

Can Taste Be Objective?

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The word "taste" (gusto in both Italian and Spanish) re-
sented the discussion of art in the seventeenth century. In the
eighteenth it became the hard-and-fast word for the faculty
of aesthetic judgment. It's as though this term, in isolating this
faculty, also isolated and brought into focus most of the prob-
lems connected with that faculty: problems that were, as far as
the understanding was concerned, the crucial ones involved in
the experiencing of art.

I've used the word "problems" in the plural, maybe
I should use it in the singular. For the crucial problems
involved in the experiencing of art are "problems" of taste.
And yet the problems of taste do seem to fall down to one
in the end: namely, whether the verdicts of taste are subjec-
tive or objective. This is the problem that haunted Kant in
his Critique of Aesthetic Judgment, and he stated it better
than anyone I know of has done since. He acknowledges its

importance, returns to it again and again, and in exhibiting the
difficulties of the problem faces up to them as, again, to one I
know of has since him.

He doesn't solve the problem satisfactorily. He posits a
solution without proving it, without adducing evidence for
it. He deduces his solution from the principles of his "tran-
scendental psychology," and it's a wonderful deduction, but it
doesn't really advance the argument that the verdicts of taste
are, and should be, objective. Kant believed in the objec-
tivity of taste as a principle or potential, and he postulated
his belief on what he called a sensus communis, a sense or
faculty that all human beings exercised similarly in esthet-
ic experience. What he failed to show was how this universal
faculty could be linked to veridical disagreements of taste. And
it's these disagreements that make it so difficult to assert the
potential or principled objectivity of taste.

Kant's failure in this direction—as well as his success in
driving it home that esthetic judgments can't be demonstrated
as proven—may have had a good deal to do with what looks
like the general abandonment of the problem of taste or es-
thetic judgment on the part of philosophers of art for a while
after his time. The last two hundred of the six hundred pages
of Gilbert and Sullivan's A History of Aesthetics con-
tain only three fleeting mentions of the word "taste," and none
at all of "esthetic judgment." But I think that the Romantic
evaluation of art may have had even more to do with this. That
art could be and was subjected to judgment and evaluation

Not that taste, didn't, and doesn't automatically, remain
as essential in the appreciation, and in the creation too, of
art as it ever was. Not that any term usefully explained it.
Not that questions of taste, didn't, enter — even
more than in the past, into its formal talk about art and
its, or that assertions deriving from the operations of
taste, however indirectly, didn't, and don't, come up every-
where in the formal talk and in the writing about art. And
not that very much of that talk and writing would, in fact,
be possible without presupposing verdicts of taste. All the
same, the reluctance to bring the question of taste out into
the open again, the coyness about dealing with it, persists.

As I've said, the Romantic change in attitude toward art
is at the bottom of much of this. But I return to Kant. After his
time the question of the objectivity of taste, of esthetic judge-
ment, came to seem more insoluble than ever, with or without
the Romantic attitudes toward art. There seemed to be less than
ever a way of settling disagreements of judgment or appreci-
ation. None of the philosophers who addressed themselves to
this question after Kant was quite ready to admit that taste was a
subjective matter, but none of them was ready, either, to try to
show that it wasn't. As far as I know, they avoided the question
or else only pretended to tackle it. Some had the courage to
dismiss it explicitly. Grant Allen, an art unknown inquirer into
aesthetics of the later nineteenth century, held that it was an
advantage from the scientific point of view to be without strong
preferences in art that may not have been wrong in some of the
reasons he gave. But even Croce—the philosopher of esthet-
ics I've found more in than anyone since Kant—escaped into
what I make out as double-talk when it came to the objectivity
of taste. Santayana simply evaded the question, and Santayana
Langer only grants it, if she even does that. Harold Osborne
doesn't evade or grant, but somehow still fails to meet it head-
on.

The question continues to be evaded, evaded, or neces-
sarily granted. I wouldn't claim that the failure to deal coherently
with the issue of taste and its objectivity is alone or even
mainly responsible for some of the startling features of recent
art and of recent discussion of art. But I think it partly re-
sponsible—a distance as it were, the shading away of the
whole question does make certain things more permitted than
they would otherwise be. There are critics now who confidently
dismiss taste as irrelevant. And an critics who say so find
that judgments of value are beneath them, being the affair of
"reviewers," not of critics proper. It certainly has been taken
granted for a while now that art critics—and literary critics
too, for that matter—can maintain themselves more than
respectably without having to tell, or being able to tell, the
difference between good and bad. At the same time, words like
"commensurate" and "commensurable" have come to sound
old-fashioned and even pejorative. Add to this the business
about "elitism" which is, in effect, the argument that taste
should no longer be decisive because the art it elevates has no
little to do with life as lived by the common man. It used to be
that only philistines said this sort of thing, but now it's said by
people, including artists, who don't otherwise talk or act like
philistines.

