## 1 The Emergence of Tastes Mohan Matthen

## 1. Early Encounters

I begin with some glimpses of cultural discovery that illustrate the geographical variation of artistic expression and taste that are my concern in this chapter.

In the thirteenth century, the *Pax Mongolica* of Genghis Khan’s successors eased, or even normalized, travel on the Silk Road that linked the West—north Africa and Europe—with China and India. From this period and up to 1700 or so, we have more than a dozen surviving accounts of European travelers who encountered the visual arts, architecture, and music of India and East Asia. These memoirs are from a time when little was known in Europe about Asian creative arts. Of course, this is a matter of degree. The harder the journey, the greater the isolation—the art and music of North Africa and the Levant would have been more familiar to Europeans. But the inaccessibility of Indian art to Europeans was not simply a matter of distance. The artistic traditions themselves had had little opportunity to mingle. In the Mediterranean region, both eastern and western, there had been extensive interaction, borrowing and hybridization in both directions (Reynolds 2013). This may well have made the nearer music and visual arts objectively less alien to Europeans than that of India or China.

Of course, there had been, for nearly two thousand years previously, well-established routes between Europe and Asia on both land and sea. But though material goods, religions, and ideas had moved back and forth across the Arabian Sea, over the landmass of Central Asia, and through the Khyber Pass for many centuries, it seems that before Marco Polo from Venice and ibn Batuta from Morocco, few non-commercial travelers from the west had had the curiosity or the leisure to observe or enjoy Asian creative arts or to record their knowledge for the benefit of others. Dispersed over East and South Asia, at one end of Eurasia, and over Europe at the other, a multitude of artistic cultures had developed in almost complete isolation from each other. It is only in the thirteenth century that travelers from the West begin regularly to take serious notice of these Eastern cultures. And, of course, hybridizing ventures were still a way in the future.

To medieval Europe, India was still a fantasy world populated by “monstrous human races” (Braga 2015: XXX). Easier and safer travel re-established the sanity of empirical observation. For four hundred years, chroniclers arrived in India with very little prior knowledge about the visual art and music they would encounter. Their naïveté marks—or perhaps one should say “stains”—whatPartha Mitter (1977: 2) has called the “formative phase in the [European] reception of Indian art.” In the first two chapters of his path-breaking study, *Much Maligned Monsters*, Mitter uses these early memoirs to construct what can serve for us as a case study of “innocent” (albeit highly prejudiced) exposure to foreign creative arts.

Mitter’s thesis, supported by detailed comparisons between travelers’ descriptions and the actual objects they encountered, is that, in their “total ignorance of Hindu iconography,” these men’s perceptions of Indian art were distorted by European stereotypes. In what was presumably a relic of medieval teratological fantasies, they interpreted the multi-limbed deities depicted in Hindu art as “monsters,” a class in which “Biblical demons and Indian gods were all indiscriminately lumped together” (Mitter 1977: 10). Consequently, they viewed a great deal of Indian art as expressions either of devil worship or alternately of mystical religious beliefs indirectly referred to by depictions of monsters.[[1]](#footnote-0) Obviously, such interpretations of Indian religious art go entirely in the wrong direction. Starting with the perception of Hindu deities as monstrously malformed, it draws wildly mistaken conclusions about the meaning and purpose of Indian visual art. This illustrates the difficulties that cultural alienation throws up for artistic appreciation.

Now, it could be said that many of these shortcomings could have been overcome by instruction. If the travelers had viewed Indian art under the guidance of local experts, they wouldn’t have relied on inappropriate pre-existing stereotypes. If they could have learned the mythological attributes of Hindu deities, their interpretation would have been less alienating. This is true, of course, but it doesn’t fully address the problem. Works of art are not desiccated specimens that exist to be intellectually grasped and catalogued. We enjoy and appreciate them through a complex emotional response. For as Ānandavardhana’s *rasa* theory insists, aesthetic experience includes a kind of objectless emotional reaction that renders it not “cold” or *merely* cognitive.[[2]](#footnote-1) Indian Hindus were immersed in a cultural background that gave these works of art a certain affective resonance—no doubt different for different individuals, but highly formed nonetheless. This cannot be recreated by European travelers. No matter how much they learned about the iconography of depictions of Brahma or Śiva, an Italian or French traveler of the fifteenth century could not possibly experience what a pious, or for that matter, a secular native of the subcontinent would when confronting the sculpture of Elephanta or Hampi. Indian religious visual art expresses a range of emotions, ranging from the devotional to the erotic. In place of these indigenous reactions, the travelers substituted their visceral aversion to polytheism and the naturalistic depictions of superhuman deities.

These reactions were not just a matter of being uncomfortable with the unfamiliar. These men were travelers, after all, in an age where travel was arduous. Moreover, exotica such as Indian pepper and muslin and Chinese silk and ceramics found not only ready acceptance but lucrative European markets as long ago as Augustan Rome. Equally, European glass was in high demand in Asia in the time of the Han dynasty. But even fifteen hundred years later, the creative arts had not traveled in either direction, at least not since the Seleucids. (Some European techniques and devices had been absorbed by Asians much earlier and developed in their own idiom, for instance, by the Buddhist sculptors at Gandhāra, which show marked Greek influences.) Culturally based affective resonance tells us a lot about this difference. Everybody can find a use for pepper and for silk; they don’t need to know anything about its origins. Art does not travel so lightly.

The point is perhaps more immediately clear when we consider a non-depictive art form, music. Our European travelers encountered music like nothing they had heard before.[[3]](#footnote-2) Unlike most imperialists in the eighteenth century,[[4]](#footnote-3) earlier travelers did not scorn foreign music. Many were both curious and respectful; as we’ll see in a moment, they even found it somewhat pleasant. But they didn’t enjoy it in the way a native might have—there is no trace of Hiriyanna’s “aesthetic rapture” (see note 2 above) in their accounts.

To illustrate the alienation of these travelers, here is François Bernier, a French physician who lived and worked in the court of Aurangzeb, describing a *naubat* (or military band):

In the night, particularly, when in bed and afar… the music sounds to my ears as solemn, grand and melodious. This is not to be altogether wondered at, since it is played by persons instructed from infancy in the rules of melody, and possessing the skill of modulating and turning the harsh sounds of a hautboy and cymbal so as to produce a symphony far from disagreeable when heard from afar (quoted in Brown 2000: 12).

“Particularly when in bed… a symphony far from disagreeable.” Bernier apparently found the music pleasant, but not so pleasant that he found it rewarding to get out of bed and pay attention. Along similar lines, here is Christopher Farewell, a merchant with the East India Company, who wrote that “the Moors” (i.e. Muslims) don’t drink alcohol, except at night, “and then their women, their wives and concubines… sing most melodiously, with such elevated and shrill voices, strained to the highest, yet sweet and tunable, rising and falling according to their art and skill, (for every country has its own, and more or less excelling)” (quoted in Brown 2000: 7). He was describing the entertainment of men by women with all its erotic overtones. He acknowledges skill within this context. But again, his enjoyment is generic and lacking in nuance. Did he notice the musical ornaments and motifs used? Did he enjoy one singer or one song especially? The quote does not suggest that he did; the music was just a pleasant background to evenings spent drinking.

Now, the music that these men wrote about was not of the highest seriousness. It was made to be part of spectacles with other components—the pomp of the military, the sensuality of the *zanana*. Still, there was purer music to be had, and it is notable that, as Brown writes, “with one exception, there are no incontrovertible descriptions of the most prestigious genres of Indian classical music in the journals published in the seventeenth century, despite the fact that some of the travelers… must have been exposed to it at the Mughal court” (2000: 6, n. 10). The one exception she mentions was a highly educated and musically accomplished (and wealthy) Italian, Pietro della Valle (see note 1 above), who described “the excellent music of an Indian who sang quite well” (and offered detailed descriptions of certain instruments, such as the vina): “This pleased me greatly, because it was not strident music like the ordinary playing of the common Indians, but low-voiced and very soft; and the musician was skillful according to the mode of the country (quoted in Brown 2000: 14). Della Valle was perceptive enough to recognize high-art music for what it was. But though he was appreciative, this is hardly the tone he would have adopted at a concert in Rome. So, even the purest forms of music in the sub-continent did not stand out to these men as traditions that deserved the same discriminative attention or emotional response as the music of Europe or to be treated quite differently from military music (Bernier) and musical entertainment in the *zanana* (Farewell).

