

# Artists' Aesthetic Criteria : An Anthropological View

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## Introduction

Although they share a common interest in the arts, anthropologists and aestheticians rarely engage in dialogue. Over twenty years ago, Herskovits pointed out that philosophical studies of aesthetics "have lacked a cross-cultural dimension;" today, as then, aestheticians

need to widen the base of aesthetic theory, to break through its culture-bound limits. If the aesthetic response is a universal in human experience, it must be studied as such, everywhere it is found.<sup>1</sup>

Anthropologists, for their part, have been reluctant to avail themselves of the insights of Western aesthetic theory, and their reluctance has on more than one occasion led them into conceptual "blind allies" in their studies of non-Western arts.<sup>2</sup> The lack of dialogue is nowhere more apparent than in discussions of aesthetic "universals." For at least three decades, anthropologists and aestheticians have been moving in very different directions on this question, and the progress of each has been slowed by the absence of exchange between disciplines.

Anthropologists have long assumed that certain properties of objects are capable of producing a universal aesthetic response. Their assumption rests upon material culled from a number of different theorists : Berenson's notion of "ideated bodily functions," the Gestaltists' positing of isomorphisms between certain forms and the electrochemical patterning of perception, Jung's work on universal symbols, Ozenfant's and Read's arguments for the universal salience of certain natural forms,

and the emphasis placed by pre-Romantic aestheticians on such formal qualities as "unity, proportion, order."<sup>3</sup> A number of studies have empirically tested that assumption. Studies eliciting the aesthetic preferences of laypeople have produced little concordance,<sup>4</sup> but those eliciting the aesthetic criteria of artists and other art "experts" indicate considerable cross-cultural agreement in the kinds of objects judged to be aesthetically pleasing.<sup>5</sup> Bolstered by such findings, anthropologists have concluded that "there are universal standards of aesthetic quality,"<sup>6</sup> that

behind such diverse objects as a Poro mask, the Venus de Milo, and a Peruvian jar, there are common factors of form, dynamic interrelation of parts, harmony of color, and so forth, which may appear in different combinations but are responsible for esthetic effect.<sup>7</sup>

Even in noncomparative studies designed to elicit emic aesthetic criteria, therefore, they have tended to concentrate on the *formal* qualities of art objects themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Aestheticians, on the other hand, have shifted their focus from the formal properties of the object to the *relation* between object and human being (the creator, the viewer, the social network in which the object is circulated, etc.). This shift in interest can be discerned as early as the Romantic period, with its growing fascination with the "man behind the work;" it came to fruition in the 1950's, Osborne's *Theory of Beauty*<sup>9</sup> being perhaps the last major work to attempt to define the "necessary and sufficient" conditions for work of art. Since then, one camp has seen the locus of the aesthetic experience in the attitude of the person who approaches it; this attitude is typically formulated as either one of "psychical distance"<sup>10</sup> or of "pleasure"<sup>11</sup>. The other camp denies that there is a special attitude involved in viewing art, and argue instead that the art object is defined "institutionally," according to conventions accepted in the art world at a given point in time.<sup>12</sup> Despite their obvious differences, these schools of thought have in common the conviction that "the aesthetic" is *relational* in nature, rather than residing in the formal properties of objects themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Rapidly accruing studies of non-Western arts and aesthetics suggest that Western aestheticians may have been premature in their dismissal of universally salient formal properties.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, anthropologists, being largely unaware of recent trends in Western aesthetic theory, may have given too much attention to those same formal properties, while overlooking the relational-particularly, the attitudinal-components of the aesthetic experience among non-Western peoples. These are essentially empirical questions, which lend themselves to resolution through detailed comparative study of aesthetic phenomena in both Western and non-Western cultural milieux. Ironically enough, at the present time, there are more comprehensive ethnographic treatments of the development of aesthetic criteria in non-Western societies than in Western ones. The vast

majority of empirical studies of Western aesthetic judgment have been carried out, not "in the field," but in psychology laboratories. As Pepper has pointed out, this approach has yielded

scanty material to the understanding of art. For the psychological laboratory is modeled on the physical laboratory, and its ideal of objectivity is the physical ideal of control by isolation and disintegrative analysis. The problem for the empirical aesthetician is not to get the work of art out of its cultural context. The problem is just the opposite, that of exhibiting the relevant cultural setting of the work of art and the relevant context of each discriminated detail.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, most of these studies have used laypeople as subjects. As noted earlier, anthropological research suggests that, if universal aesthetic properties do exist, they are likely to be revealed only in studies employing as informants artists and other art experts. The same may be true of the attitudinal components of the aesthetic. Aestheticians from Hume onwards have suggested that the nature of the "aesthetic attitude" should be induced from the experience of the "qualified observer" rather than the "man in the street."<sup>16</sup> And yet, despite the growing number of sociological studies of artists in the modern West, the nature and development of their aesthetic criteria remain largely undocumented.<sup>17</sup>

The present study is an effort to provide just such an empirically based and "contextual" treatment of American artists' aesthetic criteria. It is hoped that this effort will clarify the extent to which those criteria derive from the *formal* properties of objects or from the *relational* components of the aesthetic experience, and will thereby enhance our understanding of what is universal and what is culturespecific in the aesthetic experience.

## **Background of the Study**

The data presented herein were collected as part of a larger study of the occupational socialization of the artist in the United States.<sup>18</sup> A year of participant-observation was carried out in three different types of art training institutions in the San Francisco Bay Area: an art school, the art department of a large university, and a community "art club." To guard against the possibility that these three research settings were atypical of their genre, another 300 hours of observation was carried out in similar institutions in the area. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 48 students and 22 teachers in all three settings, social network data obtained, and demographic data on students gathered from archives. In order to provide a greater temporal dimension, interviews were also conducted with a sample of 75 professional artists in the region, and a questionnaire eliciting similar data was sent to 300 alumni of the three institutions.

