

“Sandwich Aesthetics”

Peter L. Doebler

Kettering Postdoctoral Curatorial Assistant in Asian Art

The Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, Ohio

pdoebler@daytonart.org

When you eat a sandwich, what kind of condiments do you put on it? Have you ever had to eat a sandwich without condiments? (Somewhere repressed in my mind is a memory of a bare, Wonder Bread and bologna sandwich in a brown bag lunch.) Condiments add that extra something that draws a sandwich together and gives it a particular savor. In the deli of academia, I see aesthetics as the condiments. Stated differently, I see the future of the academic study of aesthetics as being its ability to cut across different fields of inquiry and enhance whatever it is combined with.

In recent years, many fields have experienced a kind of aesthetic turn. I will mention two I am familiar with from my graduate work in religious studies and my current work in an art museum. So, these comments come from the outside perspective of someone who does not identify as a philosopher professionally.

First, religious studies has seen a blossoming of interest in exploring different spiritual traditions through the broad rubric of aesthetics. This has arisen from a methodological shift: a tradition must be studied—and experienced—beyond dogmatic propositions, considering artifacts of material culture, narratives, music, etc. The sense is that a spiritual tradition’s artistic practices—most broadly conceived—as well as its understanding of topics such as beauty, the body, and sensual experience are inseparable from ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical considerations. If one attends the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion there are always a number of sessions oriented around such studies, and there are a number of centers and institutes dedicated to the intersection of art and religion, including the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale, the Center for Arts and the Sacred at King’s College, London, and the Institute of Theology, Imagination, and the Arts at the University of St. Andrews. For those interested in a sampling of some of the sorts of perspectives that are out there, the recent *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (2014) is a useful guide, and the emerging online *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* will have an entire section dedicated to the subfield.

Second, within museum studies, and museum education in particular, there is also an aesthetic turn. May I ask, when was the last time you visited a museum? Did you take a tour with a docent? How was it? A lot of information but a little dry? Responding to the long-standing trend of docents as essentially gumball-dispensers of information, some museum educators have advanced what amounts to an aesthetic approach to museum tours. I have in mind here the work of Rika Burnham of The Frick Collection and Elliott Kai-Kee of the J. Paul Getty Museum and their book *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. They advocate a dialogical approach, that the goal of the museum educator should be to create *an* experience for the visitor, in the sense of John Dewey’s idea of an experience. A museum tour becomes a one-of-a-kind experience, unique to that time, place, and the interaction of just those people who

happen to be on the tour and who, in conversation, will discover a work of art together. This places a greater demand on the docents, for rather than presenting a pre-packaged tour it requires sensitivity and creativity in responding to the diversity of visitors. This also changes the way art objects are approached, not as closed containers of meaning from the past, but as generative sparks relevant for today. For a museum, then, arranging everything chronologically and providing the visitor with a lot of facts is not enough; aesthetic considerations are needed and they are what makes a visit to a museum memorable and something to savor—the condiments, if you will.

I use these as two examples I am familiar with where aesthetics is turned to because it adds something that enriches the primary field under consideration, adding a qualitative dimension. I am sure others here know of fields they are familiar with where an aesthetic lens is gaining importance.

This ability of aesthetics to speak across borders provides a multitude of prospects for future study in aesthetics, and based on its history and infrastructure the ASA is in a strong position to be the go-to place to inform and network those whose teaching and research veers into aesthetics. However, to achieve this I think it requires we broaden our understanding of aesthetics, that we see it as more than just a subfield of philosophy. This involves cultivating a more inclusive perspective that will, on the one hand, be sensitive to helping those from other fields easily approach aesthetics and learn how to integrate different perspectives from it into their work, and, on the other hand, be willing to acknowledge that these other fields—in the examples I mentioned religious studies and museum studies—can offer fresh insights for aesthetics, opening up new frontiers for exploration.

These are rather broad brushstrokes, and speaking about transdisciplinary work is easy to say but difficult to do. The basic challenge is getting people together so ideas can be shared, leading to the benefits of cross-fertilization. Of course, a fundamental obstacle to drawing in those from other fields who have an interest in aesthetics is a limitation of time and money. Adding another membership and annual conference may be difficult for somebody who already has commitments to the professional organization of her or his “main” field. For religion scholars, the annual AAR meeting is always in November, making it difficult to attend both that and the annual ASA meeting.

This is where technology could be helpful. For example, building on the strengths of the current website, what if the ASA worked with members to post a series of videos—a kind of open classroom—on the big ideas in aesthetics and teasing out their relevance for a diversity of other fields? These would be available to both academic and non-academic audiences, and would enhance the ASA’s website as the first place to go with an aesthetic question. In a similar vein, ASA members could collaborate to develop web resources on the intersection of aesthetics with other fields, an accessible point of entry for a scholar who wants to include an aesthetic element in her or his research or teaching.

Yet, while such projects may draw more viewers to the ASA website, what about gaining new members and attendees to the meetings? As far as membership goes, what about following the idea of “bundling” in communication services? That is, work with other professional

organizations—American Philosophical Association, Modern Language Association, College Art Association, American Academy of Religion, etc.—to offer a discounted ASA membership to those who are already members of another group. Also, people need to feel they are getting some added value from a membership, and here I think the recent addition of access to the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* for ASA members is brilliant. In this way, I think of my membership like a Netflix’s subscription: I pay about eight dollars a month for access to a great resource, plus the other benefits. As for attracting more attendees to the annual meeting, what about making it bi-annual, but adding an extra day or two? With the cost of travel these days, as well as time limitations, I would find it easier to justify making a trip every two years, and if it was in the summer that would make it even easier to carve out time for it. Finally, in an effort to save time and money for meeting organizers, which could lead to reduced costs for attendees, what if the annual meeting was hosted in the same place every time so new logistical planning is not needed—like the Olympics—when moving to a new location.

While I am not a philosopher by training, I have been attracted to aesthetics as a field that—condiment-like—provides depth, coherence, and excitement for my work, and I know there are many people like me who want to know more about aesthetics and, in turn, offer a unique perspective, or flavor, from their own field of expertise. Orchestrating such diverse flavors is the opportunity for the ASA in its next 75 years. Let’s look forward to many delicious discoveries.