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Proveniential Properties, Style, and the Aesthetic Value of History

Lisa Giombini
Roma Tre University
lisa.giombini@uniroma3.it



Introduction

Art history tells us many fascinating things about the artworks we cherish and their history of making.







Question

- Why is the history of artworks so important to us?
- Does this knowledge also have some bearing on the aesthetic appreciation and evaluation of artworks?

- My suggestion is that the debate over the aesthetic value of history can be reframed as a dispute over **the kind of properties** that are legitimately involved in our aesthetic appreciation of art.
- Are the context-dependent properties of a work of art, those reliant on its history, to be considered **aesthetic properties** in the proper sense of the term?

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2. Manifest Properties and Proveniential Properties
3. Formalism, Empiricism and Contextualism
4. Style and Stylistic Properties
5. Conclusions

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- Philosophers have long reflected on the role played in art appreciation by those contextually-dependent properties that relate a work to its author, history, and origins.
- Drawing on David Davies (2009, 2010), I shall term such properties **proveniential properties** and distinguish them from what I will call the **manifest (aesthetic) properties** of a work of art.

Manifest Properties

- Manifest properties are those that usually appear in our aesthetic judgments (“unified”, “balanced”, “serene” etc. (Sibley 1959)).
- They are manifested to a viewer in the **immediate perceptual encounter** with an artwork, though not in the same straightforward way as other non-aesthetic features.
- They bear upon the appreciation of the work possessing such properties.



Provenential Properties

- Provenential properties express the work's **history of making**, linking an artwork to its provenance.
- They comprise both **relational** features of the artwork's history, and more specific, **non-relational** ones (Davies 2010).
- Provenential properties are related to the original artist's creative activity, which resulted in her work having the manifest properties we ascribe to it.



Proveniential Properties

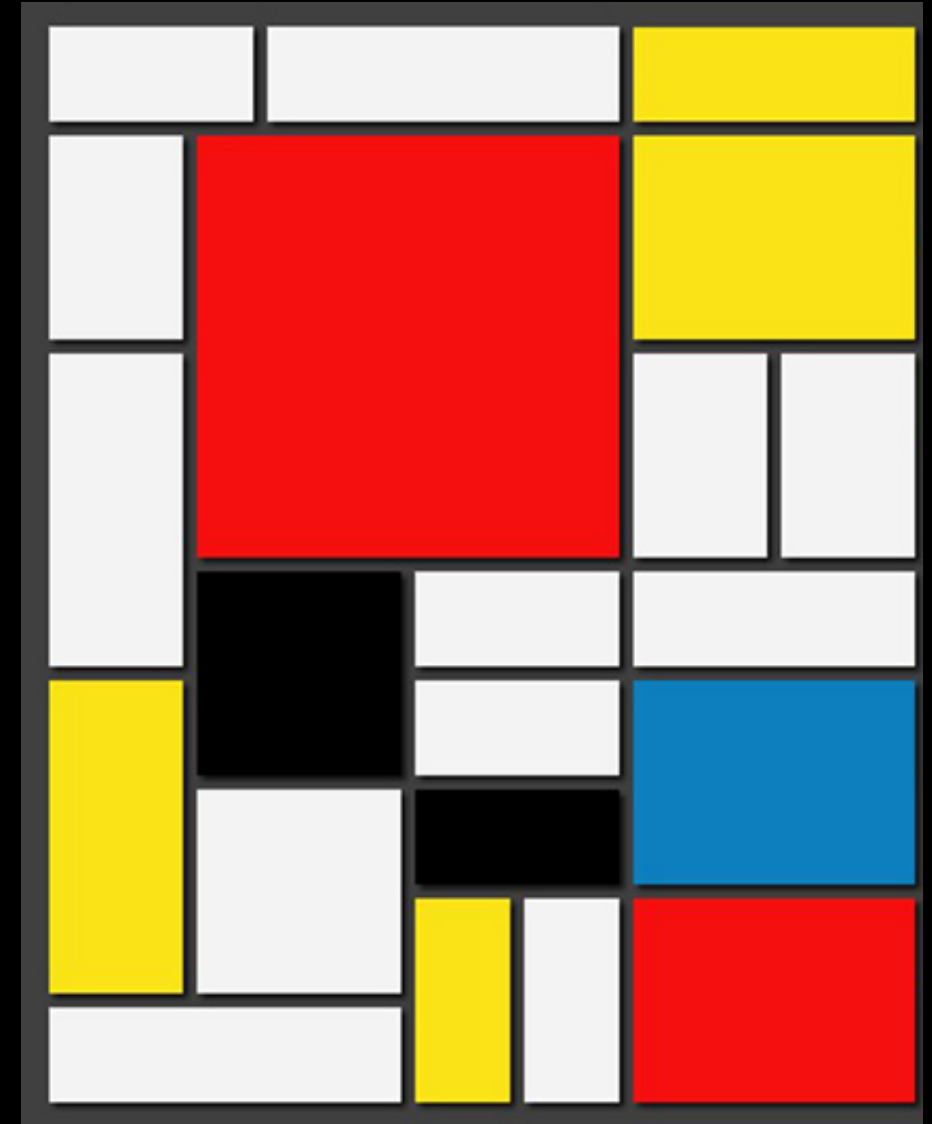
- A natural assumption is that proveniential properties **have no direct aesthetic value**, since we cannot grasp them just as we grasp manifest properties
- This raises the question. Can proveniential properties bear upon our aesthetic appreciation of a work, just as much as (we believe) manifest aesthetic properties do?
- And, more generally, what principled line we can draw between questions about artwork's aesthetics and questions about their histories.