## American Artists' Aesthetic Criteria

Participant-observation in drawing, painting and design classes revealed that certain qualities were recognized as components of a desirable or "good" art object in all three institutions. These qualities were : beauty, economy, rhythm, interest, innovation, coherence, expression, confidence, and honesty (see Chart, P. 7).<sup>19</sup> Analysis of these qualities reveals that, although they were all used to describe the art object itself, some refer explicitly to physical properties inherent in the object without overt appeal to its relationship to its producer (beauty, economy, rhythm, interest.) Others, while implying something about the physical properties of the object, focus principally upon its relationship to its producer (expression, confidence, honesty). Still others fall somewhere in the middle and are distinguished by direct reference to other objects, either those produced by the same artist or by other artists (innovation, coherence.) Thus, they may be arranged in a rough continuum ranging from the object-centered to the attitude- (producer)- centered, as in the chart.

To illustrate : in a lesson on color, an instructor turned to a project that had been propped against the blackboard and stated to the class :

It has a marvellous jewellike quality The sense of progression in it is very *beautiful*. Who did it ?

### QUALITIES OF ART OBJECTS

#### Object-centered

Column One	Column Two	Column Three
Absence	Quality	Excess
UNPLEASANT (unattractive, unappealing)	BEAUTIFUL (attractive, appealing, lovely)	DECORATIVE (pretty)
BUSY	ECONOMICAL (Simple, clean, subtle)	STINGY
STIFF (choppy, spotty)	RHYTHMIC (fluid, flowing, balanced)	DESIGNY
MONOTONOUS (dead, flat, static, muddy)	INTERESTING (intriguing, exciting, dynamic)	
DERIVATIVE (safe)	INNOVATIVE (fresh, inventive, original)	GIMMICKY (cute)
1) Predictable, precious	1) Re : own work	
2) Cliche	2) Re : others' work	

UNFOCUSED (diffuse)	COHERENT	SLICK (facile)
	1) Re : own work	
	2) Re : others' work	
CONSTRAINED (tense)	EXPRESSIVE	"ART AS THERAPY"
1) Tentative	1) Strong, vigorous	1) Out of hand
2) Tight	2) Loose	2) Uncontrolled
HESITANT	CONFIDENT	COMFORTABLE
DISHONEST	HONEST	"ART AS MASTURBATION"
1) Contrived (put-on)	1) Fidelity to self (sincerity)	1) Self-involved (egocentric) ("obvious, blatant")
2) Raw : unfinished ; "playing around"	2) Carried to certain level of completion	2) Overly manicureid, overworked

### Attitude-centered

In order to evaluate the object as "beautiful," it was not necessary to know who the producer had been. In a different class, by contrast, an instructor told a student:

I get the sense your work isn't very *honest*. It isn't personal enough.

In order to evaluate the object as not "honest," in this case connoting fidelity to self, it was obviously necessary that the teacher know-or think she know-who the producer had been and what his relationship had been to the object in question. In both instances, the evaluation related to the aesthetic success of the art object, but the second evaluation could only be made by including some knowledge of the producer's attitudes. "Innovation" and "coherence" were used of the object, but only as it related to other objects which the same or other producers had made. For example, an instructor remarked appreciatively to the researcher one day:

That's a really *different* style for you. I haven't seen you work that way before. You're getting weird, karen.

while this evaluation was not predicated upon the producer's attitude-the teacher did not know the researcher's motives or feelings vis-a-vis the change-some knowledge of the producer and her customary way of working were prerequisites of the appraisal. "Innovation" and "coherence," then, "point both ways," towards object and producer.

In addition to this underlying dimension of object-centeredness VS attitude-centeredness, analysis of the desirable qualities of an art object revealed a second similarity between them. Eight of the nine qualities had a pair of related pejoratives, one of which connoted an absence of the quality, and one of which connoted an excess of the quality (see chart, p. 7).<sup>20</sup> For example, the quality of "rhythm" refers to the composition of a work : the grace, ease, or "rightness" of the way in

which the various lines, shapes, and negative spaces coalesce. Pejoratives such as "stiff," "choppy," and "spotty" were used of a work in which the composition was lacking in such ease, grace, and rightness ; one in which there was an absence of rhythm. On the other hand, instructors on several occasions implied that the composition of a particular object was *too* easy, too balanced, too "perfect," so that the rightness of the composition became the dominant quality of the work (seemingly at the expense of "interest.") In such cases, the object was referred to as "designy"—possessed of an *excess* of rhythm. It seems, therefore, that a successful art object exists along a kind of mean, its qualities in a delicate tension between "too much" and "not enough."

Keeping in mind these two unifying characteristics - the dimension of object-to attitude- centeredness and location at the mean-we may proceed to a more detailed definition of each of the nine desirable qualities of an art object. It should also be borne in mind that in no setting was it implied that an object need embody all nine qualities in order to be considered successful ; nor was every positively evaluated work described with one of the following terms. Thus, it is not claimed that the following list comprises either the necessary or the sufficient qualities of a successful work of art in the art training setting. However, it does comprise those qualities which are 1 ) frequently mentioned; 2) common to all three settings ; and 3) acknowledged by both teachers and students. Ranging from primarily object-centered to primarily attitude-centered, the qualities are :

1) *Beauty* : general appeal to the eye, stemming from the overall impact of the object (rather than any of its constituent parts), which encourages sustained contemplation. Its absence is not ugliness, but rather a lack of visual impact which discourages such contemplation, making the viewer "turn away" from the work so that other qualities which may be present are missed. An excess of visual-appeal by implication, at the expense of other qualities, such as expression and innovation-makes a work merely *decorative* or *pretty*. For example, an art department teaching assistant told a student who was working on a floral study in pastel colors :

Be careful of making a *pretty* picture It can get in the way of the concept.

