.e., its determining ground would shift from feeling to concept. Conversely, if we associate adherent beauty with free beauty, tracing the judgment of both to the same judgment, this would negate the independent status of adherent beauty. Such an association would make it difficult to understand the title of section 16: “The judgment of taste through which an object is declared to be beautiful under the conditions of a definite concept is not pure” (KU 5:229). For Kant, adherent beauty must still arise from a mere judgment of taste. It is a specific type of judgment of taste, not a logical judgment that is superior to the pure judgment of taste and the judgment of reason.

In this context, the position of this paper can be described as one that occupies a middle ground. On the one hand, the paper posits that there is a distinction between free beauty and adherent beauty. It is argued that free beauty does not require any concepts, whereas adherent beauty necessarily concerns the concept of an end. The object of the subject's reflection in the work of art involves indeterminate concepts, i.e., rational ideas (concepts). Taken literally, all four moments of the judgment of adherent beauty have to involve concepts, which distinguishes it

from the judgment of free beauty. On the other hand, since the rational idea and the aesthetic idea are indeterminate and unable to provide determining criteria, the determining grounds of adherent beauty cannot be concepts either.¹⁷ Both free and adherent beauty are predicated on the harmony of imagination and understanding. Therefore, both free and adherent beauty share the same fundamental tenets of beauty, and Kant still possesses a unified view of beauty.

Finally, about pure judgments of taste, Kant presupposes common sense (*Gemeinsinn*) as the universal communicability of pleasant feelings, which is “the result of the free play of our cognitive faculties” (KU 5:238). It is on this basis that we are able to demand that “everyone should agree with our judgment” (KU 5:239). The fourth moment, according to modality, is thus summarized by Kant: “What is recognized as an object of necessary pleasure without a concept is beauty” (KU 5:240). For pure, free natural beauty, the subjective necessity arises from the interplay of cognitive faculties available to all, and the state of mind resulting from this interplay is, at the same time, the determining ground on which pleasure arises. In contrast, for adherent artistic beauty, pleasure comes fundamentally from reflecting on the aesthetic representations of rational ideas. However, it is uncertain how this reflective process ensures the subjective necessity of the judgment. To answer this question, it is necessary to further explore how the art of beauty is specifically created.¹⁸

4 | THE CREATION OF ARTISTIC BEAUTY: GENIUS AND SPIRIT

Whether it is a judgment of natural beauty or artistic beauty, the subject in the process is only required at the level of taste. To create beauty in art itself, that is, to endow the subject with a “productive faculty” (KU 5:313), a “genius” (*Genie*) is required. According to Kant, genius is the talent (natural gift) that gives rules to art. Consequently, the art of beauty must necessarily be regarded as the art of genius, and the art of beauty is possible only as the product of genius.

However, the rules provided by genius are distinct from those employed in mechanical art, which is simply to align with the knowledge of a possible object to produce that object realistically. Consequently, the art of true beauty is not “something mechanical, which can be grasped and followed according to rules” (KU 5:310), nor does its fundamental essence ever derive from conformity to the rules of the Academy. Conversely, a work of art can only be considered beautiful if the academic rules have not “fettered his (artist's) mental powers” (KU 5:307). Genius, in this sense, is not a skill that can be acquired through diligent study; rather, it is an innate gift of the mind bestowed by nature, which enables the artist to create works of beauty that are original and exemplary.

For Kant, nature gives rules to art in the subject. These rules, revealed through the artist's creative genius, are non-conceptual.¹⁹ Artists are unable to discern how ideas manifest within the mind, and they do not possess complete control over the process of communicating them (KU 5:308). In other words, artists can never fully articulate how they bring forth their products. Thus, artists are compelled to ascribe this accomplishment to genius as a natural gift. However, in conjunction with the definition of the concept of art above, unlike bees building a nest, Kant emphasizes that the work of art is not merely a “product of nature (instinct)” (KU 5:303). Rather, it should be based on the freedom of rational thought.

In his account of genius, however, Kant appears to reverse the rules of the work of art back to the necessity of nature. This is because the creator is unable to exercise their freedom in the process, and only nature can be held responsible for the rules. Kant's incorporation of the element of nature into the domain of aesthetic beauty is a consequence of its singularity in comparison to art in general. If the artist's intention is fully achieved, then the object becomes likable through concepts (i.e., mechanical art) rather than through the pleasure that accompanies it in mere judgment. This also implies that the art of beauty “still seem (s) to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature” (KU 306).

