Theme 1: Word Pictures

Lesson 3: Aesthetics

Part 1
It is said that when scientists began working on the space program in the mid 20th century, they needed to develop a food for astronauts that would be as convenient and as compact as possible. They came up with the perfect solution: food pellets. Rich in vitamins and minerals, fat free, and easy to digest, the pellets were nutritionally far superior to the ordinary diet back on earth. They contained all the necessary nutriments of meat, vegetables, and fruit, with none of the disadvantages of natural foodstuffs. Pellets were simple to store and never spoiled. An astronaut could easily carry a day’s supply of food in a pocket, washing down the pellets with a sip of distilled water from his plastic tube. And yet, despite high hopes, the scientists soon discovered that test subjects wanted nothing to do with the pellets. It seemed they missed the oral gratification that came from putting real food in the mouth and chewing it.

Pleasure serves no utilitarian purpose. The taste of food adds nothing to the nutritive value that keeps the body going. The only liquid we truly require is odorless, colorless, and tasteless H₂O. A scrap of moldy insulation will keep us as warm as a lovely blanket. The eye can read the visible world in black and white as readily as in color, as photographs and films have demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt. There are even folks who prefer black and white to color.

Yet the senses want gratification. Taste enjoys a variety of sensations—both consistencies and flavors—that are intrinsically tied also to the taste of smell; we all remember the school experiment in which a blindfolded student, with a clothespin on his or her nose, could not taste the difference between a piece of apple and a piece of onion. Recipes are formulas for preparing food that tastes (and looks and smells) good.

All the senses seek fulfillment in the experience of certain stimuli and recoil from others. The sense of hearing listens for rhythmic sound with a variety of tones and pitches, which when organized is called music; and we cover our ears when fingernails scratch a blackboard or a drill screams into metal.

What is desired becomes desirable, the gratification of which is experienced as pleasure. The pleasure in eating is often described as delicious. The pleasure in seeing is often called beautiful. The lack of pleasure in seeing may be called ugly or boring or pointless, depending on the intensity of reaction. What makes one sensation attractive, and another sensation repellant?

To a certain extent, of course, tastes and preferences are personal. I like white asparagus, and someone else prefers green. A third person hates all asparagus equally. There is no accounting for this kind of taste, and no need to justify it.
Yet a given population shares many likes and dislikes. Businesses depend on such a consensus of tastes and preferences. For instance, restaurants specialize in flavors and styles of preparation in order to attract a specific clientele. Clothing stores market certain fashions and not others. Car makers exhaustively research the latest trends in what the public seems to be looking for in transportation. This agreement on what is desirable and what is not, in effect, helps define the group itself: those with the same aesthetic assumptions tend to be part of the same group. It is important to be aware of this fact: within any given population, the aesthetic assumptions seem both natural and logical.

A visit to a foreign culture soon convinces us that human nature definitely does not include universal tastes and preferences. Regional foods can send us reeling. Foreign humor may leave us cold. The music which people whistle in the street may sound as meaninglessness to us as a boiling kettle. What does human nature universally include? The desire to gratify the senses, the scale from beauty to ugliness, the opposition of tastes between delicious and disgusting, ideas of proper and improper dress and behavior—these seem to be universal, though the specific stimuli may vary widely.

Obviously, we learn or at least acquire cultural norms over and beyond our personal likes and dislikes. I may not like or eat asparagus, but I am convinced that asparagus is a legitimate food. On the other hand, not only may I dislike eating spiders, but I have a hard time considering spiders as legitimate food, even though I know that in other parts of the world spiders form an important dietary staple for people just like me. In some places, spiders are considered delicacies. Culturally, I have learned that it is crazy to want to eat spiders, whether or not I have ever tried one. Cultures inculcate aesthetic rights and wrongs, just as they teach moral or behavioral rights and wrongs, the rules of conduct and social interaction. Often we learn by the reaction we observe in others rather than through explicit rule or dictum. Sights, smells, and tastes that repel us as adults may have fascinated us as babies; we had to learn that dirty diapers are disgusting. Similarly, we had to learn that movie stars, and people who look like them, are attractive.

Part 2

Aesthetics as we know it began in the 18th century as a concept for dealing philosophically with the question of beauty and its manifestations in art. In the 19th century the critic Walter Pater suggested that aesthetics has to do with “the love of art for art’s sake.” The phrase would resonate with modernist artists and writers, although Pater was not speaking about them so much as all of us. As ideas changed over the years, the precise meaning of aesthetics became subject to a wider application. The word itself comes from the Greek for sense perception, but the concept goes far beyond sensory experience to matters of
response, interpretation, judgment, value, and description. As such it draws upon and is related to psychology, anthropology, art history, and criticism.

Since the 20th century, ideas and impulses from the avant-garde, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-modernism, feminism, and still newer permutations also influence the study of artworks and texts, and in some cases dispute them. People are asking new questions: Why are there no women among the Old Masters? Where are so few people of color listed among the geniuses of the past two hundred years? Our answers often depend on our view of the world.