2) *Economy*: achievement of the maximum effect possible with the minimum constituent parts ; in composition, simplicity, and in production, "knowing when to quit." Its absence makes a work *busy*, its constituent parts too many, too elaborate, or too individually intrusive to coalesce into a total effect. Its excess makes a work *stingy*, or composed of so few constituent parts that nothing much "happens" in the object.

3) *Rhythm*: the grace, ease, or "rightness" with which the parts of the object's composition coalesce ; when it is present, the eye moves easily around the composi-

tion. When it is absent, the composition is *stiff*; its parts do not seem to fit together and the movement of the eye is tripped up or impeded in inappropriate places. when it is excessive, it dominates the work at the expense of other qualities, and the work becomes *designy* (see p. 9).

4) *Interest*: the quality which "pulls" the viewer into the work, inducing him to spend time appreciating both its constituent parts and its overall impact, and experiencing the full range of its possible effects. *Beauty* is experienced in the contemplative mode; *interest* belongs more to the analytical. Interest may derive from any or all aspects of the work- its content, an unusual use of the medium, a surprising juxtaposition of shapes-but generally implies some degree of complexity. For example, a drawing teacher commented to the researcher :

What you need to worry about is the fact that those figures pop out of that dark background too much because there's too much contrast between the red and the black. what you need to do is add some black to those figures to create more visual interest. If you bring some of the black in here, it'll drop this part back and create a kind of a Gordian knot-that's what you want, like a Gordian knot, so it's more intriguing to the eye.

where interest is absent, the object becomes monotonous- the viewer is not induced to invest time in its analysis or to experience its range of possible effects. Being thus inhospitable to change over time (whether in its own aspect, or in the viewer's reaction). the work may thus be termed *static* rather than *dynamic*. It does not "pull the viewer in ;" it "just sits there."

5) *Innovation*: the inclusion of some aspect or aspects which differentiate the object from prior products, thus expanding the repertoire of the artist-producer or of art in general. Innovation is valued at two levels. At the individual level, it means that each object which the student produces should be unique, should exhibit some property not exhibited in her past works. At the group level, it means that students should produce objects which do not strongly resemble the objects produced by other artists. where this quality is absent, the work is called *derivative* or *safe*. On the individual level it becomes *predictable*: the student is stuck in a rut, and it becomes the teacher's job to try to jolt her out of it, no matter how many of the other desirable qualities the work may contain, On the group level, it becomes *cliche*: the style or the subject matter or the concept has been treated by so many artists that it is no longer considered appropriate material for an art object. <sup>21</sup> The example *par excellence* of the latter phenomenon- cited, interestingly enough, in all three settings, and always with rueful humor- is the portrait of the "sad clown." In excess, however, and when added not to expand one's

repertoire or that of art in general, but rather for its own sake, as an attention-getting device, innovation becomes *gimmicky*, or *cute*. Comparing two of her own drawings, for example, an art student said :

The one on the cream-colored paper is a lot more effective. I thought I'd try the blue, because it looked nice and I'd never tried it before, but it's too *cute*.

6) *Coherence*: consistency with other objects, to the extent that the object seems a logical outgrowth of prior work and seems to build upon it, *e. g.*, by elaborating a concept or carrying further an experimental use of medium. Like innovation, coherence operates at two levels. At the individual level, coherence is present when a concern of the artist can be traced through objects produced at about the same time; it is because of this quality that we may speak of Warhol's "disaster paintings" or Rauschenberg's "combine paintings." At the group level, coherence is present when artists consciously link up with and build upon the work of other artists with related concerns; hence the "minimalists," the "superrealists." The quality of coherence thus stands poised in delicate tension with the quality of innovation. Absence of coherence makes a work *unfocused*, diffuse, or "off the wall;" at the group level, it may also make it *passé* or, potentially, "ahead of its time." An excess of coherence--consistency to the point of easy repetition or linking up with a movement simply because it is *au courant*--makes an object *slick*, *facile*, or, on the group level, *faddish*.

7) *Expression*: reflection in the work of the internal feeling-states of the producer. When an object is expressive, the materials of which it is composed have been manipulated in such a way that they convey something about its creator. Emotional tone is often, but not always, implied.<sup>22</sup> Work which is expressive may be described as *strong* or *vigorous*, meaning that its constituent parts work together to convey an impression of the human energy behind them. It may also be described as *loose*, meaning composed in such a way as to give the impression of a free and unimpeded flow of communication from producer to viewer: nothing "gets in the way." Absence of expression makes a work *constrained*, *tense*; if it is not strong, it is *tentative*, little energy being conveyed by the play of its parts, and if it is not loose, it is *tight*--the flow of communication is somehow constricted, as in an awkward conversation. Where expression is excessive--too strong (*out of hand*) or too loose (*uncontrolled*)--the result is what several persons referred to as "therapy" masquerading as art. The internal feeling-states of the producer overwhelm the work at the expense of other qualities (*e. g.*, beauty, economy). While creation of such an object may be cathartic for the producer--hence the appellation "therapy"--the result is not considered an appropriate candidate for the title "art object."



8) *Confidence* : a degree of virtuosity sufficient to convey to the viewer that producer achieved what he intended to achieve, through mastery of the appropriate means. The notion of craftsmanship is often, but not always, included,<sup>23</sup> Where confidence is absent, the work is described as *hesitant*. An art department teacher expressed barely-disguised contempt for "chicken maneuvers" and for a student who, while drawing, acted "like you're afraid it's going to bite." An excess of confidence—and included here is a display of craftsmanship for its own sake—makes an object *comfortable* : it conveys the impression that what was achieved too easily, that the producer could have employed the means in his sleep. Aesthetic virtuosity thus implies at least some struggle, some possibility of failure that was overcome ; to be confident in the face of certainty is considered a poor sort of confidence.