To fulfill this logically impossible requirement, it is necessary to construct a bridge between freedom and nature. The nature responsible for the rules of genius does not point to the laws of nature in the phenomenal world; rather,

it points to “the nature that hides its own rational processes from the subject.”²⁰ Nature, from the realm of necessity, plays an indispensable role in ensuring the freedom to judge the free play between the cognitive faculties of the subject. In other words, Kant’s rule of genius is designed to achieve a harmony between the “freedom of reflection of the judgment of taste” and the “immanent conception of the work of art.” The creative process of genius avoids imposing fixed concepts on the work, allowing connoisseurs to use reflective judgment in assessing the art and uncovering its innate beauty.

How does the rule of genius achieve this in concrete terms?²¹ According to Kant, genius imparts a work of art with “spirit” (Geist). This spirit manifests as an invigoration of the mind’s faculties, which Kant describes as “the faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas” (KU 5:313). In other words, based on the idea of creation, the rules of genius are rooted in the spirit, which can be defined as the “principle of the mind that animates by means of ideas” (ApH 7:246).

On the one hand, “the proper field for genius is that of the power of imagination” (ApH 7:224). Those who create the art of beauty can utilize their imagination to work with the materials of real nature. In this process, they are allowed to transcend the limitations of the law of association (Assoziation), thereby producing a higher nature that transcends empirical nature. The imagination of the genius is perpetually striving to exemplify the concept of reason. Thus, this endeavor of the imagination can be regarded as “the precedent of reason” (KU 5:314). Indeed, the aesthetic idea is essentially a representation of the imagination, and no thought or concept can be incorporated into this representation. In conjunction with this definition, the power of genius also manifests itself in the ability to create aesthetic ideas that can replace logical demonstrations in the service of rational ideas. It can be observed that the imagination is perpetually active during the creation of aesthetic ideas, simultaneously stimulating “so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept, hence which aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way” (KU 5:315).

On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that the imagination does not function as unbounded freedom. Instead, imagination and understanding, through their interaction, jointly constitute the powers of genius. Understanding can provide the imagination with natural material in its empirical applications. At this stage, the imagination still operates for the sake of objective knowledge. It is only on this basis that the imagination can transcend its agreement with the concept of understanding in its aesthetic intention, to provide “unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding” (KU 5:317), and ultimately to subjectively enliven the cognitive faculties of the mind. When these two aspects are considered together, it becomes evident that Kant’s assertion that art obtains its rules through “the disposition of its faculties” (KU 5:307) is more comprehensible. This disposition indicates a harmonious relationship between imagination and understanding.

The nature of genius can be understood more intuitively through the example of the art of poetry:

It expands the mind by setting the imagination free and presenting, within the limits of a given concept and among the unbounded manifold of forms possibly agreeing with it, the one that connects its presentation with a fullness of thought to which no linguistic expression is fully adequate, and thus elevates itself aesthetically to the level of ideas.

(KU 5:326)

In contrast to mechanical art, the art of genius is not constrained by a determinate concept. According to Kant, the true artist possesses a concept of creative intention,²² but not a concept of a concrete object. Artists must employ their imagination to generate aesthetic ideas abundant in material, which, as expressions of the imagination, are suitable for presenting rational concepts. This also implies that genius cannot be imitated but rather serves as an exemplar to be emulated. In contrast to the imitator, who learns the method only in an academically technical way, the criterion of genius is only “the feeling of unity in the presentation” (KU 5:318), i.e., the style embodied aesthetically. The process of emulating genius can only occur among individuals who possess such abilities. Genius, as a natural gift, can only be granted directly by nature to each individual. It is only when people are equipped with a

proportionate amount of power that they can be inspired by the works of other geniuses and thus become aware of their talents. As Kant points out, “who is thereby awakened to the feeling of his originality, to exercise freedom from coercion in his art in such a way that the latter thereby itself acquires a new rule, by which the talent shows itself as exemplary” (KU 5:318).

