

## **Wine as an Aesthetic Object<sup>1</sup>**

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Art is one thing, the aesthetic another. Things can be appreciated aesthetically – for instance, in terms of the traditional category of the beautiful – without being works of art. A landscape can be appreciated as beautiful; so can a man or a woman. Appreciation of such natural objects in terms of their beauty certainly counts as aesthetic appreciation, if anything does.<sup>2</sup> This is not simply because landscapes and people are not artefacts; for there are also artefacts which are assessable aesthetically without being works of art (e.g. an elegant car or a mathematical proof).

The category of the aesthetic, then, is a broader one than the category of art. Let's use the term 'aesthetic object' for something that is capable of aesthetic appreciation, and 'art object' for something which is capable of appreciation as a work of art. Thus: some aesthetic objects are artefacts, and some of those artefacts are art objects.

What makes any artefact an art object – a work of art – is, of course, a fraught and contested question. One of the difficulties is that in some of its uses the concept *art* still has an evaluative, commendatory and honorific connotation. This is not to say that *art* is a purely evaluative concept; 'bad art' is not a contradiction in terms. But calling something *art* must have some sort of normative import if we are to

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<sup>2</sup> See Malcolm Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

understand the reaction many people have to certain kinds of avant-garde art. The reaction I have in mind is that of those who say that the work of John Cage, say, is ‘just not music’ or that Tracey Emin’s random objects are ‘just not art’. The evaluation here implies that some mistake has been made by those who present their work as art: they are claiming to achieve a certain standard, but fail to do so.

Wine certainly admits of aesthetic evaluation. Wines are praised as elegant, refined, balanced; they are criticised for being crude, brash or unbalanced. These are plainly aesthetic descriptions: expressions of the aesthetic value of the sensory experiences of those drinking the wine. Anyone who has drunk good and bad wine and has tried to assess their experience knows what such descriptions mean. Those who say they don’t – or say that these descriptions can only express snobbish prejudices, rather than genuinely aesthetic attitudes – are either incapable of tasting wine or are not telling the truth.

Wine is a natural product, of course; but wine does not occur naturally, even if fermentation does. Winemaking is the result of centuries of inherited wisdom about grapes, places and seasons, of detailed scientific knowledge, and of trial and error on a huge scale. The winemaker makes a contribution to the character of a wine at almost every stage, fully deserving the evocative French title *éleveur*. Wine is not discovered but made: it is an artefact that can be appraised aesthetically.

But wines are not works of art, and winemakers are not artists. And this is not because they are aspiring or confused artists who fail to meet the standard for art. Compare the rejection of wine as an art object with the typical rejection of avant-garde art just mentioned. When someone says that Carl Andre’s famous pile of firebricks, *Equivalent 8*, is not a work of art, they normally mean that Andre is trying to do something – create a work of art – and failing miserably. Certainly, they will

agree, Andre is an artist; he is just mistaken in thinking he has created art. The artist is aiming to do the usual sort of thing which artists do, including get their works into museums etc. – but he simply fails. ‘It’s just not art: no matter what the critics say’. (I’m not endorsing this view, only describing it.)

It seems to me that this is not what people are saying when they deny that wine is a work of art. For a wine could succeed in all the ways the wine-maker intended, but still not count as a work of art. This is because the wine-maker cannot even be *trying* to create a work of art. The winemaker is doing something else: practising a craft, engaging in high-end agriculture, making a beautiful drink, a fine luxury consumable item etc. – but not making a work of art. Winemakers have not tried and failed to do something because of some confusion about the nature of their activity – as the critic of the avant-garde would say about Carl Andre – rather, they have not even *tried* to do that kind of thing.

Here I shall explore some of the reasons for and against taking wine to be an art object. Although some of the arguments against taking wine to be an art object are not very persuasive, there do not seem to be any positive reasons for it, either. Our difficulty in answering this question is largely due to the fact that we lack a satisfactory understanding of what it is to be an art object. Despite this, it is clear that wine can appeal to us aesthetically in many of the ways that some art objects do – so long as we have the right conception of aesthetic appeal and aesthetic value. For we should not be misled by a narrowly intellectual conception of the aesthetic. Although the predominant meaning of the word ‘aesthetic’ these days is *pertaining to beauty*, the word derives from the Greek word for sense perception, *aesthesis*. It should be a commonplace that a proper understanding of the aesthetic and aesthetic value must give a proper place to the contributions of sense perception. Once we realize this, we

see how wine is indeed a central example of an aesthetic object, whether or not it is an art object.