9) *Honesty* : fidelity to one's own standards, on one hand, and willingness to carry a work to a certain level of completion, on the other. An object which is honest in the first sense conveys the impression that the effort involved in its production was a sincere attempt—the purpose or success of the attempt being in this context irrelevant, and the sincerity, or genuine meaningfulness to the producer, being pivotal. An absence of such honesty makes a work *contrived* : one is manipulating media in a certain way because it meets others' standards, not one's own, or one is pretending to make a sincere attempt at a certain end without having any real commitment to the manifest task (a *put-on*). Carrying work to a certain level of completion shows a willingness to stay with an attempt , to give it a "fair chance ; at success, thus also conveying sincerity. Where honesty in this sense is absent, the work is *raw, unfinished* ; the object conveys the impression is simply *playing around*. On the other hand, when work is too concerned with one's own standards at the expense of any and all relation to the viewer or of other aesthetic qualities (e. g. , interest, innovation), it becomes *self-involved* or else *obvious* and *blatant*. This is the phenomenon which one art school student described as "art as masturbation : "

I don't have anything to say about them (my drawings). Can't art just be like masturbation ? I don't know why I did them, it was just a game.

The comment precipitated a heated discussion in which the instructor and other students opposed the notion that art could be totally self-involved, without attention to communication or regard to external standards ; said one student, "in that case, why bother to do it ?" An excess of completion-- carrying work beyond the appropriate level-- made it *overly manicured, overworked* : giving an attempt a "fair chance" thus became a kind of "over-kill."

Open-ended interviews revealed some differences between teachers' and students' aesthetic criteria. When instructors in all settings were asked what they considered a "good" art object to be, they all tended to emphasize the more attitude-centered and of the aesthetic continuum. There was a discrepancy between teachers' standards and students' perceptions of those standards in all settings. Students tended, on the whole, to perceive their teachers as being more concerned with object-centered qualities than they actually were. Their own aesthetic concerns were more object-centered also, in a pattern almost homologous with the concerns they attributed to their teachers. These data indicate that in all systems, some frustration may result from the fact that students keep concentrating on qualities like economy and rhythm, while teachers are more concerned with seeing expression and honesty emerge in their work. Integral to the activity of the art classroom, then, is the process of learning to establish priorities among aesthetic *desiderata*, moving from-- perhaps by mastering-- object-centered qualities to attitude-centered ones. Considering the student data diachronically, it seems that such a movement does in fact take place; older students are significantly more likely to describe a "good" piece of art in terms of attitude-centered qualities than are beginning students.<sup>24</sup>

### **Variation Between Training Systems**

Some variation between training systems appears to exist. Teachers at the art school mentioned attitude-centered qualities almost exclusively. The highest proportion of object-centered responses came from art club teachers, while instructors at the art department tended to mention both in equal proportions. Students seemed to "pick up on" the aesthetic criteria of their instructors. Art school students were the likeliest, overall, to stress attitude-centered qualities; art club students were likeliest to mention object-centered qualities; and art department students were about equally divided between attitude, object, and "both." Each setting thus maintains its unique variation on the aesthetic themes which they all hold in common, the art school being most strongly inclined toward attitude, the art club toward object, and the art department toward both. Observation, also, indicated that discussion at the art school tended to touch on the attitude-centered end of the continuum and at the art club, on the object-centered. That is, teachers at the art school were likely to discuss an object in terms of its expression, or to condemn it for being dishonest, giving a passing comment on, *e. g.*, its beauty, whereas teachers at the art club were likely to praise an object's beauty or to criticize its "designy-ness," giving a passing comment on its expression. Discussions at the art department were characterized

by references to the qualities at the mid-point of the continuum, coherence and innovation: thus, where teachers and students were most concerned with both attitude and object, they emphasized the qualities which point, "both ways." At the risk of oversimplification, one might summarize these differences by saying that art school students learn to produce self-oriented art (whose quality depends to a large extent on its relationship to its producer); art department students learn to produce art-oriented art (whose quality depends to a large extent on its relationship with other works of art) ; and art club students learn to produce viewer-oriented art (whose quality depends to a large extent on the visual characteristics which it presents to the viewer).

As for the sources of this variation, the greater bias of the art school toward self-oriented, or attitude-centered, art stems at least in part from the fact that a higher proportion of instructors there were trained in the Bay Area, with its long involvement in expressionistic styles, and had themselves been steeped in the art school's institutional milieu, characterised by both avant-gardism and a continuing involvement with the subjective mode of abstract-expressionism.<sup>25</sup> The greater heterogeneity of instructors' geographical backgrounds and the weaker institutional aesthetic milieu at the art club help account for the lesser interest in that subjective mode. The greater diversity of faculty backgrounds may militate against the promulgation of theory and turn instruction toward those facets of art that are more easily agreed upon-- the visual appeal of the physical characteristics of the object. Also, the art club faculty's comparative lack of orientation toward the elite fine-arts market helps explain why innovation and coherence-- qualities which refer explicitly to other works of art-- are not greatly stressed. By the same token, the high degree of orientation toward that market among art department faculty probably accounts for the concern which those qualities are accorded in the university setting. One might also speculate that the greater academic bias of that setting, together with its proximity to an art history department, makes the relationship of a work to other works a particularly salient concern. There is another unique aspect of the department students' situation which may help account for the interest in innovation and coherence shown in that setting: unlike students at the art school and the art club, they perceive their peers' aesthetic standards as being significantly different from their professors'. While the greater proportion see their teachers' concerns as being primarily object-centered, they perceive their peers' concerns as being primarily attitude-centered. Thus, in attempting to meet the aesthetic expectations of both sets of "significant others," they come

to concentrate on these qualities which point "both ways" on the aesthetic continuum.