These travelers were aware, and all explicitly acknowledged, that they were confronting a musical culture different from their own. But they did not seem to think that this in any way decreased the credibility of their reports or weakened their right to judge. In this respect, they aligned quite well with the philosophical orthodoxy of the time—“music is music,” they seem to say, “but this is strange music that is not the equal of what Europeans play, as I, a European, am particularly well-equipped to judge.” Underneath this bluff dismissal, though, their reactions reveal something quite puzzling. I’ll try to bring this out by posing two groups of questions.

The first group of questions is about the unity of rubric that covers diversity of form. The travelers found music in India, but this music was very unfamiliar. By what mark, then, did they recognize it as music? They speak of Indians following the “rules of melody” and singing “most melodiously.” So, perhaps, melody was for them the essence of music. But what makes a tonal sequence a melody? How did they recognize this? (Speech and birdsong can be melodic or musical, but this is not enough to make them music.) And how did Indians, in all the centuries of their isolation from European musical culture, come by melody recognizable to Europeans? (And vice versa.) How did they discover ways to train their voices and manufacture instruments that enabled them to follow cross-culturally recognizable “rules”? And given the commonalities, how should we explain the differences? Given that there is melody in India, why is it so different from what they knew in Europe? Why does “every country have its own” arts and skills?

At the time, it was sometimes said that the most plausible answer to these questions of diversity within a single recognizable rubric is that music has common origins. In the beginning, there was music, and it went to India and to Europe, being transformed in both journeys but still staying recognizably itself. Many of these authors are likely to have adopted a Biblical version of this; they believed that, as Brown writes, “all societies had originated in Eden, and subsequently degenerated” (2000: 7). Humanity was created with the capacity for ideal music, painting, literature, and decoration, and subsequent diversity is the product of independent degenerative (or, as some believed, in Europe, progressive) histories. As I will explain later in this chapter, I too believe in common origins, though not singular origins—and obviously I do not subscribe to the Edenic narrative.

The second group of questions is about the discrepancies of appreciation. Why do these travelers, and for that matter why do we today, often find that the artistic products of another country are, on the one hand, pleasant to attend to but, on the other hand, almost always impossible to fully appreciate? Music isn’t like poetry or painting. There isn’t a linguistic barrier to enjoyment, and there is no literal depiction in it, so factual knowledge about history and society aren’t needed to grasp its significance. So, since Indian music is music, and since Indians enjoy it as such, why is it not equally enjoyable by anybody who enjoys music? This question must be approached delicately. We can’t *just* appeal to difference of culture because, as noted, there’s somedegree of enjoyment across the divide by even the naïve. Nor can we posit a simple one-size-fits-all capacity for musical enjoyment because this does not account for shallowness of the travelers’ enjoyment.

I think it will be agreed that, bracketing European arrogance, these travelers’ responses are pretty much what one would expect from people outside a culture. Of course, most of these travelers were not truly immersed in music or art. But how different would it have been if a European “true musician” were to have travelled to Mysore or Delhi? A great composer like Corelli would perhaps have been more curious about foreign music than our travelers—certainly, he would have been more able to discriminate and appreciate mode, phrase, rhythm, and skill. So, it is no accident that Pietro della Valle, who was a talented composer, was the most appreciative of our chroniclers. But even he did not enjoy it in the same way or to the same degree as a native, even one less talented at music. Why? This needs to be explained.

I want to be clear right from the outset that these are not questions just about “high” art. There were and are underlying similarities and also many differences of style and taste from country to country. Partly, of course, this is a matter of circumstance and material technology. Indians dress for a warmer climate than the English do; moreover, they use cotton, and this too makes for sharp differences from the wool and linen traditionally used in Europe. With respect to food, each culture uses grain, meat, and flavorings found and developed in their own climates and soil. Still: since personal decoration is just personal decoration and flavor just flavor, shouldn’t there be universal preferences regarding these things? (To some extent, of course, there are. As I remarked earlier, Indian pepper and muslin were highly prized in ancient Rome—but they were incorporated into local cuisine and couture. It wasn’t as if the Romans discovered foreign cuisine.) Whatever foods were traditionally available in a given country, shouldn’t a European just agree with Indians that *biriyani* is preferable to *risotto alla Milanese* and chapatis to baked bread?And yet this does not happen. So, here’s the question: How can this kind of preference have a geography? This is the broader context for our questions about the way our travelers appraised the art they found in unfamiliar lands.

## 2. The Standards of Taste

Where there is a difference of enjoyment among individuals, we speak of taste—the pattern of enjoyment that marks each of us as individuals. Each of us has a particular taste determined by our sensory sensitivity, psychological make-up, and history of exposure. This helps explain some of the discrepancies of appreciation mentioned in the previous section. Some of these are purely individual—some individuals are excited by strong rhythmic beats; others are not. Others trace to national origins. Indians and Europeans are exposed to different musical (and other artistic) experiences and so develop different tastes. Pietro della Valle grew up in Italy. Naturally, he developed a taste for Italian music. Taste developed in Italy does not immediately respond to Indian music. So, della Valle did not enjoy Indian music, at least not as much as people who grew up in India did.

Of course, this doesn’t do much more than label the phenomenon. The question is why and how art, and consequently taste, comes to differ by nation. To illustrate one of the difficulties that needs to be addressed, think of David Hume’s famous essay, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1985[1757]; see the Introduction). Hume did not believe that individual taste is shaped by external norms. He didn’t think that it makes sense to say that della Valle preferred Italian to Indian music because it was objectively better—for him, there is no such thing as objective value. Nevertheless, he felt obliged to acknowledge that the appreciation of art appears to respect some sort of intersubjective norms. Taste is subjective, he said, but it seems nevertheless to be governed by a “standard.” If somebody preferred Ogilby to Milton, he famously said, we would pronounce them “absurd and ridiculous”—“The principle of the natural equality of tastes is then totally forgot” (1985[1757]: 231). The non-objectivity of artistic evaluation is tempered by the tendency of the most sensitive and refined individuals to converge.

Hume’s attempt to resolve this apparent inconsistency is based on what he takes to be a natural tendency among persons of fine sensory discrimination and elevated sensibility. When such individuals immerse themselves in literature and other fine arts, they naturally converge on certain works as more lastingly rewarding than others. Taste is not governed by objective standards, but persons of refinement behave as if it is.

Hume’s strategy, familiar from his epistemological works, is to posit a psychological regularity to explain away the appearance of objectivity. Objectivists believe that taste converges on an external fact—beauty or something of that sort. Hume regards this is an illusion: taste converges because increasing exposure to great art produces in all refined human beings a greater psychological receptivity to, or preference for, some works of art over others. He says that people whose senses are sharp, and who are discriminating and consistent in their tastes, and who have been sufficiently exposed to art and music, tend to enjoy and appreciate the same works, which are for this reason the most highly esteemed.

Unfortunately, though, Hume’s application of this idea does not even begin to address the problems posed in the foregoing section. For obviously there were painters and musicians of exquisite sensibility both in India and in Italy. Why then did they not agree in their judgements—why did the Italians find little in India to match their painters and musicians (and, presumably, vice versa)? Hume, of course, was willing simply to cut the Gordian knot at this point—he would have said that once refined Indians encountered Italian music, they would simply appreciate it more than their own. Either this, he would say, or there are no Indians of refinement equal to that of Europeans. For their failure to appreciate Italian art would simply mirror their inability to create something that appealed as well to the most discriminating audiences. This, obviously, is not the approach that either I or my co-authors would recommend. We take it as a starting point that there is a diversity across nations of aesthetically appealing qualities. The question is how this could be.