I am starting with the assumption that wine is not generally regarded as an art object as opposed to an aesthetic object. I want to look first at why this might be so; I will then venture more widely, and tentatively, into the field of aesthetics.

According to the so-called ‘institutional’ theory of art, roughly speaking, anything which is in an art museum (gallery, concert hall etc.) is a work of art, and anything that is a work of art is in an art museum. On a normal understanding of what a museum is, this would immediately disqualify wine, since wine rarely appears *as such* in art museums – anyone offering a vertical tasting of Chateau Lafite to London’s National Gallery *as an exhibition* would be making a joke or a big mistake.

But the institutional theory of art is very implausible, so perhaps it should not dominate our theorising about art. One difficulty with the theory is that it can push the definition of art back onto a further question of what makes something an art museum or institution. The Penfolds winery outside Adelaide consists of displays of old vintages of its classic Grange wines, and tasting rooms where you can sample Penfolds’ wines. It is a kind of museum; but what in the institutional theory disqualifies it from being an art museum? No doubt the defenders of the theory have a response; but the general direction does not seem like the right one to take.

A more interesting objection to wine as an art object is based on the status of wine as an object. A wine cannot be properly appreciated aesthetically unless it is drunk, just as a painting is not properly appreciated unless it is seen. Those speculators who buy and sell wine simply to make money are not appreciating wine aesthetically. So we might think that the aesthetic value of a wine requires an

experience which itself has an aesthetic value. The value of the wine is partly determined by the value of the experience to which it gives rise. This is not to say that it is *only* the experiences themselves that are of any value. The wine itself has aesthetic value; but what it is for a wine to have aesthetic value cannot be understood without making reference to the experience of tasting it. (Consider the absurdity of someone saying: ‘I admit that this wine is beautiful/elegant/refined etc.; but I don’t see any need for anyone to drink it.’) We will return to this point below. For the moment it should be clear that as with painting, there is a distinction between appreciating a wine aesthetically and appreciating it in other ways.

But wine is essentially ephemeral; and here the comparison with painting starts to break down. One notable feature of many works of art is that we can return to them repeatedly and learn more about them. Indeed it is often said to be the mark of a great work of art that it repays frequent visits. There is a sense, however, in which a wine cannot be returned to time after time. It is true that in tasting Chateau Lafite from a certain vintage one is undeniably tasting a representative of a kind of wine – and if the winemaker has done his job well then other bottles will taste similar – and expert tasters can confidently talk about how *Lafite 1996* has changed over the years. But, strictly speaking, we are not tasting the same thing – at least in the sense in which the viewer returns to look at the same painting. At the very best, we are appreciating a specimen or a part of a larger sample of wine. Perhaps then we should call the larger sample – maybe the whole vintage of the *grand vin* from a particular chateau – the work of art?

There is something to this, for critics tend to say that the 2000 Margaux was a masterpiece, not some particular bottle of the 2000 wine. But given the significance bottling has on the development of a wine, this way of talking neglects an important

aspect of what contributes to quality. There is change across time, certainly, in both the experience of the painting and of the wine. But with wine, what changes are the different aspects of the work itself; in the case of the painting, what changes is your understanding of it. The painting remains the same, you return to it and deepen your understanding of it. Wine changes from bottle to bottle, as each develops differently over time.

In addition, if the whole vintage *were* the work of art then the analogy with painting would break down in another fundamental way. For viewers of the painting can see the whole work at one go; they can return to appreciate the *very same thing* which they saw before. And this is true even if the painting itself changes over time, for instance by its colours fading. There is no comparable experience with wine: one cannot return to the whole vintage and experience the *very same thing* time and again. One can only experience a part of it, and each part may have very different features.