## How Aesthetic Criteria Are Acquired

The process whereby young artists develop the aesthetic criteria described above is complex, and can only be sketched here in its most general outlines.<sup>26</sup> In interviews with professional artists and students alike, four aspects of art training emerged as most influential: teachers; curriculum (the actual content of the art classes); peers (fellow students); and the "personal development" which some informants saw as taking place in themselves during the time that they spent in school. Of these four aspects, teachers and curriculum were judged to be the most influential of all.<sup>27</sup> Since it is teachers who structure the curriculum, these two influences cannot be completely disentangled; but generally, by "teacher influence," informants referred to comments made by instructors, and by "curriculum," they referred to the nature of the tasks set out for them in the course of their classes and to the provision of positive models, i. e. . of examples of what art "should be,"

Teachers' comments were of three main types: comments made to individual students about their work during class; comments made to the class as a whole about trends observed in the class's work; and comments made during formal critiques, which were an integral part of instruction in all three settings. These comments could be either positive-- reinforcing some aspect of the student's work-- or negative-- discouraging some aspect of the student's work. Of the three types, those made during critiques appeared to carry the most weight, since they were made in a public setting with all eyes turned toward the work of the student in question, and since they constituted appraisals of finished works. Analysis of the kinds of comments made in all three settings revealed that teachers repeatedly attempted to encourage the nine qualities detailed earlier, and to discourage their absence or excess, but with differing emphases consistent with the variations described in the last section.

The nature of the tasks was similar in all classes, namely, the actual production of a drawing or painting or some part thereof during the course of the class period, which afforded the instructor an opportunity to observe the process of production as well as its end products, and to comment and intervene along the way. Variations in this basic framework also appeared to contribute to the variations in aesthetic criteria described above. At the art club, for example, a "set-up" of objects to draw or paint was always provided, and students were expected to use it. At the art school, by contrast, a "set-up" was not always provided, and

when it was, working "from" it was never mandatory. This difference would appear to underscore the greater orientation of the art club toward the *formal* properties of the art object itself, and the greater orientation of the art school toward *relational* factors, such as the attitude of the student-artist toward his work.

Positive models were of three main types. The first was a model from the instructor's own work ; this could be a direct intervention by the instructor on the student's painting or drawing, a sketch by the instructor on paper or blackboard, a technical demonstration ( "demo" ), or a finished work brought to class for the students to view. The second was a model culled from student work; for example, the instructor might stop the classroom action and draw the students' attention to one of their peers' drawings, or might use drawings from a previous class to illustrate "do's" and "don'ts." The third was the use of well-known artists' work, either through books and slides, recommendations, of books or exhibitions, or recommendations of books or exhibitions, or recommendations of copying from some well-known work as a technical exercise. Again, the types of models provided, and the comments which accompanied them, tended to emphasize the nine qualities described above and to discourage their absence or excess. And again, variations between systems reinforced variations in aesthetic emphasis. For example, the art school provided significantly fewer positive models of all types to its students than did either the art department or the art club, reinforcing the idea that the artist's own attitude toward his work was more important than any tangible aspects of the work itself. The art department-- which, it will be recalled, stressed the "art-oriented" qualities of coherence and innovation-- provided significantly more models of well-known artists' work to its students than did either of the other two systems.

The action which takes place in the art classroom is thus a multifaceted, ongoing process, the purpose of which is the inculcation of aesthetic criteria. Consistent variations in the nature of that process help account for variations in the degree to which certain criteria are more strongly inculcated in some systems than in others.

## Conclusions

These findings concern one category of "art experts," professional artists, in one Western culture, the contemporary United States. Pending further research, therefore, conclusions drawn from them can be at best provisional. Yet they do appear to shed some light upon the questions raised in the introduction to this paper.

The fact that aesthetic criteria described herein embrace *both* formal and relational properties indicates that both types have cross-cultural--perhaps even universal--salience. This finding lends credence to the dominant frameworks of both anthropologists, and aestheticians, with their respective emphases upon the formal and relational aspects of aesthetic judgment. At the same time, the fact that these two types of aesthetic criteria coexist in one culture suggests that each group of scholars has been somewhat limited in their approach to the study of aesthetic phenomena: that anthropologists need to extend their attention beyond the object itself and investigate the attitudinal components of aesthetic judgment, while aestheticians may have been too hasty in turning from the formal properties of objects to locate "the aesthetic" in subjective feeling-states or in institutional conventions.<sup>28</sup>

For example, anthropologist Alan P. Merriam, in his study of Bala musicians, is quick to conclude that the Bala have no "aesthetic" in the Western sense of the term.<sup>29</sup> He bases this conclusion upon the observation that music is not "abstracted from its context" and therefore does not bring into play the phenomenon of "psychical distance."<sup>30</sup> The present study suggests that by no means all Western aesthetic criteria involve "abstracting" a work from its context; that, indeed, certain criteria, such as coherence and innovation, have meaning only in relation to the context of other works, while the more attitude-centered criteria, such as honesty and expression, derive their meaning precisely in their relationship to the artist's "total framework of belief and behavior."<sup>31</sup> Merriam also argues that the Bala lack an aesthetic because they have no concept of "beauty" and "in the Western aesthetic, beauty is irrevocably tied up with art."<sup>32</sup> But the present study confirms what aestheticians since Shaftesbury have implied-- that beauty is only one aspect of the aesthetic.<sup>33</sup> A more inclusive definition of the Western "aesthetic," derived from empirical observation, might have permitted Merriam to reach quite different conclusions about the presence of a Bala "aesthetic."