Aesthetics is not concerned with defining beauty, but in exploring what we know or think we know about beauty and other terms we throw around when speaking of sensory perceptions. Although aesthetics studies all the arts, this course is devoted to painting and literary texts and the relationship between them. Each falls under the critical eye of aesthetics.

We become more aware of what we enjoy as we construct ideas around the experience and relate it to other experiences. In other words, we observe, analyze, and categorize; that is, fit information into the bigger picture. This exploration in itself can be—and I fervently hope it will be, for students of this course—an aesthetic pursuit, an activity that produces satisfaction and, yes, even pleasure. What we validate almost by definition becomes beautiful. The better we get at anything, including aesthetic response, the more we enjoy doing it, for in the end it also validates and gives meaning to us.

There is no need to fear aesthetics or sneer at it. Aesthetics refers to something you do all the time anyway. The goal in this course is to refine that critical thinking process by (1) using specific works of painting and literature to become more aware of these objects of study and of our responses to them and (2) developing new information, more ways of seeing, to broaden, deepen, and strengthen our ability to think critically about the human condition.
Part 3
Consider the following statement by Charlie Chaplin, the most famous comic of the Silent Screen and an enthusiastic collector of art.

Many people would find themselves nodding in agreement with Chaplin’s sentiment, especially when confronted by a piece of modern art that leaves us scratching our head, such as *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, which is nothing but a urinal set on a pedestal (at left). Putting aside sentiment for a moment, let’s take a closer look at what Chaplin actually says. He claims to be impatient with a particular kind of artwork, as if waiting for the “thing of beauty” to do something it in fact refuses to do without aid. The artwork comes across as a foreign object, as a thing set apart, a thing foreign to the everyday world of sense experience, needing an interpreter or perhaps a specialist in such things to solve the mystery. Chaplin resents the object for requiring the intrusion of a third party, an expert. By questioning whether or not this “thing of beauty” has fulfilled its purpose, he is telling us that things of beauty do indeed have a purpose to fulfill. He admits the beauty of this thing from the start (“thing of beauty”), so we must conclude that he expects more than beauty from it. The thing must have a purpose beyond its beautiful appearance, beyond its way of existing beautifully, pleasing the eye. The implication is that true beauty must prove—make us understand—that it is beautiful before we should accept and appreciate it as truly beautiful.

Must an artwork mean something more or other than what it is? Here is a fine aesthetic question! Art as we know it is a fairly recent concept. Famous paintings from five centuries ago, which today we label as “art,” meant or represented or symbolized something more or other than themselves in their own time; in addition to appealing to the eye, they spoke to the heart or mind. Religious paintings, for example, illustrated religious truths and religious authority; even mythological scenes revealed God’s handiwork in nature. As Mary Anne Staniszewski points out in *Believing Is Seeing*: “For Leonardo [da Vinci], his drawing and painting were means of understanding the world. In the Renaissance, seeing, observing, and recording were means of acquiring the knowledge that led one to wisdom—a kind of wisdom that brought one closer to a divine state of Grace” (53). Renaissance painters never considered their work as Art with a capital A.

The modern concept insists on the utter meaninglessness of the art object. It is not meant to signify, represent, symbolize, or reveal. Marcel Duchamp, the same man who exhibited the urinal in an art gallery in 1917, tells us: “It is we who have given the name ‘art’ to religious things; the word itself doesn't exist among primitives. We have created it in thinking about ourselves, about our own satisfaction. We created it for our sole and unique use; it's a little like masturbation. I don't believe in the essential aspect of art” (100). Renaissance paintings were never really Art (in our sense of the word) because they had a purpose beyond their aesthetic function. For Duchamp and most “modern” artists of the 20th century, real Art lacks transcendence. It exists for us to look at
and perhaps wonder about. And yet, as we will discuss in the final theme of this course, Duchamp’s urinal was revolutionary in its day because he meant it to mean something.

In any event, we are not inhabitants of the Renaissance but of our own time and place. The aesthetic principles we practice certainly ought to weigh original purpose or intent, but not be bound by it. Five centuries may add a lot of unintended significance to a painting. Aesthetics must be practiced in the context of specific objects of study or else it results in a pointless display of mental gymnastics (to avoid using Duchamp’s word). Aesthetics is discovered as we go along, and thus is often subject to revision. Or rediscovery. Thoughts, opinions, and questions continue to change as we read literature and paintings year after year.

“I don’t like it,” is not a legitimate statement in this course and will never be accepted as such. “I don’t like it because…”—provided you base the explanation that follows on observation, experience, and critical thinking—is a good start. That explanation itself, removed from the “I don’t like it because” and grounded in the image and text under study, is the only real evidence that the student has done the work this course demands. I do not expect you to like everything. It is quite possible to dislike a particular work, however, and yet appreciate why others like it or why it is important to aesthetic discourse, either our own or the historical discussion. You may also find a composition intellectually stimulating to work with, regardless of your feeling for it. As you read my commentary on specific paintings and texts, you will undoubtedly get a sense of my personal favorites among the works chosen, and as the class reads your journal, we will get a sense of yours. It is unlikely any of us will ever have to say out loud, “I don’t like it.” Everyone will already know.