Perhaps we have chosen the wrong analogy? If we take the case of music, by contrast, there is a closer analogy available. A great piece of music is something to which one can return again and again. But to what is one returning? In the days before recorded music, many listeners only had performances and their memories of them to go on. They returned to the same piece again and again, but performances differed. But this performative feature did not undermine the status of these works as art. This is analogous to individual occasions of drinking bottles of the same vintage.

However, the relationship between the individual bottles and the vintage is not the same as the relationship between the work and the performance. Using philosophical terminology, we can say that the work itself is the *type* of which the individual performances are *tokens*. The token performances are not *parts* of the type, in the way that the individual bottles of 2000 Margaux are parts of the 'work' which

is 2000 Margaux itself. 2000 Margaux is scattered throughout the world; the *Goldberg Variations* itself, by contrast, is nowhere in particular. A piece of music is not located where the original autograph score is – if you burn the latter you have not destroyed the piece.

This shows that the vintage is not a type of which individual bottles are tokens. For the vintage is an evolving creation which will one day go out of existence when the last remaining bottle is drunk. Types do not go out of existence in this way: even if no-one were to perform the *Goldberg Variations* ever again, this would not mean that it had gone out of existence. Moreover, a type does not change in the same way as the vintage does over time. Different performances of the *Goldberg Variations* add to our understanding of the work; but as with paintings, what has changed here is our understanding, not the work itself. By contrast, wines themselves change over time in aesthetically relevant ways, not just our understanding of them.

So wine is in some ways analogous to music, and in some ways not. But no analogy is perfect; the relevant feature of the original analogy was that the ephemeral nature of musical performances does not threaten their status as works of art. Analogously, the fact that wines are ephemeral does not show that they are not works of art.

We have examined some arguments for denying that a wine might be a work of art and found them unconvincing. Yet still I do not believe that wines are works of art, and I'm sure you don't either. What is the significance of this?

You might think that it is of little importance. What does it matter, after all, whether wine is an art object? Wine is not traditionally valued as art, but so what? It is still valued. Why should we not introduce a broader category, *art\**, which includes

everything we now think of as art and also wine, furniture, certain foods etc.? Art\* could mean: *aesthetically assessable human artefacts*. Art\* could then replace *art* in our discussions and the definition of ‘art’ be consigned to the dustbin of pseudo-questions.

This seems to me a superficial manoeuvre. The concept of art is too important in our culture for the question ‘what is art?’ to be dismissed as a pseudo-question. And even if there is no agreed answer to the question, the attempts to answer it have brought insights of their own. But from the perspective of what is most valuable to us as consumers of aesthetic objects, the similarities between aesthetically assessable human artefacts – works of *art\** -- matter more than the differences between them and works of art. From other points of view, the distinction between *art* and *art\** might be very important, but one thing wine teaches us is that where the value of our artefacts is concerned, it is often the aesthetic or sensory which counts for more than the artistic as such. I will introduce this idea by considering one more reason for scepticism about wine as an art object.

An obvious reason that someone might not want to classify wine as art is because art must have a *message*. This is a widespread view, often associated with political or religious conceptions of art; but its influence goes further than (say) didactic Marxist or Christian ideas of art. If works of art have to have a message, then wine would obviously not be a work of art, since wine has no message. A wine may ‘speak’ of its terroir, to be sure, but not in any literal sense. Unlike art which contains a message, wine conveys nothing, it has no intellectual or cognitive content.

But to my mind, it is a mistake to think that art must contain a message. Some art does, and when it does, its value might wholly or partly derive from the (moral, political or other) value of the message it conveys. And understanding the message of



a work of art can be essential to understanding the work: the message of *Guernica* – the vivid evocation of the horror and senselessness of human slaughter, say – is not something which merely arises accidentally in the minds of people as an effect of seeing the painting. It is central to understanding what the painting is. So we should not deny that the messages conveyed by works of art can be an important source of their value.<sup>3</sup> The question here is whether this is the *only* source.