Art history and art criticism provide much evidence that relational criteria have been important in the aesthetic judgments of non-Western peoples. In classical China, for example, scholarly painting was judged by quite different standards than court painting, and among those standards was the extent to which the work reflected the spiritual vigor, intuition, and individuality of the scholar-painter.<sup>34</sup> In traditional India, the worth of a Hindu sculpture derived not only from its formal harmonies but also from the spiritual discipline and insight of its creator.<sup>35</sup> Guènon even suggests that much of the impact of medieval Western

art is lost to the modern viewer because he lacks knowledge of the esoteric principles and training which animated its producers.<sup>36</sup> All this suggests that the usual procedures used by anthropologists, whereby native informants are shown various art objects and asked to indicate which the "like best" and why, may miss important *relational* criteria involved in aesthetic judgment, since the technique tends to skew responses in the direction of the *formal* properties of the objects themselves. Studies which are explicitly designed to elicit the attitudinal aspects of aesthetic response among non-Western peoples might reveal significant cross-cultural commonalities.

The present findings also suggest, however, that there may indeed be formal properties which are aesthetically salient in all or nearly all cultures. The emphasis placed by informants on "the mean" as an aesthetic *desideratum*, discouraging both absence and excess of the nine salient qualities, is echoed in studies of non-Western aesthetic criteria. Fernandez, for example, has chronicled the emphasis placed in Fang aesthetics upon "permanent and balanced opposition."<sup>37</sup> Thompson lists as central aesthetic criteria of the Yoruba "midpoint mimesis," a balance "between absolute abstraction and absolute likeness,"<sup>38</sup> "the calming virtue of symmetry,"<sup>39</sup> and an appropriate tension between roundness and straightness. Gerbrands mentions "symmetry," "balance," and "harmony" as guiding criteria in the judgment of Dan masks.<sup>40</sup> Though the particular qualities in question may differ, and though cultures may locate "the mean" at different conceptual points, the notion that aesthetic qualities involve a delicate tension or balance between "too much" and "not enough" appears to be extremely widespread cross-culturally.<sup>41</sup>

There is evidence that certain, if not all, specific formal properties found to be salient in American artists' aesthetic evaluations are salient in other cultures as well. Dan masks should exhibit the quality of "rhythm."<sup>42</sup> The Japanese aesthetic has always viewed "economy" as a hallmark of successful art works.<sup>43</sup> Innovation-- long held to be anathema to "traditional" arts-- is increasingly being recognized by anthropologists as a consciously cultivated artistic goal in all parts of the world, particularly if its definition is broadened to include the acceptance of diffused traits and minor, rather than dramatic, departures from past forms.<sup>44</sup>

Aestheticians may immediately object that an assumption of universally salient aesthetic qualities renders incomprehensible the derision and bafflement with which western observers have frequently greeted non-Western art forms. What seems probable is that such qualities, though they may be finite in number, are not all present in the aesthetic repertoire of all cultures, and that they are

not stressed in equal measure. Just as most American artist informants placed a higher value on honesty and expression than they did on economy and rhythm, other cultures may place a higher premium on formal qualities like interest and beauty than, for example, on relational qualities like confidence. This difference would account for the oft-repeated observation of anthropologists that many non-Western peoples appear to 'stress technical skill rather than personal expression,'<sup>45</sup> and would also account for the initial inability of observers to perceive the aesthetic merits of unfamiliar art styles. Such an interpretation suggests that one of the main processes involved in intercultural artistic contact is the expansion of one's aesthetic "vocabulary" to include emphases not current in one's own cultural milieu. The conditions under which expansion is facilitated have been tentatively sketched by authors as diverse as Muensterberger and Fanon,<sup>46</sup> and clearly deserve greater attention from Western aestheticians.

If it is true that there are certain formal and relational factors that are aesthetically salient in most or all cultures, then it is clearly imperative that anthropologists and aestheticians acquaint themselves with one another's dominant frameworks in order to sketch a full and accurate picture of the nature of aesthetic phenomena. Such a conclusion would also necessitate revisions in the "institutional" approach to art, which until now has largely denied the existence of aesthetic universals, preferring to explain aesthetic phenomena as the products of culture-specific "conventions." At the same time, scholars will still confront the task of explaining why it is that different cultures emphasize different aesthetic qualities; and in that task, the institutional approach promises to remain useful, for it mandates careful attention to the specific historical and ethnological conditions which shape the aesthetic of a particular people. In order to explain why the bulk of the American artists observed in the present study emphasized the attitude-centered pole of the aesthetic continuum, it would be necessary to trace the emergence of the Romantic aesthetic from the matrix of the Industrial Revolution, to acknowledge the profound challenge issued to Western artists by the development of photography, and to invoke the increasing marginality of the artist in the economy of late capitalism.<sup>47</sup> In order to clarify what "innovation" and "coherence" mean in any particular society, it is obviously necessary to have some knowledge of the artistic conventions currently prevailing in that culture.<sup>48</sup> And, in order to explain the existence of intracultural aesthetic variation, it is necessary to have detailed accounts of the institutional processes and practices through which various groups in



society acquire their aesthetic criteria. Explanations like these can be predicated only upon careful, case-by-case investigations which locate aesthetics squarely within their sociocultural settings. To this end, research strategies already advanced by anthropologists like Maquet and D'Azevedo<sup>49</sup> might be fruitfully grafted onto the institutional approach to aesthetics, the better to facilitate cooperation between the two disciplines.

Greater unity between two hitherto disparate fields can only enhance our understanding and appreciation of the universal principles which undergird the contents of our constantly-expanding "museum without walls."<sup>50</sup> and of the concrete processes which bring them to life.