In Kant's framework, the capacity for genius is not a communicable trait. However, it is also important to note that genius is capable of universal communication of aesthetic ideas, as well as the state of mind involved in the creation of art. In particular, genius plays a pivotal role in the creation of beautiful art in two dimensions. Firstly, genius identifies a diverse range of aesthetic ideas for the given concepts. Secondly, genius expresses these aesthetic ideas. Kant emphasizes that the second dimension is true “spirit,” which is capable of communicating the subject's state of mind to others as an accompaniment of the given concepts. In a word,

the aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, associated with a given concept, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it, which therefore allows the addition to a concept of much that is unnameable, the feeling of which animates the cognitive faculties and combines spirit with the mere letter of language.

(KU 5:316)

It is, therefore, the spirit that “express (es) what is unnameable in the mental state in the case of a certain representation and to make it universally communicable” (KU 5:317), which embodies “a faculty for apprehending the rapidly passing play of the imagination and unifying it into a concept, which can be communicated without the constraint of rules” (KU 5:317). For Kant, the beauty of art is essentially perceived as “the form of the presentation of a concept by means of which the latter is universally communicated” (KU 5:312). The central question is: how is the universal communicability of aesthetic ideas ensured through the mediation of genius and spirit? Only by addressing this can we truly explain the source of subjective necessity in the judgment of artistic beauty.

To achieve the universal communicability of aesthetic ideas, Kant proposes the solution of “the combination of taste with genius in products of beautiful art” (KU 5:319). When Kant discusses whether taste or genius holds greater importance for the art of beauty, he is not referring to two separate subjects (the subject of judgment and the subject of creation), but rather to different perspectives of the same subject. In other words, Kant examines the role that the taste of genius plays in the process of creation. A work of art that is considered beautiful must possess both taste and genius, as the absence of either of these qualities will result in a work that is merely a reflection of “genius without taste” or “taste without genius.”²³

As previously discussed, genius is capable of generating aesthetic ideas and presenting them in a work of art. In contrast, the true spirit is manifested in the universal expression of aesthetic ideas in the process. In light of these considerations, Kant asserts that it is only through the guidance of genius and taste that ideas can be made purposive for understanding. This implies that only when taste introduces “clarity and order into the abundance of thoughts it makes the ideas tenable” (KU 5:319). While genius presents aesthetic ideas in concrete works of art, these ideas cannot be directly conceptualized, leaving taste with space for reflective judgment. This space of taste serves as the source of universality, simultaneously limiting and elevating the process of genius's expression.

The combination of taste and genius allows the art of beauty to move beyond the private sphere and enter the public sphere. No matter how creative an aesthetic idea might be, it would remain a merely private vision if it were not used to actualize intentional artistic concepts.²⁴ This transition is not instantaneous, but rather “a slow and indeed painstaking improvement” (KU 5: 312). Artists with genius need to practice constantly in order to “let it (form) become adequate to the thought and yet not detrimental to the freedom in the play of the mental powers” (KU 5: 312–313). As Kant succinctly states, the art of beauty necessitates the indispensable contributions of imagination, understanding, spirit, and taste. Moreover, “the first three faculties first achieve their unification through the fourth” (KU 5: 320f).

Notably, Reiter and Geiger (2023) argue that the universal communicability of artistic beauty can be ensured through aesthetic education and training. In their view, engaging with works of art requires pointing out overlooked elements and explaining the unknown through constant dialogue and sharing. This paper agrees that acquiring taste in art should not be understood as passively accepting the common view, but actively learning how to look/listen/read a work of art. We can illustrate this even further in Kant's portrayal of the young poet:

Hence a young poet does not let himself be dissuaded from his conviction that his poem is beautiful by the judgment of the public nor that of his friends, and, if he does give them a hearing, this is not because he now judges it differently, but rather because, even if (at least in his view) the entire public has a false taste, he nevertheless (even against his judgment) finds cause to accommodate himself to the common delusion in his desire for approval. Only later, when his power of judgment has been made more acute by practice, does he depart from his previous judgment of his own free will, just as he does with those of his judgments that rest entirely on reason. Taste makes claim merely to autonomy. To make the judgments of others into the determining ground of one's own would be heteronomy.