The answer is obviously no. For many works of art simply *contain no message*. The plainest, most uncontroversial examples here are provided by purely instrumental (and so-called ‘non-programme’) music – what we might call ‘abstract music’. Music like this is often said to convey or express emotion; how it does this is a difficult philosophical question, but *that* music does this is undeniable. However, in no plausible sense is the emotion expressed or conveyed in a *message*. A message says something, it has some propositional or descriptive content. The emotional ‘content’ (if this is the right word) expressed by a piece of abstract music does not say anything in itself.<sup>4</sup> In concentrating on those art objects which do have messages, we have restricted ourselves to an intellectualized conception of art. Yet as the case of music shows, it is not essential to the value of art that it have a message. So it can be an objection to wine’s being a work of art that wine lacks a message.

Similar considerations apply to those views which claim that art makes you a better person, and this is what its value consists in. In a recent book, *What Good are*

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<sup>3</sup> In Malcolm Budd’s *Values of Art* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2005), he argues that the value of a work of art is greater if the message it conveys is actually true. Nonetheless, this is consistent with saying that the value of the message does not exhaust the value of the work.

<sup>4</sup> By using the phrase ‘in itself’ I mean to ignore here the very important phenomenon of works coming to be associated with a certain message. Association with a message is not the same as having a message.

*the Arts?*, the literary critic John Carey argues against these views.<sup>5</sup> Carey argues that art cannot make you a morally better person because many indisputably wicked people (for example, Hitler) have been enthusiastic art lovers. In itself, this is about as good an argument as contending that eating pasta cannot make you fat because many undeniably slim people (for example, athletes) eat it. Surely no one who thinks that art makes you a better person would agree that reading George Eliot or listening to Mozart *all on its own* can do the trick, or that other deficiencies of character cannot override the otherwise beneficial effects of art.

Nonetheless, even if his argument fails, Carey is surely right in his conclusion: there is no reason why art should even contribute towards making you a morally better person. The puzzling question is why anyone would think that it should in the first place. If we move to the case of music, the absurdity of the idea is even more apparent. It is entirely incredible that listening to Haydn's string quartets can make you a better person. There is no intelligible or causal connection between these two things. There is a parallel here with wine. Some have argued that wine has a civilising influence in a way that other alcoholic drinks do not.<sup>6</sup> But the idea is as implausible as the idea that art is improving. It may be true (with one or two exceptions) that wherever there is civilised life, people drink wine. But the obvious explanation for this is that wine has developed along with civilisation, and so the virtues of civilisation and wine are each effects of this development. They are, as philosophers say, joint effects of a common cause. But there is no causal connection between these two effects.

Where do these implausible ideas come from? I suggest that they come from the intellectualized conception of the value of art and the aesthetic. Those who believe

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<sup>5</sup> John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* London, Faber and Faber, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> For more in this idea see the chapter by Scruton in this volume.

that art must have a message rarely apply their views to abstract music – and those who do, for example, in Stalin’s USSR, make the absurdity of their view all the more obvious.<sup>7</sup> The ‘message’ view of art could only be plausible when applied to literature or to some visual art; when we venture beyond these examples we can see how feeble it is.

However, the message view also rests on a deeper error: that the value of art must always reside in being a means to some other further end. It is often claimed that if art has a rationale or a justification, it must be in terms of something outside the work itself. This assumption lies behind the title of Carey’s book, *What Good are the Arts?* – in other words, ‘what outside art and the experience of art, is art *good for?*’ The assumption is that unless there were something outside art which art is good for, then art would not be good for anything, and therefore of no value. But this assumption seems to me to be false.

Among all the things that have value, we can distinguish between those things that have value in themselves (‘intrinsic value’) and those that are valuable only as means to other ends (‘instrumental value’). Friendship has intrinsic value; no one thinks (or should think) that real friendship is only a means to an end. Money, arguably, is a means to further ends; it would be bizarre to contend that it is intrinsically valuable, independently of what we can do with it. It is a matter of dispute which things are valuable in themselves and which things are only of instrumental value. Is good health something valuable in itself? Or is it only valuable as a means to other intrinsic goods? Opinions differ. But there should be no dispute

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<sup>7</sup> For a fascinating account of Stalin’s criticism of Shostakovich, see Leonid Maximenkov, ‘Stalin and Shostakovich: Letters to a “Friend”’ in Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich and his World* Princeton University Press 2004, pp. 43-59.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this idea see the chapter by Smith in this volume.

about whether there really is such a thing as intrinsic value. If nothing were of intrinsic value, then nothing would be worth doing for its own sake. Since few of us believe that nothing is worth doing for its own sake, then clearly something must have intrinsic value.