Putting Hume’s Euro-superiority to one side, though, there is a deeper problem here. For the unfortunate downside of his appeal to human psychology is that it implies a side-by-side comparability across cultures and locations. To understand why, imagine what would have happened if della Valle had spent a few years learning and listening to Indian music and had come to enjoy it in the way that Indians of that time and place did. According to Hume, he would then have acquired a more expansive *but still unified* faculty of musical taste—he would exercise the very same propensity of musical taste when listening to Hindustani music as he would at a concert in Rome. And just as might have enjoyed Corelli more than Vivaldi, he might also have preferred Corelli to a Hindustani *raga*, comparing them side by side in the same way.His receptivity to music is, from Hume’s perspective, a single unified capacity that takes both in.

For reasons that will become clearer later, I think this is not correct. In my view, the appreciation of Indian music brings into play a different armory of acquired skills than that which is deployed in listening to Italian music. From my perspective, a better account of della Valle’s hypothetical musical education in India would have been that when he listened to Hindustani music, he would have gradually become able to switch out of Italian mode and into a newly acquired Hindustani mode. Hume’s model predicts the expansion of a pre-existent skill; I want to propose the acquisition of a new skill, and a new taste—though with some overlap with what he already possessed—specific to this new music.

## 3. An Outline of the Theory

The view of taste that I will develop has three parts, summarized as follows:

(1) *Culturally coordinated appreciation.* I have been saying that differences of taste between the European travellers and Indians recounted in section 1 above trace back to differences in their cultures. This has to be explicated. Accordingly, I will begin by explaining how I am using the notion of culture. and offer an account of how cultures figure in artistic expression.

(2) *Cultural evolution.* How do differences in the cultures of art develop? Actions based on a culture are not necessarily conformant; they can be very different from one another and even transgressive, while still being based on the same culture. Cultures accommodate variety. Sometimes, however, transgressions become entrenched in a new culture that operates independently of the one from which they came. When cultures evolve separately, they will, in all probability, diverge and split into separate cultures.

(3) *Common origins.* The culture-based kinds that fall under broad rubrics such as music, dance, visual image-making, and poetry have historical origins determined by natural human preferences. When they originated, these forms of artistic expression were minimally culture-laden. Commonalities of taste across cultures—the shallow but positive reactions of some travelers—are accounted for by these common origins.

## 4. Culture: How It Works

I’ll begin with some broad conceptions relevant to culture. I will be arguing that culture is inherently unstable and prone to change.

(I) A *culture* is a body of beliefs, preferences, and behavioral dispositions—“mental attitudes,” for short—that are transmitted from one individual to another within an inter-communicating network of individuals (a “community”).[[5]](#footnote-4)

(II) Cultures include culture-reflexive beliefs—beliefs, explicit and tacit, about the mental attitudes broadly shared by transmission among members of the community.

(III) *Culture A differs from culture B* if either the subject-matter of A is different from that of B, or the community within which A is transmitted is different from that within which B is communicated, and, for this reason, the mental attitudes that constitute A are different from those that constitute B.

One talks in this sense about the “culture” of groups such as political parties, groups of interacting scholars, cities, and so on. These cultures are bodies of mental attitudes that help explain why people act in ways characteristic of these communities—that is, because community members influence each other by passing on beliefs and preferences, and by their own behavior serving as examples for others to emulate or avoid. The culture of a literary society in a city is different from that of a sports club in the same city, even when the membership overlaps, because the subject matter of these bodies of mental attitudes is different. The cultures of literary societies in different societies are different because they are distinct networks of transmission.

Here are two central paradigms of action influenced by culture.

(IV) An action is *culture-influenced* if the agent’s reasons for that action are parts of a culture that is hers.

(V) An action is *culture-based* if the agent’s reasons for that action are consequences of beliefs about a culture that is hers.

Actions are not culture-based merely because they are based on mental attitudes shared within a culture. Rather, they are culture-based because they are based on beliefs that certain mental attitudes are part of her culture.

Here is an example that I hope makes the point clear. Suppose that an agent, A, gets vaccinated because she believes that this prevents illness. Now, it may be that this belief is shared by mutual transmission within A’s community. If so, culture influences her action. But this would not be enough to make her action culture-*based*. For it to count as such it must be based on her belief that some belief is part of her culture. This further condition is not satisfied in this case.

Now, suppose that Sgets vaccinated *not* because (or not merely because) she believes that vaccination prevents illness but because she believes that members of her community generally believe that vaccination prevents illness. She might reason, for example, that it would be a good thing to conform to community behavior whether or not it makes her safe from illness. Or suppose she *doesn’t* get vaccinated because she wants to be tagged as a rebel against mandatory vaccination. These actions *are* culture-based because they are based on beliefs-*about*-culture. Note that culture-based actions do not have to conform to culture. S believes, rightly, that the culture includes belief in vaccination-efficacy. Actions that are influenced by this belief are culture-based. But as our two cases show, these actions need not conform to any norm prescribed by the culture. Thus, culture-based actions can admit of variation. Action that violates a cultural norm might still be based on the culture—in many cases, this is the only way to understand them.

This brings us to a crucial point. Communities have practices that are based on culture-reflexive beliefs. Dress codes are a good example. Why do Europeans wear dark clothes to funerals? For no reason other than that they believe that members of their community think that this is appropriate—they could just as easily have believed that one should wear light clothes to funerals, and then these same people would have followed along. Here, culture propagates beliefs about cultural beliefs, and these beliefs-about-beliefs are the basis of people’s actions. Let’s call this *cultural coordination*:

(VI) An action is *culturally coordinated* if the agent’s reasons for that action include beliefs-about-culture that are parts of the agent’s culture.

As before, cultural coordination does not necessarily imply universal conformity. Someone might wear light clothes to a funeral as an idiosyncrasy—this would be a non-conformant, culturally based action.

Culturally coordinated actions are of particular interest for questions regarding art. Artists create works for audiences to consume. They do so against the background of a culture they share with the audience. For example, a poet might write a verse to be heard in a certain meter, knowing that the audience will be aware of the rhythmic possibilities of her words—that’s a collection of cultural-beliefs-about-cultural-beliefs. The audience receives the poem assuming that listening to it in this way will unlock its potential to be enjoyed—the same. Both acts are culturally coordinated. Both the poet and her audience have, by virtue of a shared culture, the capacity to act in culturally coordinated ways.

Importantly, much of this is unspoken and in the background. Neither the artist nor the audience need *explicitly* be aware of more than a small part of this cultural background. As Michael Baxandall puts it: “Some of the [mental attitudes assumed by artist and audience] may have been implicit in institutions to which the actor unreflectively acquiesced: others may have been dispositions acquired through a history of behaviour in which reflection once but no longer had a part” (1985:42).[[6]](#footnote-5) This kind of transaction is not limited to “high art:” it is equally constitutive of cuisine, couture, decoration, and the like.[[7]](#footnote-6)

## 5. Cultures and Categories of Art

The above account of cultural coordination is relevant to understanding a phenomenon that has assumed a great deal of importance in recent aesthetic theory—the dependence of artistic appreciation on genre-dictated attitudes taken up by artist and audience. When I look at a photograph, my expectations and attitude with respect to its representational realism, color, and texture are different from those when I look at an expressionist painting. Why? Aren’t photographs simply superior with respect to depiction? Most agree that this is because these are different genres of depiction backed by different culturally acquired mental attitudes. Depiction functions within such a genre. A man painted with a blotchy green face can be appreciated as a depiction of Max Ernst, even though (of course) Ernst’s face was not that color. A high-quality color photograph of Ernst cannot be appreciated as an expressionist depiction—it is something else. Each item has to be appreciated as an example of its kind.