(KU 5:282)

As can be seen, the universal communicability does not arise from the generalization of empirical views, but rather from the subject's own feeling, which is even called by Kant a form of autonomy.²⁵ He asserts, "it is required of every judgment that is supposed to prove the taste of the subject that the subject judge for himself, without having to grope about by means of experience among the judgments of others and first inform himself about their satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the same object" (KU 5:282). In other words, in the process of reflecting on an object, the subject's reflective judgment is capable of legislating for itself.²⁶ However, this doesn't imply that the appreciative subject is merely indulging in a self-centered world. As Kant emphasized, the judgment of the young poet can become more acute with practice. Taste is "most in need of the examples of what in the progress of culture has longest enjoyed approval if it is not quickly to fall back into barbarism and sink back into the crudity of its first attempts" (KU 5:283). Strictly speaking, it is only through extensive practice that the poet learns to make an autonomous aesthetic judgment.²⁷ This practice is embodied in engagement with the classics, which not only help refine our reflective and normative adjustments but also open us to universal perspectives.²⁸

In this sense, the central aim of Kant's interpretation of genius is not to describe how individuals specifically produce beautiful works of art, but rather to illuminate the process by which the beauty of a work of art is revealed and grasped. This serves to advance the transcendental argument concerning how we apprehend beauty.²⁹ For humans, the concrete manifestations of genius and spirit are challenging to articulate and learn, and thus, there are limitations to the investigation of the process by which beautiful works of art are produced. Furthermore, genius and spirit provide deeper insights into the human faculties involved in evaluating beauty. According to Kant, "genius can only provide rich material for products of art" (KU 5:310), but the material must be subjected to the test of judgment. Therefore, the fourth moment for artistic beauty is that which is recognized under rational ideas as a necessary object of universal pleasure by all who possess taste is beautiful in art.

Regarding the fourth moment of aesthetic judgment, free beauty derives its universality exclusively from the harmonious interplay between imagination and understanding, asserting a necessity that operates independently of conceptual mediation. In contrast, adherent beauty demands a synthesis of genius and taste, thereby foregrounding the interdependence of aesthetic ideas and rational ideas. This introduces a "thick" universality contingent on inter-subjective concepts, whereas free beauty relies on a "thin" universality rooted in subjective harmony.

In summary, all four moments of artistic beauty—disinterestedness, conceptlessness, purposiveness, and universality—deviate from Kant's framework in the *Analytic of the Beautiful* when applied to adherent beauty. Unlike free beauty, which remains unconstrained by conceptual considerations, adherent beauty explicitly engages with aesthetic ideas and rational ideas. However, adherent beauty's reliance on ideas does not subordinate it to conceptual rules. By preserving aesthetic qualities despite conceptual engagement, adherent beauty clarifies how these two modes of beauty remain interconnected within Kantian aesthetics.

5 | CONCLUSION

It should be acknowledged that this paper does not address another complex issue, namely, what can aesthetic ideas express? In other words, is it possible to categorize aesthetic ideas?³⁰ In the domain of music, for instance, Kant argues that the tone more or less designates an affect of the speaker (KU 5:328). Additionally, in section 49 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant appears to propose a categorization of the objects of aesthetic ideas:

The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature, by means of an imagination that emulates the precedent of reason in attaining to a maximum; and it is really the art of poetry in which the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure.

(KU 5:314)

Aesthetic ideas make not only rational ideas sensible, but also empirical concepts. The reason why some empirical concepts need the help of aesthetic ideas is that they cannot be directly and concretely apprehended by human knowledge. In this framework, the relationship between aesthetic and rational ideas in beauty functions more as a normative dimension than as a full portrayal. With regard to this normative dimension, beauty is intrinsically related, whether closely or distantly, with moral ideas. Without this connection, it would “serve only for diversion, which one increasingly needs the more one uses them to banish the mind’s dissatisfaction with itself, by which one makes oneself ever more useless and dissatisfied with oneself” (KU 5:326).

Finally, it is clear that “beauty is generally the expression of aesthetic ideas.” Whether it is natural beauty or artistic beauty, they both express aesthetic ideas in their own way. There is even a path of ascent from the aesthetic idea toward the rational idea in artistic beauty. In Kant’s aesthetic theory, the aesthetic idea constitutes an important mediator between the judgment of beauty and its creation. This orientation of the aesthetic idea fundamentally enriches Kant’s Copernican revolution in aesthetics, canceling the separation and opposition between subject and object. The aesthetic idea is not an objective criterion of beauty³¹; rather, it represents the duality of production and reception in beauty.