And yet taste continues to be decisive, and maybe more
obviously so than ever before (at least in the West)—that is, if
you look at what actually happens to, with, and in art, and pay
less attention to what's proclaimed about appropriate persons in
up-to-date situations. Art that used to be valued for all sorts of
non-esthetic reasons (religious, political, national, moral) has
lost its hold on the cultured public almost entirely, or else its
non-esthetic significance has been more and more discounted
in favor of its purely esthetic value, whatever that might be.
(It could be Fra Angelico's or it could be Maxfield Parrish's.)
And as this happens differences of taste become more and more
the agreements become more important and conspicuous than
the disagreements. Actually, this is what has been happening

In effect — to good and solid effect — the objectivity of
taste is probably demonstrated in and through the presence
of a consensus over time. That consensus makes itself evident
in judgments of esthetic value that stand up under the ex-
traordinary testing of experience. Certain works are singled
out in their time or later as excellent, and these works continue
to excel: That is, they continue to compel those of us who in
time after look, listen, or read hard enough. And here's one ex-
plaining this durability—the durability that creates a consen-
sus—by the fact that taste is ultimately objective. The
best taste, that is, that taste which makes itself known by the
durability of its verdicts, and in this durability lies the proof
of its objectivity. (My reasoning here is no more circular than
experience itself.) It remains that the people who look, listen,
or read hard enough come to agree largely about art over the
course of time—and not only within a given cultural tradition
but also across differences of cultural tradition (as the experi-
ence of the last hundred years teaches us).

The consensus of taste confirms and reconfirms itself in
the durable reputations of Homer and Dante, Balzac and Tol-
stoy, Shakespeare and Goethe, Leonardo and Titian, Rem-
brandt and Cezanne, Dostoevsky and Mallarmé, Diderot and
Bach, Mozart and Beethoven and Schubert. Each succeeding
generation finds that previous ones were right in exalting cer-
tain creators—finds them right on the basis of its own experi-
ence, its own exercise of taste. We in the West also find that the
ancient Egyptians were right about Old Kingdom sculpture,
and the Chinese about Yang art, and the Indians about Chola
bronzes, and the Japanese about Heian sculpture. About these
bodies of art, practiced taste — the taste of those who pay
enough attention, of those who immerse themselves enough,
of those who try hardest with art — speaks as if with one voice.
How else account for the unanimity, if not by the ultimate ob-
jectivity of taste?

It's the record, the history of taste that confirms its objec-
tivity and it's this objectivity that in turn explains its history.
The latter includes mistakes, distortions, lapses, omissions,
but it also includes the correcting and repairing of those. Taste
does not make mistakes, and it also does not correct them.
now as before—now maybe even more than before. Amid it
all, a consensus persists, forming and re-forming itself—
and growing. The disagreements show mainly on the margins
and fringes of the consensus, and have to do usually with
contemporary or pre-contemporary art. Time tests these disagreements
out, progressively. Within the core, certain disagreements will
continue, but only about such things as Titian or Michelangelo
the better painter? Is Mozart or Beethoven the better composer?
Disagreements of this kind assume fundamental agreement
about the names concerned—that they are among the supreme
ones. The implications of this fundamental agreement is borne
out at every turn. You may find Raphael too overrated or Velázquez
too cold, but if you can't see how utterly good they are when they
are good, you doubtfully yourself as a judge of painting. In other
words, there are objective tests of taste: but they are strictly em-
pirical and can't be applied with the help of rules or principles.

It's the best taste that, as I've already indicated, forms the
consensus of taste. The best taste develops under the pressure
of the best art, and is the taste most subject to that pressure.
And the best art, in turn, emerges under the pressure of the
best taste. The best taste and the best art are interdependent.
Well, how do you in your own time identify the bearers of the
best taste? It's not all that necessary, in time past the best taste
could have been diffused through a whole social class, or a
whole tribe. In later times it may or may not have been the pos-
session of a coterie—like the expressionists in and around the
Naxos in the early 1930's, or the critics in which Rauschenberg
emerged in the mid-sixteenth century. But it would be wrong on
the whole to try to pin the best taste of a given period to speci-
c individuals. I would say it works more like an atmosphere,
circulating and making itself felt in the subtle, intangible
ways that belong to an atmosphere. At least that's the way it
seems, in the absence of closer investigation. The most that is
safely known is that the best taste, cultivated taste, is not some-
thing within the reach of the ordinary poor or of people without
a certain minimum of comfortable leisure. (Which happens to
be true of the highest brain in general of civilization, and it
doesn't change the nature of those fruits, however much the
human cost of them may be deplored or how ever clearly it is
recognized that art and culture are not expense values.)
Whether or not we can identify those who exercise it, and
through those effects the consensus of taste makes itself a fact,
and makes the objectivity of taste a fact—an empirical fact.
The presence of this fact is what's primary, not so much the
names of the particular individuals who, as exponents of the
best taste, continue to create the fact.