Probably the best and most cited account of genre-dictated appreciation is Kendall Walton’s (1970) account of “categories of art.” (The example of depictive realism above is his.) Walton proposes that works of art are understood relative to categories; they cannot be properly appreciated independently of the category to which they belong. He writes:

We are likely to regard, for example, cubist paintings, serial music, or Chinese music as formless, incoherent, or disturbing on our first contact with these forms largely because, I suggest, we would not be perceiving the works as cubist paintings, serial music, or Chinese music. But after becoming familiar with these kinds of art we would probably retract our previous judgments, admit that they were mistaken (1970: 356).

Walton’s device seems relevant to understanding the history recounted in section 1 above. These travelers failed to regard Indian music and painting as exemplars of the categories of art that they in fact belonged to; instead, they treated them as if they were exemplars of categories with which they were already familiar (or perhaps not as exemplars of any particular category at all). Consequently, they adjudged them as “formless” or “incoherent” (though pleasant enough) and not of any particular interest.

Walton’s categories are maintained by cultural coordination. Taking his example of cubist painting, a person who is able properly to appreciate cubist painting has culturally acquired mental propensities that enable her to view them in a certain way. And, as Baxandall says, the artist relies on her audience sharing these capacities. The necessary coordination between them is achieved by transmission among members of the community. What I would now like to argue is that the culture that supports categories of art is not stable. It is *essentially* open to change. This is why cultures diverge across communities, and ultimately why there is a geography of taste.

I’ll begin by recounting a small misstep by Walton. He thinks that culture is not essential to categories of art—what matters is that the audience should know what category a work belongs to, and though this might normally be achieved by culture, it would be fine if it were not. Here is his argument. Consider a genre-breaking art-category like twelve-tone music. When Schoenberg first composed serialist works, Walton says, “this category was certainly not then well established or recognized in his society” (1970: 360). So, someone who listened to Schoenberg’s twelve-tone compositions at the time they were first performed would have no pre-existing culturally recognized category to place them in. But, says Walton, this would not necessarily prevent this person appreciating the music. A listener could appreciate this music if she knew Schoenberg's intentions (1970: 360–361). The source of her knowledge is inconsequential. Culture need not be her source.

Now, Walton is interested in a slightly different question than I am. He is concerned about what makes is *right* to assign a work to a category, and about the correctness of the evaluative judgements that follow. An example of an evaluative judgement: Is this work a first-rate example of serial music or a poor example of tonal music? I am more concerned with affective response, or *taste*—what category-specific ways of listening must one employ to enjoy a piece of music? So, I do not want to argue about the facts of this specific historical example. It’s logically possible that art could be created and appreciated in groups within which an artist’s intentions are divined without relying on culture. Perhaps one could have artists who create works for themselves and only themselves—such an artist would not rely on culture to find the right category to assign her productions. My point is that notwithstanding all of this, culture accommodates transgression, and that art constantly changes by transgression.

I’ll illustrate my point by sketching an alternative to Walton’s narrative of the Schoenberg case. It could have been that Schoenberg’s twelve-tone innovation was culturally transgressive, but that the audience’s response was nonethelessculturally coordinated. For it is possible that the culture of the time included culture-reflexive beliefs about tonality—that is, that it not only included certain expectations about tonality, but also the belief that these expectations were a part of the culture. Then, twelve-tone music could havea deliberate violation of known cultural expectations that the audience recognized as such. Schoenberg’s audience had a pre-existent culture of listening that had its roots in traditional tonality, but he found an elaborate and highly rule-bound way to cut loose from tonality. This violated existing culture; moreover, it was a part of that culture that this was a transgression. When people of that time went to a Schoenberg concert, they could recognize where it conformed to the prevalent musical culture—the instruments, the singers, the twelve-tone mode, and so on. Schoenberg created a situation in which understanding the culture of the time was a precondition of recognizing his violations of that culture. In short, the audience was able to appreciate twelve-tone music in a culturally coordinated way. It’s true that they recognized Schoenberg’s intentions, but they did so in just the way that they would have when they recognized that Richard Strauss’s compositions were still tonal.

Let me now add one further point. In time, serialism produced (or could have produced) a new way of listeningspecifically adapted to the new form. By doing this, it modified the old culture. If this new way of listening became autonomous, a new category of art would have emerged. This is the kind of evolution and separation that were responsible for the emergence of other art forms like rock ’n roll and rap—what starts as a deliberate tweak of existing culture is responsible for a new way of listening.

These theses help explain the existence of distinct artistic cultures in different geographical locations. As people migrated, they formed communities and cultures that were isolated from one another for many centuries. They brought music and other arts with them. These arts are inherently unstable. Their reliance on culture makes them prone to transgression and change. Thus, they evolved both in the places out of which migration occurred and in the migratory endpoints. This brings divergence. The European travelers described earlier were moving from one evolved culture to another. They could recognize and appreciate similarities due to shared origins. But their own culture could not give them ways of appreciating what they encountered in India.

The account of cultural learning that follows is meant to fill out the outline just given. It is supposed to elucidate what a way of listening is, or more generally, a way of engaging with art achieves. I should say that my account of audience engagement is somewhat independent of the outline of cultural coordination just offered. Thus, Lopes’s account of artistic culture in Chapter 2 is very different from mine. But he might still agree with the outline of cultural coordination and change offered above.

## 6. Aesthetic Pleasure[[8]](#footnote-7)

First, let me characterize the audience response that, in my view, is the desired product of a culturally agreed upon mode of engagement and the goal of artistic creation—aesthetic pleasure.[[9]](#footnote-8) There are three reasons why I invoke pleasure in this role.

First, pleasure is generally directed at an object or state of affairs outside the subject; so, it can serve as the basis for response to an external object, art in this case.

Second, it is a subjective state of positive affect modulated by cognitive states that respond to external circumstances. The positive affect explains why an individual wants to engage with an art object; the subjectivity explains why different individuals can, without error, respond differently to the same object. And cognitive influences on pleasure open up a role for culture because culture shapes cognition.

Finally, pleasure grounds learning: if you get pleasure from doing something, you are more likely to do it again. Thus, pleasure influences the mental attitudes that constitute culture.

It is important for me to emphasize right at the outset that I don’t mean pleasure in this context to denote a feel-good psychological state incompatible with negative emotions associated with its object—I do not take it to be synonymous with something like “fun” or “joy.” Antonia Peacocke gives us a nice example that illustrates the point:

Consider a monument to the victims of a disaster, one which offers a deeply painful but unifying way to grieve communally when properly experienced and not otherwise. That is a valuable, *if not pleasurable*, form of experience; its being so valuable can similarly ground the monument’s own aesthetic value (2023: 94; emphasis added).

Peacocke is right to suggest that it would be inapposite to say that the victims’ experience of this monument is pleasurable. For them, it is inextricably bound up with a heavy burden of grief. But this is compatible with a deeper truth: their engagement with the monument is one of positive affect. The pain and grief arise from the original disaster, not from the monument—the monument evokes recalled grief, but it is not itself an object of grief or pain. (It would add to the victims’ trauma if it was.) Contemplating the monument brings the victims relief, unity, acceptance, and possibly resolution. These are states with positive affect. It would thus not be right to suggest that the experience is “valuable” but at the same time subjectively aversive—it isn’t like painful chemotherapy. The experience reinforces certain ways of appreciating the monument and thus it bears another psychological mark of pleasure. I’ll return to this example at the end of this section.

Here’s my plan. To begin with, I will introduce a unit of action that I call an *assembled routine*. The appreciation of art is an assembled routine, I will argue. Then, I will try to establish the following concepts, which will enable me to give an account of the diversity of taste across cultures.

(1) *Facilitating pleasure*: a psychological complex that helps us execute difficult assembled routines.

(2) *Aesthetic pleasure*: facilitating pleasure associated with the execution of a particular kind of mental assembled routine: open-ended cognitive engagement with an object.