In the process of the spirit’s universal communicability of the aesthetic idea, we act both as creators and observers. Beauty itself constitutes a vast field in which the subject’s own experience and the expression of the object’s form are unified. In the context of human aesthetic experience, it can be posited that “an event where subjective and objective impulses blend” takes place.³² The “universal expression of the aesthetic idea” is in harmony with the “state of mind,” and together, they constitute a more appropriate criterion of aesthetic pleasure.³³ Therefore, to fully comprehend Kant’s aesthetic theory, it is essential to recognize the aesthetic idea as a fundamental and necessary normative element.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ References to Kantian works are to the Akademie Ausgabe, cited as follows: abbreviated title, volume no.: pg. no.; On this basis, I have relied on the English translation of the Cambridge edition (quoted at the end of this article). The following abbreviations are used: KU: *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; ApH: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.
- ² For instance, Chignell (2007) builds on this with a new interpretation of subjective universality in the judgment of taste, and points out the connection that Kant makes between an object's expression of rationality and the normativity of aesthetic judgments about it.
- ³ Tygstrup (2023:146) points out that Kant's radical shift in perspective inadvertently undermined the foundations of aesthetics, with this transformation eventually becoming an integral aspect of the modern art form.
- ⁴ Lütke (1984: 67) explicitly classified the doctrine of the aesthetic idea as a branch of "a theory of the production of beauty (Produktionsästhetik)." Reiter (2021a: 404) also points out that when Kant elaborates on the notion of an aesthetic idea, he refers only to aesthetic ideas expressed in art. This fact seems to be taken (at least implicitly) to support the assumption that aesthetic ideas are connected solely to art.
- ⁵ As Reiter (2021a) notes, the aesthetical normal idea represents the image of the entire species, situated among the diverse and diverging intuitions of individuals. Nature employed this archetype as the underlying template for her creations within the same species, yet it does not appear to have been fully achieved in any individual.
- ⁶ See Allison (2001), Geiger (2021), Reiter (2021a), and Graband (2015).
- ⁷ Allison (2001: 287) posits that the object appears "as if designed" for our cognitive faculties, which we can now take to be equivalent to the claim that it "seems like art."
- ⁸ The focus of these two distinctions is distinct. The distinction between free and adherent beauty concerns the extent to which the concept and internal perfection of the object are taken into account. The distinction between natural and artistic beauty concerns the presence of the intentional creator. Accordingly, for Kant, there are four types of beauty, which are free natural beauty (a flower), free artistic beauty (a fantasia), adherent natural beauty (a person), and adherent artistic beauty (a statue of a goddess). Moreover, the creation of natural beauty is not addressed in this paper, as the best one can do is consider God as the creator of natural beauty, which is a dimension that cannot be analyzed.
- ⁹ See Reiter and Geiger (2018: 72).
- ¹⁰ See Reiter and Geiger (2023), Neal (2012), and Zuidervaart (2003).
- ¹¹ In Kantian philosophy, art represents an important exception to the claim that rational ideas cannot be presented in a sensuous manner. This point has also been emphasized by many scholars. See Reiter and Geiger (2023), Halper (2020), and Geiger (2021).
- ¹² Halper (2020: 862) identifies a potential drawback to this association, namely that the close interconnection between aesthetic attributes and aesthetic ideas may come at a cost. In particular, it constrains the artists' capacity to express themselves. Not only are the artists constrained by the materials they employ, but each aesthetic attribute already possesses a specific meaning that can, in principle, be elucidated in advance within a particular cultural context.
- ¹³ Teufel (2018: 3114) argues that "aesthetic ideas, by themselves, lack the logical articulation to represent any kind of rational or conceptual content at all – even if only, as it were, pictorially." Indeed, the relationship between the conformity of the aesthetic idea and the rational idea remains unexplored. But what is more important is actually the activation of the subject's faculties of reason and the subsequent expansion of the rational idea itself.
- ¹⁴ As Reiter (2021b) emphasizes, Kant can be seen as an aesthetic cognitivist of art, not because art is essentially mimetic, but because it is capable of expressing rational ideas.
- ¹⁵ Reiter (2021a: 404) summarizes the difference between artistic and natural beauty as follows: "Beauty in art is an aesthetically or sensuously unified expression of the conceptual richness of an idea of reason; beauty in nature is an expression of a purely aesthetically or sensuously (non-conceptual) unified richness."
- ¹⁶ It should be noted that under the double distinction between free/adherent beauty and natural/artistic beauty, the above definition of the moments of artistic beauty is only applicable to adherent artistic beauty, that is, to the case where the concept of the end is taken into account. This also implies that we do not consider the exceptions to the embodiment of free beauty in artistic beauty at this time. The four moments of pure judgment of taste can be directly applied to these exceptions. For example, Kant regards fantasia (without a theme) or even any textless music as free beauty (KU 5:229), which does not express any object under a determinate concept. It is worth noting, however, that for Kant, most music is still capable of expressing "the aesthetic idea of a coherent whole of an unutterable fullness of thought" (KU 5:329). The aesthetic idea of music comes not from concepts and determinate thoughts, but from a proportionate disposition of sensations. In music, the form of the composition of these senses (harmony and melody) can replace the forms of language.