## Notes and References

1. Melville J. Herskovits, "Art and Value" in *Aspects of Primitive Art*, ed. Robert Redfield, Melville J. Herskovits, and Gordon F. Ekholm (New York, 1959), P 44.
2. For example, some anthropologists have argued that because a local word for "art" or "beauty" does not exist, the people in question cannot be said to have art or aesthetic criteria; see, e. g., Roy Sieber, "Approaches to Non-Western Art" and John Ladd, "Conceptual Problems Relating to the Comparative Study of Art" in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, ed. Warren L. d'Azevedo (Bloomington and London, 1973). Others have maintained that "an aesthetic" cannot be said to exist in cultures where no distinction is drawn between "beauty" occurring in art and "beauty" occurring in nature; see, e. g., Harold K. Schneider, "The Interpretation of Pakot Visual Art" in *Man*, Vol. 56, No. 108 (August, 1956), PP. 103-106, and Nelson Graburn, "The Eskimos and Commercial Art" in *The Sociology of Art and Literature: A Reader*, ed. Milton C. Albrecht, James H. Barnett, and Mason Griff (New York, 1970).
3. Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History* (Garden City, 1948); Rudolf Arnheim, *Toward a Psychology of Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966); Carl Jung (ed.), *Man and His Symbols* (New York, 1964); Amadee Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art* (New York, 1952); Herbert Read, *Education Through Art* (London, 1943); Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical*

- Greece to the Present: A Short History* (New York, 1966), p. 95.
4. W. A. McElroy, "Aesthetic Appreciation in Aborigines of Arnhem Land: A Comparative Experimental Study" in *Oceanic*, 23 (1952), pp. 81-94; Monica Lawler, "Cultural Influences on Preferences for Designs" in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 61 (1955), pp. 690-692; Robert Lowie, "A Note on Aesthetics" in *American Anthropologist*, 33 (1921), pp. 170-174.
  5. Irvin L. Child and Leon Siroto, "Bakwele and American Aesthetic Evaluation Compared" in *Ethnology*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (1965), pp. 349-360; Sumiko Iwao and Irvin L. Child, "Comparisons of Esthetic Judgments by American Experts and Japanese Potters" in *Journal of Social Psychology*, 68 (1966), pp. 27-34; C. S. Ford, E. Terry Prothro, and Irvin L. Child, "Some Transcultural Comparisons of Esthetic Judgment," in *Journal of Social Psychology*, 68 (1966), pp. 19-26; Sumiko Iwao and Miguel Garcia, "Further Evidence of Agreement between Japanese and American Esthetic Evaluations" in *Journal of Social Psychology*, 75 (1969), pp. 11-15.
  6. Raymond Firth, *Elements of Social Organization* (New York, 1950), p. 161.
  7. Robert Linton, "The Problem of Universal Values: Method and Perspective" in *Anthropology*, ed. R. F. Spencer (Minneapolis, 1954), p. 166.
  8. See, e. g., Peggy Golde and Helena C. Kraemer, "Analysis of an Aesthetic Values Test" in *American Anthropologist*, 75 (1973), pp. 1260-1275; Harry R. Silver, *The Mind's Eye: Art and Aesthetics in an African Craft Community*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University (1976). It should be noted that not all anthropologists have ignored the relational components of the aesthetic nor failed to take developments in Western aesthetic theory into account: see, e. g., Jacques Maquet, *Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology*, McCaleb Module in Anthropology, Addison-Wesley (1971).
  9. Harold Osborne, *Theory of Beauty* (New York, 1953).
  10. Edward Bullough, "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and Aesthetic Principle" in *British Journal of Psychology*, 5 (1912), pp. 87-118; Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism* (Boston, 1960).
  11. See, e. g., J. O. Urmson, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 31 (1957).
  12. George Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude" in *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. John Hospers (New York, 1969), pp. 28-45; *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, 1974).
  13. Exceptions to this trend do exist, but even they tend to define "the

- aesthetic" negatively rather than positively-- as *non-monotonous*, *non-chaotic*, *non-overfamiliar*. Cf. Richard W. Lind, "Attention and the Aesthetic Object" in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol 39, No.2 (1980), pp. 131-142.
14. Carried to its logical extreme, such dismissal would validate the "withdrawal" of aesthetic quality and content from works of art at the whim of the artist, as in the case of Robert Morris's withdrawal of such quality and content from his work, "Litanies," November 15, 1963. At least one critic has rejected this logical extreme, contending that "aesthetic qualities inhere in things. The aesthetic is not an element that exists separately, to be banished at the will of the the artist" (Harold Rosenberg, "De-aestheticization" in *The De-Definition of Art* (New York, 1972), p. 35.
  15. Stephen C. Pepper, *Aesthetic Quality: A Contextualistic Theory of Beauty* (Westport, Conn. , 1937), pp. 11-13.
  16. In a recent interview carried in the *Kansas City Times*, artist Richard Diebenkorn was quoted as saying that the viewer should not expect art to be immediately accessible, and should be willing to work at understanding what the artist has in mind.
  17. Mason Griff, "The Recruitment and Socialization of Artists" and Anselm Strauss, "The Art School and Its Students : A Study and An Interpretation" in *The Sociology of Art and Literature : A Reader*, ed. Milton C. Albrecht, James H. Barnett, and Mason Griff (New York, 1970); Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley, 1982).
  18. Karen L. Field, *Doing What I Love : The Socialization of the Artist in the United States*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University (1979). The research and writing involved in this work were supported by National Institute of Mental Health Fellowship- /=/5 F31 MH05917-02, and benefitted greatly from critical comments by George Spindler, John LaPlante and Barbara Rosenblum. It should be noted that this research focused on only one group of Western "art experts," namely, practicing artists. Until empirical research is conducted on the development of aesthetic criteria among other types of art experts-- aestheticians, critics, and the like-- it is impossible to determine the extent to which findings on the American artist are extrapolable to other categories of experts in the modern West.
  19. For inclusion in this list, words had to meet the following criteria : 1) the capitalized word in column two, or one of its synonyms in parentheses, had to have been mentioned in reference to a student-produced art object at least five (5) times in each

setting : 2) at least one of the references had to have been made by an instructor and at least one by a student ; and 3) at least three of the references had to have been made in different classes taught by different instructors. The purpose of the first criterion was to ensure the importance of the quality by its frequent mention; the purpose of the second, to ensure that it was a concept shared by all actors in the classroom situation ; and the purpose of the third, to ensure that the concept was not idiosyncratic to a particular instructor's set of standards.