(3) *Pleasure in art*: a form of aesthetic pleasure, distinguished from the genus by its dependence on a culturally learned manner of engagement.

(4) *Art form*: a family of artworks that compete with one another for audiences that engage with them in accordance with a culturally coordinated manner of engagement.

My aim is to use these concepts to elucidate how art forms diverge and demand specialized forms of appreciation. Engaging enjoyably with works of one form does not imply the capacity to enjoy works of another because the culture required to enjoy the two forms is different.

## *6.1 Assembled Routines*

Assembled routines are acts that consist of sequences of component acts that are willed as a single unit. (All willed acts are assembled routines, I would claim—an act without components is never willed.)

To illustrate assembled routines and their ubiquity, here’s a simple example: standing still. One tends, naively, to think that this is a simple homogeneous activity. It is not. It is rather an assemblage of heterogeneous components. For there are many forces, internal and external, that act on one’s body when one is attempting to stand still, each of which has to be counter-balanced by muscular effort. Standing still thus requires an assemblage of separate muscular efforts, each of which precisely counteracts a force that pushes the body away from equipoise. These component actions are not separately willed; they are coordinated in the cerebellum, out of the reach of conscious access. Standing still is the exercise of an internalized ability to execute a coordinated assemblage as a whole. Its seeming homogeneity is a result of unitary volition.

More complex examples are walking, dancing, and so on. A good dancer does the bhangra by executing many fine movements in sequence. She doesn’t attend to, and may not fully be aware of, each step she takes. Rather, she releases a coordinating control mechanism learnt by practice, saving her attentional and conative resources for the music, her companions, her surroundings, and, of course, the dance. The more practiced she is, the more the control mechanism is hidden from her conscious awareness. She simply responds to the beat without counting it out in her head.

Importantly, the assembled routine of dancing the bhangra is, unlike walking or standing (which are developmentally acquired), learned. It is only by being well learned that it can be executed as a unit without willing each component separately. Learning is an important factor in the assembled routines I am concerned with here.

Some *mental* acts are learned assembled routines. Reading is an example. A child learning to read must recognize each individual letter and its sound, put strings of these together, and sound them out to form words. She must also perform the linguistic operation of comprehending what the words mean. She does this painstakingly, letter by letter. The practiced reader executes the act at a more assembled level; she simply reads without separately willing, or being separately aware of, each component act that she performs. Like a practiced dancer, she has learned to execute an assembled routine as a unit.

## *6.2 Manner-Focus*

Assembled routines can be goal-directed or manner-focused (or both). A goal-directed routine is one that is assembled in a certain way in order to achieve a particular result. A tennis player hitting a backhand must rotate her body, position the racket-head, swing, and follow through in a well-timed sequence. This sequence of actions is precisely constructed to achieve a particular goal—a well-hit ball to the right place. It is an example of a goal-directed routine. By contrast, dancing is manner focused. The point of the steps, the turns, the holds, etc. lies in the shape of the routine itself, not its effectiveness in achieving an extraneous result—the steps are not aimed at getting to the other side of the room, for example. In such routines, the manner of doing something has significance over and above any goal or result that ensues.

The assembled routines I am interested in are learned, mental, and (with respect to their ultimate motivation) manner focused. Take recreational reading. This is a learned mental routine. It has a goal-directed component: the writing on the page must be absorbed and comprehended, and many of the component acts of reading are designed to achieve this goal efficiently and quickly. Additionally, however, there are manner-focused aspects of recreational reading—that is, aspects shaped by something other than the culminating goal. As you read, you may, for instance, inwardly recite the words to bring out the prosody, or open yourself up to the emotional resonance of the passage by dwelling on the text for longer than needed for mere comprehension. When you read in these ways, you still aim to achieve the culminating goal of comprehension. But the manner of reading has an additional purpose in recreational reading: the enjoyment of reading. With literature considered as art, enjoyment is achieved by the manner of reading.[[10]](#footnote-9)

Here's where I am going with this: the appreciation of art is a learned manner-focused assembled cognitive routine. As I’ll explain in a moment, art is most attractive to an audience only if it is engaged with in a particular manner—poetry, for example, is attractive when the meter is emphasized. As Baxandall emphasized, the optimal *manner* of engagement is understood by both creator and audience. This coordination is achieved through the culture they share. Note, once again, that I am not saying that the culture necessarily *prescribes* the optimal manner of engagement, though it often does this. The point is rather that this manner of engagement is known by means of culture.

Once again, I am not preoccupied by high art alone. Think of cuisine (Matthen 2021). When an accomplished cook makes rasmalai, she assumes that the quality, quantity, and balance of saffron and cardamom makes a difference to the consumer’s enjoyment—explicitly so in the case of an experienced consumer, who expects this to be an element of savor. (A less experienced eater would just focus on the flavor, not on the balance of flavorings that create it.) Enjoyment of the dish as an artistic product (not merely as an agreeable confection) results from this kind of transaction between cook and consumer: a non-explicit understanding that this manner of tasting will be employed. The rasmalaiis an art object because it *can* be eaten in this way.

And now to a theory of the kind of pleasure, or enjoyment, that’s involved and how it involves culture and culture-learning.

## *6.3 Facilitating Pleasure*

Pleasure releases and facilitates assembled routines. Consider reading again. Clearly, it is an activity that taxes brain resources and competes with other resource-intensive activities. It is difficult to concentrate on a book when other cognitive and bodily demands compete. However, reading is easier when it gives pleasure. Even when tired and hungry, you can keep your mind on a good book. On the other hand, it is very hard even in favorable circumstances to keep your mind on a turgid legal contract. This difference does not mean that the book is intellectually less demanding than the contract—the opposite might well be true. What it shows, rather, is that the pleasure derived from reading the book agentially releases a particular manner of reading and facilitates your ability to conduct it as a unitary act, while displeasure disrupts the routine and ultimately holds it back. And the same is true of other assembled routines; they are self-reinforced by pleasure-in-doing (fig. 1). Facilitating pleasure can function in this way as a part of the psychological complex by which one executes difficult assembled routines.[[11]](#footnote-10) It is agential in this sense.

[PLACE FIG 1 HERE]

Facilitating pleasure is very different from another kind that philosophers talk about—consequential pleasure. The latter is pleasure that simply welcomes a fact. Think of getting into bed at the end of a tiring day. The pleasure you feel is just an effect; it is not part of any agential complex. (Of course, the pleasure you feel from the comforts of your bed *is* agential; it motivates you to stay.) Consequential pleasures like these are effects separate from the events that give rise to them. Facilitating pleasure, by contrast, is tied up with performing the activity. It’s a component of the psychological complex by which it is performed.[[12]](#footnote-11)

## *6.4 Contemplation*

Now, I want to introduce an assembled routine that will serve as a broad template for aesthetic engagement. Imagine being mentally engaged with something in a manner that enables you to be aware of and focus in on (some of) its properties. Suppose further that your cognitive focus on this object is manner-focused—in the sense that what matters to you is the awareness of the object itself, not what you discover about it. For example, you might:

look at a tree and be aware of its colour and shape over a period of time (and by visual recollection after you stop looking), or

listen to a lecture and be absorbed by the compact unfolding of its argument (separately from its content), or

hear k. d. lang sing, and be aware of her articulation, attack, and rhythm.

These are acts of awareness that maintain focus on an object without regard to any cognitive achievement that might accrue as a consequence of this focus.

I’ll call these assembled routines acts of contemplation, though the word has a connotation of passivity that I do not intend. (Another term that I’ll use is “mental engagement,” but this has too intellectual a connotation.) They are difficult assembled routines—they consist of coordinated component acts of perceptual or conceptual search, attention, and receptivity. For example, looking at a tree requires you to focus your eyes, saccade from one point to another, register and remember color contrasts, etc. Looking at a tree in a way that makes it pleasurable to do so—this is a manner-focused routine. It is a different way of looking at it than when you are trying to identify what kind of tree it is or trying to measure its height.