- ¹⁷ As Rogerson (2008: 22) points out, there is neither a well-formed idea of an end nor a determinant concept for the objects that art can supposedly express. Art cannot be governed by rules or standards in the usual sense, and the claim that aesthetic ideas are a state of mind compatible with “free harmony” is a fairly well-accepted interpretation.
- ¹⁸ The status of the fourth moment in relation to judgments of artistic beauty remains undecided at this point but will be revisited and addressed in detail at the end of Part 4 of the paper.
- ¹⁹ For example, “genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products” (KU 5:308).
- ²⁰ Kahlitz (2008: 165) takes the dialectic of freedom and order as essential features of reason and inscribes the reconciliation of the two as the very achievement of Kant’s art. For if the work of art is to appear natural, then the activity of reason in the work of art must unconsciously yield to nature.
- ²¹ For Allison (2001), the explicit connection between idea and genius is central to Kant’s analysis of art.
- ²² Makkreel (1990) emphasizes that this creative intention refers to the expression of aesthetic ideas in works of art.
- ²³ Guyer (1997: 356–357) emphasizes that both the form and content of a work of fine art jointly and freely produce the harmony of the higher cognitive faculties, which is reflected in the combination of taste and genius. Similarly, Allison (2001: 299) argues that Kant held a “complementary view,” according to which genius and taste are each necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for creating artistic beauty. Further, Reiter (2024: 46–49) elaborates on how genius and taste conjoin in artistic production under the concept of aesthetic autonomy.
- ²⁴ See Reiter (2018: 315) and Zuidervaart (2003: 204).
- ²⁵ For discussions of aesthetic autonomy, see Gorodeisky and Marcus (2008), Moran (2012), Matherne (2019), Lopes (2021), and Reiter (2024).
- ²⁶ Guyer (1997: 241) argues that one cannot conduct such reflection on the reported pleasures of others, but can only so reflect on one’s own feelings. Allison (2001: 167) also emphasizes that what others (even the supposed experts) think about the aesthetic value of a particular natural object or work of art cannot determine one’s own taste.
- ²⁷ See Matherne (2019: 18).
- ²⁸ According to Matherne’s (2021: 700) reconstruction of Kant’s account of aesthetic education, we need to exposure to the alleged classics, presented as such, in order to develop the reflective capacities of common sense and to become sensitive to common sense as a normative standard that governs our efforts to make a judgment of taste.
- ²⁹ In the case of beautiful art, we regard the object as the product of genius, Neal (2012) even argued that this is not to claim the necessity for an actual productive faculty of genius, but rather to acknowledge the limits of possible inquiry into the production of the beautiful, while commending what Kant regards as our very special human capacity to apprehend and judge it.
- ³⁰ Matherne (2013), for example, argues that we should hold an inclusive interpretation of the aesthetic idea. In her view, there are aesthetic ideas that are primarily oriented toward experience, which include the presentation of empirical concepts and emotions.
- ³¹ See Neal (2012: 357). This explanation can hardly be applied to natural beauty, otherwise we would have to attribute aesthetic ideas to an objective God.
- ³² See Tygstrup (2023: 152).
- ³³ Rogerson (2008) argues that the inclusion of standards of the aesthetic idea can avoid the charge that everything is beautiful.

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