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Formalism

- Formalism (Bell 1913; Fry 1920; Beardsley 1958; Zangwill 2001) can be seen as a view of the properties of a work that determine its correct aesthetic appreciation.
- More specifically, formalism implies that the aesthetically relevant properties of an artwork are **formal**, i.e. graspable by sight or by hearing.



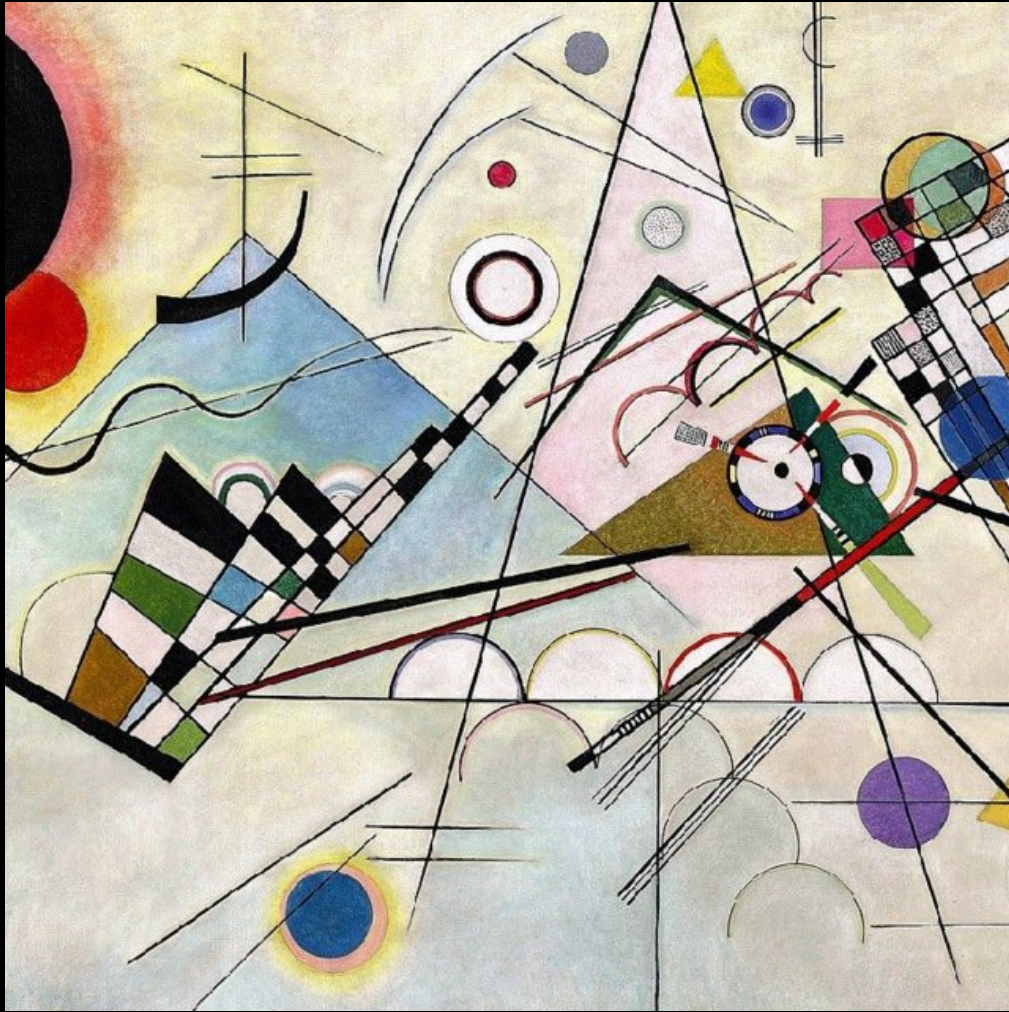
Formalism

The formalist claim is generally taken to follow from the ‘immediacy’ and the ‘disinterest’ theses (Binkley 1970; Carroll 2001).