Now, here is an important point. Manner-focused contemplation is unstable because it is difficult. Something is needed to maintain the focus; if it has no extrinsic goal, mental engagement is just as apt to wander off the object as to stay on it. This is where facilitating pleasure plays a role. It keeps your mind on the task. It is sustaining.[[13]](#footnote-12)

## *6.5 Aesthetic Pleasure*

Now think of an act of contemplation that produces facilitating pleasure. This is self-sustaining, hence stable. Facilitating pleasure stabilizes your focus on the object of contemplation. If you enjoy looking at a bird, you’ll focus on it more; you’ll even take in more of its visual characteristics. Note, here, that the reinforcing role of pleasure is manner-focused—it is the activity itself, not any goal-state, that shapes how you contemplate the object. This open-ended pleasure-reinforced contemplative engagement with an object (fig. 2) is my model for aesthetic enjoyment.

[PLACE FIG. 2 HERE]

To pull these threads together:

Aesthetic pleasure is facilitating pleasure that arises from contemplating something in a manner-focused way. As facilitating pleasure generally does, it serves to reinforce the act it arises from. Thus, aesthetic pleasure makes the act of contemplation self-reinforcing.

Note that this definition of aesthetic pleasure is functional, in the sense that it is defined in terms of its agential role. Certain negative emotions—fear, disgust, sadness—can play a role in self-reinforcing an act of contemplation in accordance with the above definition. Aesthetic pleasure need not be fun in a narrow sense of the term.

The scope of aesthetic pleasure clarifies Peacocke’s example of a monument that helps survivors of a disaster grieve when it is “properly experienced.” I can now say more about my attitude to this example. First, note that the example has the same structure as that of the aesthetic loop in figure 2. The survivors contemplate the monument in an act of grieving. This contemplation, which (I assume) is different from that performed by a detached viewer, is manner-focused; it dwells on the monument in a certain way in the context of a larger act of grieving. Here’s my contention: If aesthetically positive, this act of contemplation has the self-reinforcing structure of figure 2. This is why I say it evokes (facilitating) pleasure.

## 7. Culture-Learning and the Pleasure of Art

In the previous section, I linked aesthetic appreciation to a kind of pleasure. Now, I want to show how the pleasure is the basis of culture-learning. If I am on the right track about the cultural coordination of art-appreciation, my argument in this section will show how culturally based aesthetic pleasure is essential to appreciative engagement with art.

I’ll introduce culture-learning by first characterizing generic reinforcement-learning and then noticing the specific features that distinguish culture-learning as a kind thereof.

## *7.1 Reinforcement-Learning*

Pleasure is a fulcrum for learning. Here is one way this works.

*Reinforcement Learning:* if X performs action A1 in circumstances C and A2 in another occurrence of the same circumstances C, and if A1 gives more pleasure than A2, then X’s tendency to perform A1 in C is reinforced relative to her tendency to perform A2 in C.

Reinforcement learning is standardly used by animal trainers. Normally, they utilize consequential pleasure-rewards following spontaneous occurrences of the action they seek to establish. For example, they might train a dog to jump through a fiery hoop by giving it a reward every time it comes uncomfortably close to the hoop, ultimately inducing it to jump through (and rewarding it for so doing). In this pattern, a new action is learned by the subsequent pleasure-carrying reward that it elicits. The action is performed because it has provided consequential pleasure in the past and is lastingly associated with the pleasure as a result. (I’ll qualify the last statement in a moment.)

In reinforcement learning, an animal learns a new action—jumping through a fiery hoop when commanded. The action is performed for the pleasure-linked “value” that has come to be associated with it. (I am not saying that an animal possesses a value-concept, just that its preference for one action over another is an implicit value.)

## *7.2 Manner-Reinforcement*

I am interested in a related, but somewhat different, reinforcement pattern—learning to perform an already familiar action in a new manner by the facilitating pleasure that accompanies it when performed in that manner.

*Manner-Reinforcement:* if assembled routine A is more facilitated by pleasure when X performs it in manner M1 than when she performs it in manner M2, then X’s tendency to perform A in manner M1 is reinforced relative to her tendency to perform it in manner M2.

Note that X’s tendency to perform A may not be reinforced as such. The act itself may not rise in her preference-ordering. What is reinforced is a certain manner of performing the act: when she performs it, she does so in this way.

Dancing is an example of a manner learned routine. When one struggles with a step or a move, the routine is forced and easily falls apart. But when one has mastered the timing of a step, dancing gives self-reinforcing pleasure—it just feels good to do it this way. This pleasure helps one learn the right manner of dancing. Dancing is manner-focused, and the pleasure that it creates when performed in a certain manner facilitates dancing in this manner (as in fig. 1). And the value of dancing may be adjusted upwards because there is a learned manner of dancing that affords greater pleasure than dancing in the old manner. Of course, this does not necessarily happen. One may still prefer to go to the bowling alley or to the movies. But if one is going to dance, this is the way one prefers to do it. And doing it this way may just make it more attractive than bowling.

## *7.3 Culture Learning*

One engages with art in a manner that conforms to a culture shared with the creator. That’s the transaction between creator and audience.

Suppose you read *A Suitable Boy* in the way Vikram Seth assumed you would when he wrote it. Then you will get greater facilitating pleasure out of reading it than if you read it in a less culture-informed way.[[14]](#footnote-13) Note again that I am not saying that you are explicitly aware of Seth’s intentions, or that you need to be. I am simply saying that if he is successful, your reading will be more facilitated by pleasure if it is shaped by the same culture as his writing. There is a coordination between artist and audience that results from the culture to which both have “unreflectively acquiesced” (to echo Baxandall, quoted earlier).

I can now articulate a general thesis (an elaboration of the view that I attributed to Baxandall):

The enjoyment of art rests on culturally coordinated expectations of production and appreciation that are parts of the relevant culture.

## 8. Art as a Special Kind of Aesthetic Object

Here is a characterization of art in terms of its relationship to cultural learning.

1. Works of art are created in accordance with the expectation that they will be engaged with in a specific culturally learned manner.

2. Consuming a work of art in the culturally learned manner assumed by the artist maximizes aesthetic pleasure (normally, non-accidentally).

3. The coordination between creator and audience implied by (1) and (2) is enabled by a culture they share.

4. Artworks are properly evaluated relative to the culturally specific terms of coordination implied by (1) and (2). (This is Baxandallian coordination.) Specifically, their acceptance in a community depends on how successfully they are able to generate pleasure that facilitates the cognitive focus of an audience (see Matthen 2017).

Here is one way of summarizing the results of the theory of taste that I have presented.

Call the features of artworks that afford facilitating pleasure their *attractors*.

Some attractors are culture independent. In music, certain harmonies and certain rhythms are universally attractive; perhaps the preference for these is innate. Other attractors become so by universal psychological processes. For an example of the latter, think of the mere exposure effect discussed by Bence Nanay in Chapter 4. It has been claimed that repeated exposure to a visual pattern (for example, a brand logo) increases how much subjects “like” it or prefer it to others. Preferences traceable to mere exposure effect are not culture-based; that is, they do not arise from beliefs about culture.

These culture-independent attractors are the ones Hume was assuming. I’ll call them the *primary* attractors because they are likely responsible for the historical origins of art. They also explain how cross-cultural appreciation is possible—they are what appealed to the travelers I talked about in section 1 above. (I’ll say more about primary attractors in the following section.)

In addition to these universal attractors, there are culture-specific attractors. They are artistic devices that are culturally learned through coordination between creator and audience based on information that both absorb from others in a social group. I’ll call these the secondary attractors.[[15]](#footnote-14) All art has secondary attractors; the appreciation of art is, to a much greater than the appreciation of nature, dependent on secondary attractors and this is culturally coordinated.