The philosophers of art must have been aware from the
first of something like a consensus of taste, however dimly.
What I wonder about is why they didn't become more defini-
tively aware of it and take it more into account, with its impli-
cations. Had they done so they would, as I think, have had no
choice but to exclude once and for all the possibility that taste
is ultimately subjective. (As if Homer's standing, or Titian's,
or Bach's could have been the outcome of what would have
had to be the accidental convergence of a multitude of strictly
private, subjective experiences.)

It is Kant's case, I believe, that may offer the best clue
as to why the consensus of taste hasn't been taken seriously
enough. It was solely a matter of record, too simply an histor-
ical problem. To find the objectivity of taste on such a product
would be proceeding too empirically, and therefore too un-
philosophically. Philosophical conclusions were supposed to
catch hold in absence of all experience; they were supposed
to be arrived at through insulated reasoning, to be deduced
from premises given a priori. This isn't my own view of phi-
losophy, not is it the view of many philosophers themselves,
including Hegel, Kant's predecessor. But, as it seems to me,
it's a view that has infected the investigation of aesthetics even
among empirical philosophers. They too have tended to start
from the inside of the mind and try to establish esthetics on
the basis of first mental or psychological principles. It was well
and good for Kant to postulate a sensus communis on the ba-
sis of experience — empirically, that is. (And who knows but
that experimental psychology may not have the potential set in
some scientific detail in some unforeseeable future?) But his
deductions from the postulate didn't advance his case much;
what they showed merely is that we want to agree in our es-
thetic judgments and may be justified in so wanting. He could
have checked his case for the time being—and for some time
to come too—by remaining content to point to the record, the
empirical record, with the consensus of taste that it showed.
And he could have also pointed to how that consensus of taste
showed that most important aspects of it had settled in
the shorter or longer run. But he would have had to recognize

then, I think, that they got settled through experience alone—as
far as anybody could tell. And with this recognition, that ex-
perience alone demonstrates and creates for the objectivity of
taste, he would have had to leave the question.

I realize that I take my life in my hands when I dare to
say that I've seen something better than Kant did—Kant, who,
among so many other things he did, came close to describing
what went on in the mind when experiencing art that anyone
before or anyone after him. I can plead in justification of my
hardness only what close to two hundred years of art since his
time have expanded and clarified.

Close to our own time, psychologists have been trying by
experimental methods to discover constants in esthetic ap-
preciation that would enable them, presumably, to predict, if
not describe, the operations of taste. Some habits of esthetic
preference or reflex have been ascertained. It has been discov-
ered that most people, across most cultural divisions, prefer
blue to other colors, and that certain relations of sound tend, at
least in the West, to be preferred by most people—and so on.
But nothing has been ascertained so far that bears usefully on
the way that practiced taste works, or that says anything really
useful about the objectivity of taste.

In the meantime I keep on wondering, again, why the con-
sensus of taste, with all it says for the objectivity of taste, goes
unmentioned in the reworked controversies about esthetical
questions that have been carried on outside formal philosophy.
All the reputations that have come down to us form a kind of
puzzlebox. There the masters are, and they are there by virtue
of what has to be a consensus of taste, and nothing else. The
fact that consensus should have in the awareness of any-
one seriously interested in art or music or literature or dance
or architecture, let someone it remains unmentioned at the
same time that it remains implicit and necessary, it's not re-
ferred to all the while that it's proceeded upon; all the while
that the activity of art and around art, as we know it, would be
unthinkable without the presence of the consensus. When I
say "unmentioned" I mean nothing being brought to clear con-
sciousness and without being invoked as a given on which an
argument can be built. And in the common, objective validity
of esthetic judgments continues to be disputed—and not just
as a demonstrable fact, but even as a possibility.

Art can do without taste — I hear voices from as far back
as 1913 saying this. What they mean, without knowing it, is
that art can do without art: that is, art can do without offering
the satisfactions that art alone can. That's what art doing
without taste really means. Well, if the satisfactions exclusive
to art are dispensable, why bother with art at all? We can go on
to something else. (And there are, after all, things more valu-
able than art, as I myself would always insist.) But meanwhile
we're talking about art.