The distinction can be applied to wine. For some people, wine has merely instrumental value: as an investment or as a way of enhancing their social status or perceived sophistication. Even the value of the *experience* of drinking wine can be seen as instrumental: the experience is a way of drowning sorrows, or a tool for oiling the social wheels. I am not denying that wine and the experience of drinking it can have these values; but does wine have intrinsic value too? And if so, in what does its intrinsic value consist? To answer these questions, we must first return to art.

Many have said that art only has an instrumental value. Marxists took this approach to art, believing that art should serve the purposes of revolutionary socialism. In Marxist states, art which did not do this was condemned as ‘bourgeois’ or ‘decadent’. Moving closer to home, those in government who have defended ‘the arts’ purely on the grounds that they stimulate the economy and produce jobs are thinking along broadly similar lines. And the claims we have just considered – that art must have a message, or that it makes you a better person – are also attempts to explain the value of art instrumentally.

Yet it seems to me that we do not have to think in this way about the role of art in our lives. I am not denying that people – like Marxists, or those committed to some other ideology – think of art as being fundamentally justified by its role in promoting some other value. But surely those of us who are not committed to any such ideology are not obliged to think of the value of art in this way? Someone who

spends their resources (time, money, energy) on attending concerts or reading fiction or looking at paintings need not *have* to think of the value of what they are doing in terms of some externally given goal. The idea that art might be something which has intrinsic value is one which we should have no difficulty accepting – once we have accepted the idea of intrinsic value, of course.

It is one thing to say that something has intrinsic value, however, and another to say what that value consists in. Intrinsic value is not supposed to be something ineffable or indescribable. If someone thinks that friendship is intrinsically valuable, then they are not prohibited from describing what friendship is in a way which reveals its value. If good health is something of intrinsic value, then we should be able to say what good health consists in. Similarly, if works of art, like pieces of abstract music, have such value, then we should be able to say something about what their value consists in.

It is clear that the value of abstract must in some way be related to the sensory experience of listening to it. The intrinsic value of music must reside partly in its aesthetic (in the etymologically original, but now secondary, meaning of sensory or sensual) effects. But these effects – experiences of music – can themselves be something intrinsically valuable. Music is intrinsically valuable precisely because of the intrinsic value of the experiences to which it gives rise. But this is not to say that it is *only* the experience that has value, and the music itself has only instrumental value, as a means to the end of producing the experience. This is a mistake, because the experience can only be characterized as an experience of *this* music: its value cannot be understood except as deriving from this music. The experience with its intrinsic value cannot be obtained in any other way. And the music can have this value even if

it does not give rise to experiences of such value – even if it is not heard, or the correct conditions for producing the right experiences do not obtain.

It is not true of all art that its value resides in the value of the sensory experience of the art. It is not true of all literature, nor of ‘conceptual art’ where the sensory component plays little role. In the case of some conceptual art, its value resides entirely in the message it conveys; one doesn’t necessarily have to see it in order to get the message, and the work does not demand seeing more than once. Duchamp’s *Fontaine* seems to me to be a good example of this. I’ve never seen it; yet I feel I have fully absorbed its message, and its value derives entirely from its message. What is more, even if I had seen it, I don’t think my understanding of the work would be enhanced by seeing it many times.

But much art is not like this. Most art, even art that has a message, will have aesthetic qualities too, in the sense of ‘qualities pertaining to sensuous perception’ as well as in the sense of ‘qualities pertaining to beauty’. Excessive concentration on the extra-artistic purposes of art can obscure this crucial element in art’s value. In particular, I have claimed, an excessive concentration on the cognitive content – e.g. the ‘message’ – of a work of art can obscure whole areas of art which are valuable to us. This is not supposed to be a controversial or original idea; my purpose in saying it here is to remind you of its importance.

The intrinsic value of music derives from the intrinsic value of the experiences of listening to music. This, I suggest, should be our model for understanding the intrinsic value of wine. A wine cannot be appreciated for its intrinsic value unless it is drunk; the value of the wine is intimately related to the kinds of experience to which it gives rise. Again, this is not to say that it is *only* the experience which has intrinsic value.