Specific art forms—Waltonian categories of art—are defined by secondary attractors. To fully enjoy them, an audience needs to absorb the culture on which they are specifically based. Thus, secondary attractors are always tied up with locally available information.[[16]](#footnote-15) Often, the secondary attractors are second-order. You enjoy the flat saturated colors that Turkish and other miniaturists use; you also enjoy and notice the devices by which they deploy these colors. (More about this in the following section.)[[17]](#footnote-16)

### Origins

If artforms and secondary attractors are different in every culture and every genre, what explains the universality of the broad categories of art—music, dance, poetry, fiction, decoration, and so on? In section I, I mentioned the old theory that these had common origins in Eden. I don’t (of course) believe in Eden or humanity’s fall from it. But I do think it plausible that the broad categories of art have common origins.

Before I say more about common origins, let me make two remarks about change and divergence in art-forms.

1. *Change within art forms.* As recounted earlier, artworks belong to categories, or art forms—groups of productions that presuppose a common cultural background and thus compete against one another for consumption by people who possess specific culture-based competencies—this group of similarly-skilled people constitutes a market niche for the art-form. The greater the aesthetic pleasure these consumers derive from a work consumed in accordance with these skills, the deeper their cognitive engagement with it. As a consequence, works that give greater aesthetic pleasure are in greater demand. This competitive niche exists within a wider economy: artworks compete for resources against food, defense, housing, mating opportunities, and so on. The art-market is shaped by aesthetic pleasure, as well as by other factors such as the existence of supporting productive entities, such as technology, wealth, and cultural institutions. (Lopes 2017 gives an original and important account of these supporting institutions.)

With this in mind, my first thesis is that artists target audiences they know; these audiences are interested in works they can appreciate with the cultural skills they possess. As argued earlier, these skills are coordinated: artists succeed because they produce works their audiences know how to consume; audiences find cultural enjoyment because they have the skills that artists cater to. These skills are shaped on both sides by learning by exposure, imitation, and instruction. Skills that are shaped in this way are flexible; though they start with works of certain genres, they will be capable of enjoying works that transgress and innovate within certain bounds. A person who is familiar with strict perspective in visual art may, for example, be able to appreciate deliberate distortions of perspective. For example, if perspective is deliberately used to distort the apparent size of objects relative to one another, an experienced viewer might understand and appreciate the trick. And having enjoyed it, she might develop new ways of enjoying art within the tradition. This modifies the culture of the art form.

Now here’s an important point: the cultural change I have described in this way is path dependent. That is, any cultural product is the result of innovations piled on innovations back through history; for this reason, its characteristics depend on its lineage. To continue with the example from the previous paragraph, a painting that distorts perspective depends on a tradition in which perspective is employed more literally. A Turkish miniaturist would not have distorted perspective in this way because his cultural background didn’t use strict perspective in the first place—distorted perspective would not have had the same meaning for Turkish audiences.

Nanay (2018) likens this accumulation of cultural innovations to the path dependence of biological natural selection, an idea he attributes to George Kubler and Whitney Davis. This is insightful and helpful, but we must note an important difference. In cultural innovation, but very much less so in biological evolution, there is the possibility of borrowing, cross-fertilization, and returns to past cultural modes. Thus, European painters of the nineteenth century borrowed certain tropes from Japanese printmakers—but birds cannot borrow design features of insect wings by hybridization. Of course, cultural borrowing is also path dependent; the borrowed Japanese tropes have to “make sense” in their new context or be modified so that they make sense. But it’s important to recognize that (by contrast with biological evolution) there is confluence as well as separation in the lineages of art. With this proviso, we should remember that because art is the product of a path dependent series of innovations, it is culturally and historically bounded. It is misleading, for this reason, to think of it as a quest for some universal quality such as beauty, or a manifestation of some universal “standard of taste.”

2. *Emergence of new art forms*. Modifications of art forms can lead to splits. Suppose that parallel series of changes of the above kind leads to the formation of separate sub-audiences, each of which is attuned to different culturally learned attractors in the art form. Cumulatively, this can lead to the formation of groups with skills that are learned independently of one another. In the Western world, this kind of change has been very accelerated by the invention of new technologies, the availability of culture to more and more members of society with diverse educational and economic backgrounds, and the cross-influence of artistic cultures made possible by travel. Just think of how photography and film developed, with the emergence of new technologies initially subordinate to established art forms in painting and drama, and gradually developing incommensurable standards of their own.

These processes create increasing variety. Take technology. The invention of photography creates a new medium. This creates variety in the art form of “realistic” pictures—portraits and landscapes that could hitherto be made by pencils or brushes are now enriched by visual effects experienced in photographs. The culturally learned skills of appreciating portraits and landscapes are expanded to include the enjoyment of photographs, and these expanded skills feed back into painting to expand the expressive resources used there. So far, this is change of technique within an existing art form that does not require a completely new culture to appreciate. But it is easy to imagine changes that finally create a split in these pre-existent cultures—ways of manipulating digital images, for example, which are different from what can be achieved in a darkroom or with a paintbrush. These changes could create an entirely new culture of enjoying pictures, a culture quite different from that of enjoying charcoal sketches or painting. This is how new art forms are created. Note also that there does not have to be only one such event. It could have happened that different photography art forms emerged independently in Japan and in North America, both deriving from the same original event. (This is a disanalogy, once again, with biological macro-evolution.)

*Origins.* The processes of cultural evolution that I have described create variety, and together, they can explain the variety and geography of taste. So, as humans dispersed over the globe, thereby reducing, or even entirely severing, contact with other groups, the variety of artistic cultures would proliferate. Conversely, looking backwards in time, we would expect that in the distant past there would have been less variety than now. For this reason, it is plausible to speculate that every art form traces back to one or more culturally transformative singular events. This is what my sketch of diversification shares with the fall-from-Eden hypothesis. I would suggest that the broad categories of art—music, dance, depiction, fiction, poetry, decoration, and the like—arose from common origins. I would further suggest that the limited cross-cultural appeal of art is explained by these common origins.

The most discussed case of common origins in the literature is music.[[18]](#footnote-17) The reason it is treated as a separate case is primarily that it seems to be a basic human, or possibly hominin, ability: like language, it has a universal syntactic structure (Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983) and a hard-wired neural substrate (Norman-Haignere, Kanwisher, and McDermott 2015). So, though there is disagreement about the adaptive significance of music, it is generally agreed that it is an instinctive behavior in all humans tracing back to or before the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. However, there is no reason to suppose that these instinctive vocalizations were *art* at this stage. No doubt, some were pleasing to listen to. But my treatment of the nature of art indicates that this is not sufficient. The vocalizations have to be ritualized and codified before they become art-music.

Art is, as I have argued, creation that gives aesthetic pleasure by means of culture—it has secondary attractors as well as primary ones. So, imagine the early accretions of culturally specific modes of singing: over the base of instinctive rhythmic or melodious vocalization is added a technique that gives pleasure by culturally specific appraisal or appreciation—something like throat singing or warbling or harmony where a knowledgeable auditor can enjoy the appraisal of skill or technique or creativity. Such an accretion would be both inevitable and transformative. The kind of music that results from it is now art. This new art-music has primary attractors that were already present before this innovation and now also secondary attractors attributable to the innovation. I would suggest that all musical art historically traces back in this way to singular events that add a culturally transmissible feature to instinctive melodic and/or rhythmic vocalization that was pleasurable to hear.

Similarly, think of bipedal mobility, walking and jumping (etc.). Some people walk in a way that is aesthetically pleasant to watch; this doesn’t make their movements art. It is only when these movements are ritualized, and the rituals are part of what an audience appreciates, that we have art—dance, processions, marching, etc.