20. For inclusion in columns one and three, the capitalized words (or their synonyms in parentheses) had to meet the same three criteria described above (see Note 19). The only exceptions appear in quotation marks : "art as therapy" and "art as masturbation." These were phrases, used only once apiece, which referred to qualities commonly recognized and condemned in art classrooms for which no precise one-word equivalent seemed to be in usage. The single exception to the two-pejorative rule was the quality of "interest;" there is apparently no such things as an art object which is "too interesting."

21. At the most extreme pole, of course, absence of innovation at a group level becomes plagiarism. So little is unique about the object that it may

be considered a copy of another's work. When individual authorship of such an object is claimed, the issue is no longer abrogation of an aesthetic standard, but rather of an ethical one.

22. Deliberate omission of emotional tone-- as in, for example much of pop art-- may still be construed as expressive : something of the producer's feelings is revealed, if only their repression or negation. Refusal to convey an affective stance in a work is quite a different thing from failure to convey an affective stance.

23. A deliberate lack of craftsmanship (in the traditional sense) is sometimes integral to what the artist hopes to achieve, thus constituting "appropriate" means; consider, for example, the recent "random art" and, at least to some extent, the "action painting" of the 1950's.

24. Students also came to perceive their teachers' expectations as focusing more on personal qualities than on work-related qualities, as their time in the training setting increased (see Field, *op. cit.*). The two movements seem to complement one another; as students come to feel that they are being judged in a more "personal" way, they also come to feel that the quality of their work is being judged by more "personal" standards. Just as there was variation between settings in the degree to

- which attitude-centered criteria were inculcated, so too was there variation in the *degree* to which personal qualities came to be viewed as the focus of teachers' expectations.
25. When asked what they thought their teacher considered a "good" work of art to be, four of the sixteen art school students (25 per cent) said "abstract expressionism" in the course of their replies. No students at the art department or art club did so.
  26. For a more detailed account, see Field, *op. cit.*
  27. Both professional graduates and current students from the art club emphasized "curriculum" as pivotal; professionals and students from the art school and art department emphasized "teachers."
  28. Some anthropological studies have given attention to the attitudinal components of artists' aesthetic judgments; see, e.g., Ruth L. Bunzel, *The Pueblo Potter* (New York, 1928); Paul Bohannon, "Artist and Critic in an African Society" in *The Artist in Tribal Society*, ed. Marian W. Smith (London, 1961); and Robert Thompson, "Abatan: A Master Potter of the Egbado Yoruba" in *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, ed. Daniel P. Biebuyck (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969).
  29. Alan P. Merriam, "The Bala Musician" in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, ed. Warren L. d'Azevedo (Bloomington and London, 1973).
  30. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
  31. *Idem.*
  32. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
  33. See Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (eds.), *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, (New York, 1964), pp. 239-241.
  34. Michael Sullivan, *A Short History of Chinese Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967).
  35. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in art* (New York, 1934);
  36. René Guénon, "Initiation and the Crafts" (pamphlet), (Ipswich, 1974).
  37. James W. Fernandez, "principles of Opposition and Vitality" in *Fang Aesthetics* in *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies*, ed. Carol F. Jopling (New York, 1971), p. 373.
  38. Robert Farris Thompson, "Yoruba Artistic Criticism" in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, ed. Warren L. d'Azevedo (Bloomington and London, 1973), p. 32.
  39. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
  40. Adrian A. Gerbrands, "Art As an Element of Culture in Africa" in *Anthropology and Art*, ed. Charlotte M. Otten (Garden City, 1971), p. 380.
  41. Apparent exceptions, such as the Japanese cultivation of *asymmetry* as an aesthetic property, may represent just such a different conception of

- the "mean;" and there is evidence that they, too, are governed by emic definitions of "too much" and "not enough" (see Kakuzo Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, New York, 1964.)
42. Gerbrands, *loc. cit.*
  43. See Okakura, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
  44. See, e. g., Daniel P. Biebuyck, "Introduction," and William Bascom, "Creativity and Style in African Art" in *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, ed. Daniel P. Biebuyck (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), and Fredenick J. Dockstader, "The Role of the Individual Indian Artist" in *Primitive Art and Society*, ed. Anthony Forge (London and New York, 1973).
  45. Daniel J. Crowley, "An African Aesthetic" in *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies*, ed. Carol F. Jopling (New York, 1971), p. 325.
  46. Warner Muesterberger, "Roots of Primitive Art" in *Anthropology and Art*, ed. Charlotte M. Otten (Garden City, 1971); Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1963).
  47. See F. D. Klingender, *Art and Industrial Revolution* (New York, 1968); Richard Miller, *Bohemia: The Protoculture Then and Now* (Chicago, 1977).
  48. Lord has argued that the institutional theory of the aesthetic precludes innovation as an aesthetic goal, equating "convention" with "repetition" (Catherine Lord, "Convention and Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art," in *British Journal of Aesthetics* 20, 1980, pp. 322-328). Her point of view is cogently refuted by Peggy Zeglin Brand, "Lord, Lewis, and the Institutional Theory of Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1982), pp. 309-314.
  49. Maquet, *op. cit.*: Warren L. d'Azevedo, "A Structural Approach to Aesthetics" in *American Anthropologist* 60 (1958), pp. 702-713.
  50. André Malraux. *Museum Without Walls* (London, 1967).

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