The value is in the wine, just as the taste is in the wine, there to be apprehended by many perceivers.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless the only way to apprehend the aesthetic value of a wine is to taste it; just as the only way to apprehend the aesthetic value of a piece of music is to listen to it.

What kinds of sensory experiences have such value? Clearly, value is not an on-or-off phenomenon: some things can be more or less valuable than other things, and the same is true of experiences. In talking about the value of wine here, some of our points apply to the finest wines only. But lesser wines can still have intrinsic value. Our interest here is in the features of experiences which explain why a wine, any wine, has the intrinsic value it does.

Let us return to our earlier point about the ephemerality of wine and the experience of it. Although experiences of tasting wine are essentially ephemeral, they do nonetheless give us a reason to return to the object of the experience. As we saw above, this is not exactly like returning to a painting, it is more like hearing another performance of the same piece of music. We return to the wines we like to grasp more of the kinds of experience they give us, just as we return to music that we like to grasp more of the experience of hearing it. One reason for this is that the experience is often an experience of *complexity*. In the best wines, we experience various elements balancing in harmony. We find them difficult to classify, fascinating, elusive. We want to pin them down, as we might want to isolate the tensions and resolutions points in a piece of music. With wine, unlike with music, the complexity can be the product of more than one sense: the look of the wine, its taste and smell, the texture in your mouth all contribute to this experience of complexity. And although ephemeral, the sense of complexity can linger, as the finish of a wine can stay in your senses, and its memory can provoke you to return to it again.

Returning to a wine in this sense is not just a matter of merely wanting the same physical stimulation again, as one might want another salted peanut. One often returns to a wine to pursue its qualities: to find out more about its tastes and to classify them properly. Returning to a wine is, in a broad sense, a search for understanding: understanding the properties of the wine that make it produce experiences like this. But it isn't like a scientific understanding, since a scientific understanding of the mechanisms of taste and the chemistry of wine could in principle be had by someone who had never tasted wine. The understanding we seek having had the experience is an understanding of *that* subjective experience, from the inside, to so speak. The search for understanding which is consequent upon an experience of a great wine is part of what explains the enormous amount which is written about wine. It is also what distinguishes wine from almost all the other things we eat and drink. The starting point for a proper aesthetics of wine should be a recognition of this particular relationship between the intrinsic value of wine, the intrinsic value of the experience of wine and the need for understanding which arises out of that experience.

I started with the question of whether a wine could be a work of art. I claimed that where most art is concerned, the value of a work of art cannot be exhausted by the value of its message, and also that there is art which has no message at all. Music is an art whose appreciation requires appreciating the sensory experiences to which it gives rise. If winemaking were an art, then this is the kind of art it would be: the creation of art objects whose value had to be understood in terms of the value of the experiences to which they give rise.

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Yet, lacking a satisfactory answer to the question “what is art?”, I am reluctant to insist that wine is a work of art. Despite the fact that the arguments against the idea that wine is an art object are not very good ones; and notwithstanding the fact that we seem to have a model of aesthetic value of an artefact where its value derives from that of the sensory experience of the artefact (i.e. music); despite all this, it seems like a pointlessly provocative linguistic stipulation to insist that wine is a work of art.

However, what our reflections on art objects and aesthetic objects have shown is that it is not necessary to insist that wine is a work of art in order to claim many of the privileges of works of art. For music provides us with a model of the essentially sensory elements in the appreciation of the aesthetic value of an artefact; but there is no reason why this essentially sensory element should only be common to art objects, as opposed to aesthetic objects more generally. With aesthetic appreciation comes the application of standards, evaluation, and judgements of quality – all things which we can apply to wine as well as music. Wine is an aesthetic object rather than an art object. But the claim of this essay has been that much of what makes certain art objects valuable is something which can be shared with many aesthetic objects. Art objects may matter to us partly because of their aesthetic qualities; but mere aesthetic objects can matter to us for exactly the same kinds of reasons, and wine might be like this. In this sense, perhaps, the aesthetic is a more fundamental category than the category of art.

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