- The **immediacy thesis** implies the aesthetic irrelevance of properties whose grasping requires the use of knowledge.
- The **disinterest thesis** implies the aesthetic irrelevance of all properties capable of practical import.

Taken together, these theses suggest that aesthetic appreciation depends solely on a work of art’s visual, auditory or otherwise sensual appearance.

Aesthetic Empiricism



- ‘What is aesthetically valuable in a painting can be detected merely by looking at it. Features that cannot be so detected are not properly aesthetic ones.’ (Currie 1980: Ch.2)
- Properties of a work that cannot be perceptually detected are not aesthetic and thus cannot ideally bear upon aesthetic appreciation.
- A consequence of this idea is that the history of a work, expressed in its proveniential properties, has no aesthetic value per se.

Criticism

- It has become increasingly common to argue that formalism and aesthetic empiricism are wrong (exceptions are Lessing 1965; Zemach 1986; Jaworski 2013).
- Facts about a work's history of making seem to be crucially important in practice and from a number of different perspectives.



Contextualism

- The main criticism derives from Danto's (1981) **argument from indiscernibles**. Form alone neither makes an artwork nor gives it whatever meaning it has.
- This position is generally referred to as **contextualism**.
- Artworks are “historically embedded objects” (Levinson 2007) or “historical individuals” (Rohrbaugh 2003) that are the product of a particular individual at a particular time and place.



Discussion

- A worry about contextualism is that it does not really explain why it is so.
- This is assumed to be the case because of the way works of art are as ‘historically-embedded objects’. Nevertheless, all human-made artefacts, are historically-embedded, but we do not always include facts about their origins in our appraisal of them.
- What is so special about art that makes knowledge of historical and contextual factors crucial to its experience?



An Empiricist Constraint

- Even if the formalist-empiricist view is untenable, this does not imply that we have to get rid of the idea that there is an **ineliminable connection** between aesthetic value and perception.
- Aesthetic value of a work may still reside in, and be accessible to, some appreciative experience or perception of the work.
- Drawing on Peter Lamarque (2010), we might call this a **moderate empiricist constraint**.
- In this approach, a property is aesthetic only if the subject can **discern cases** in which the property is present from those in which it is not (which is not the same as claiming that all knowledge is irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation).

- Suppose we say that a property of an artwork has aesthetic value only if it **makes a difference** to the recipient's direct engagement with the work.
- Then, we might insist that proveniential properties have aesthetic value only if they are somehow **directly discernible** in our engagement with the work bearing upon its proper appreciation.

- The claim that I want to make is that at least **some proveniential properties** work exactly in this way.
- This concerns those properties that are related to an artwork's **style**.

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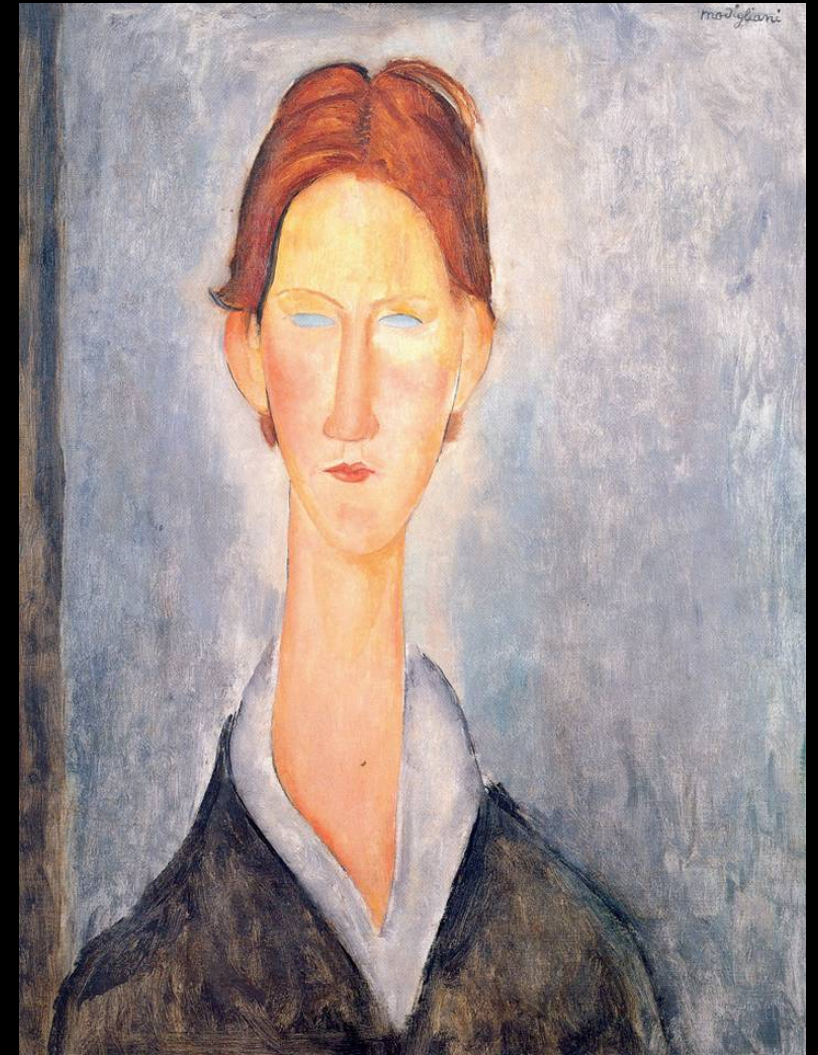
What is Style?