The methodology that I am suggesting is followed in an illuminating paper by Sandra Francis (1991). Francis hints that the question of origins is entwined with a non-ethnocentric understanding of dance, and she suggests that in discussions of origins, anthropocentrism is an extension of ethnocentrism. To broaden our species-limited horizons, she uses the work of the primatologists, Wolfgang Kohler and Jane Goodall. Here’s Kohler:

When Kohler studied captive chimpanzees on Tenerife… from 1913 to 1917, he observed a number of behaviours that to him suggested “primitive forms of dancing.”… Of particular interest is Kohler’s description of the semi-rhythmic movements of a group of chimpanzees in single file around a pole, some of whom accented their movements by stamping heavily on one foot, and wagging their heads in time with the stepping. Self-decoration often accompanied the “ring-dancing,” as the animals draped themselves in rags, strings, and bits of vegetation (Francis 1991: 205–206).

Importantly, Francis distinguishes between dance and “dance-like” behavior very much along the lines I have suggested, where the former is (to paraphrase) intentionally rhythmic in conformity to a culturally learned pattern. She believes that chimpanzees are capable of dance; I cautiously agree that Kohler’s evidence supports this.

Whitney Davis (1986) proposes another origin narrative—early uses of what he calls “the representational line” in the Aurignacian period about 30,000 years ago. He writes: “Sometime between 32,000 and 17,000 B.C., a continuous technology [of carving curved lines in stone] underwent one profound conceptual alteration. Image makers discovered the essential feature of the representational line—its analogical, continuously modulated, semantically ‘dense’ quality” (1986: 194). That is, they discovered that by altering the symmetry and curvature of a single line, they could represent “multiply linked and ever changing features of reality.” The idea is that by initially seeing naturalistic images of parts of real-world objects in C- and S-curves, these sculptors acquired the capacity to use similar curves to represent similar things. To see the representational qualities of these curves, ordinary naturalistic vision has to be suppressed and an “image channel” has to be activated.

Once marks were perceived as things… the full analogical, expressive power of the line could be quickly and logically derived and even detached from mere experiences of perceptual ambiguity…. As soon as *one* complex of lines could be interpreted representationally, potentially all lines could…. The emergence of images was, then, a “threshold discovery” (Davis 1986: 201).

Davis’s claim is that images have a representational component; hence, the discovery of representational lines marks the origin of images. In my terminology, it marks a transition from an etching that relies solely on the universal human capacity to see real-world objects in scratchings, shadows, clouds, and the like to one that utilizes a systematic artifice to perform the representational function. It is thus a move to culturally based devices and mark a beginning of one kind of art.

In the view that I support, all art historically traces back to purely instinctive behaviors. Culture modifies such behavior by adding new pleasure points. Each cultural accretion is one of many that are possible. These accretions pile up by a historically path-dependent process. The art forms we encounter today are points in a lineage that traces back to a founding cultural event.

We are trying in this book to describe and account for the plurality of artistic cultures, each of which leads to aesthetic enjoyment and appreciation, which is recognizable across cultures. The aesthetic life is the same everywhere—close enough to make no difference—but its content is not. This variety under a unified rubric is a challenge to traditional philosophical aesthetics, which takes aesthetic appraisal to be grounded in the descriptive properties of art objects with no clear place for culture or personal experience to play a role. The other authors of the book have described the malleability of different components of the aesthetic life. My aim has been to describe the psychological and cultural determinants of taste.

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1. Mitter refers to a “Neoplatonic tradition of an essentially mystical approach to the image” (1977: 30). This hermeneutic tradition opened the way to a more flattering construal: “The very monstrosities of these images prevented them from being accepted as real and stimulated the mind to seek a higher spiritual significance.” Thus, he quotes Pietro della Valle’s description of sculpture in a temple in Cambay: “I doubt not that under the veil of these Fables, their ancient Sages… have hid from the vulgar many secrets, either of Natural or Moral philosophy.” Of course, the esoteric reading of Indian art was no closer to the mark. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. A philosophically insightful account of Ānandavardhana’s theory can be found in Mysore Hiriyanna (2011[1954]). Writing about poetry in particular, Hiriyanna says: “the mind of the responsive reader first becomes attuned to the emotional situation portrayed… through one or more of the knowing touches which every good poem is sure to contain; is then absorbed in its portrayal… and this absorption… results in the aesthetic rapture of *Rasa*.” Hiriyanna emphasizes a kind of abstractness that Ānandavardhana found in emotional reactions to poetry—this is what I try to capture in my term “objectless.” In some ways, it prefigures Kendall Walton’s idea that emotional reactions to art are “make-believe.” The emotional response to art is not a reaction to a real situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. My recounting of the early European reception of Indian music follows Katherine Brown (2000). Many thanks to Joe Cadagin for the reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Not untypical was a Captain Campbell, writing around 1780, who describes Indian music as “inelegant, harsh, and dissonant” (quoted in Hardgrave and Slawek 1989: 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Culture has been understood as an all-encompassing way of life associated with ethnic origin. In this book, Dom Lopes and I use it more narrowly to describe sets of socially formed practices that characterize a single activity, such as a game or artistic pursuit. There is a difference in our usages, however. He says that a culture is “a regularity in the behavior of a group that is due to group members sharing a common formative background.” I want to focus on the synchronic and diachronic *variations* (as opposed to his regularities) of behavior that can exist among individuals who share a common formative background. I differentiate cultures in a way close to Alan Patten, who writes that the content of culture “consists in various beliefs, meanings, and practices, but what makes these the beliefs, meanings, and practices of a shared culture is that the people who hold them share a common social lineage” (2014: 51). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Thanks to Lopes for emphasizing Baxandall in discussion. Lopes, in Chapter 2, characterizes the Baxandallian background as “norms.” He is on the same page as I am, though I would quibble with the term—norms are conformity-expectant; culture is non-conformity permissive. So: visual perspective is part of the European painting culture of the fifteenth century. For this reason, knowledgeable fifteenth-century Europeans would interpret a painting that violates the rules of perspective as provocative. But they would not automatically think that the painter had fallen short. They might enjoy the provocation because it is a provocation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. See Matthen 2021 for a discussion of cultural coordination in cuisine. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Sections 6 and 7 derive from earlier work, particularly Matthen 2017 and 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. *Rasa* theory generally uses “*priti*,” often translated as pleasure, as just such a stand in. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Close reading is, of course, a distillation of such methods for literature. Though my descriptions are inspired by close reading, I can’t repeat often enough that I abjure any high-brow account of artistic enjoyment. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Reber, Schwartz, and Winkielman 2004 dwell on one half of the loop that I am describing. They propose that *fluency* in executing (what I call) an assembled routine is a source of pleasure. But they do not mention the reciprocal influence—pleasure contributes to and maintains fluency; displeasure disrupts it. So, the agential role of pleasure does not figure in their theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. There is another view of pleasure that has been in the literature ever since Plato—that it is a quasi-perceptual apprehension of the good. Aesthetic pleasure is, on this view, purported apprehension of beauty, or of aesthetic merit. Gorodeisky 2019 and De Clercq 2019 adopt approaches like this. Such views are (a) committed to a consequentialist view of pleasure, since perception of *F* is a causal consequence of *F*, and (b)assume that beauty is a transcendent quality. They are orthogonal to my employment of pleasure because of (a). They are ill-equipped to deal with cultural variation because of (b). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. This proposal has much in common with the attention theory of aesthetic enjoyment developed in Nanay 2015, Nanay 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Of course, you might read it in the way that you read a historical essay and get a lot of facilitating pleasure by doing so. But this would take your reading into a different, though related, genre, and it is merely in virtue of the overlap that Seth’s novel works in that form. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. For the distinction between primary and secondary attractors, see Matthen 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. It can happen, and perhaps is happening, that there is a global culture. This is accidental. A global culture operates no differently because it is global. The preferences it generates are not Humean. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Samantha Matherne (Chapter 3) and I agree that there can be cross-cultural appreciation of art. But I think that there are barriers, limits, and risks. Engagement with works from unfamiliar genres entails learning the secondary attractors, however inexpertly. But incomplete knowledge of the secondary attractors puts one at risk of committing the aesthetic injustices discussed by Nanay in Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. For recent discussion, see Mehr et al. 2021 and Savage et al. 2021 and commentaries. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)