- Style is generally taken to indicate the **distinctive visual appearance** of an object, which is determined by the creative principles, inspiration and taste according to which something is designed (Gombrich 1968).
- Style can pertain to objects or actions that do not belong to the artistic realm, but has primary importance in the arts and in many aesthetic debates (Ross 2003).

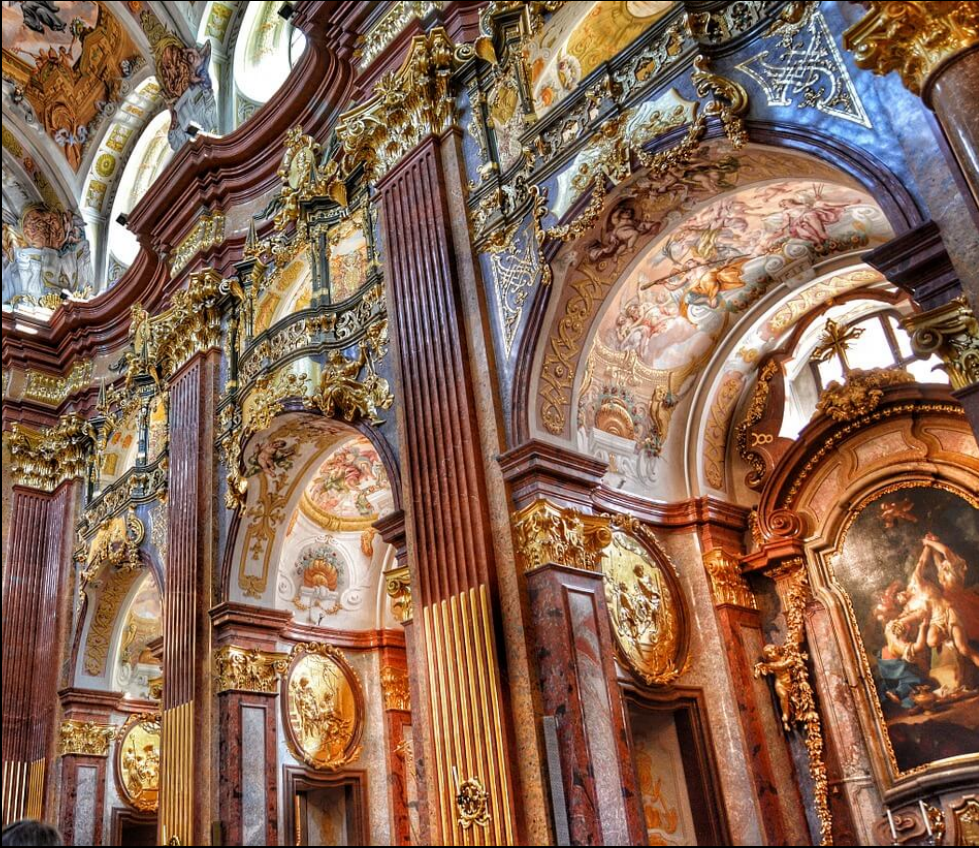


Individual Style and General Style

- **Individual style** refers to the style of a singular artist (i.e. ‘the style of Giotto’).
- According to Wollheim (1979), it is primarily an outcome of the ‘**psychomotor character**’ of the artist – a feature of the artist’s psychology that plays a guiding role in her artistic activity.
- This in turn depends on a number of things: the artist’s experience, her knowledge of the art history, and her ability to creatively imagine new ways of doing things.



Individual Style and General Style



- **General style** refers to the style of a period or artists' group within a period (i.e. 'Gothic Art').
- It is a sort of **common denominator** in the production of a time, something external to individuals and not a function of their activities as artists (Wollheim 1979).
- It is associated with **a set of distinctive properties** that group artworks together, in being particularly striking, or important.
- There are several forms of general style, including 'school' style, 'period' style, and 'cultural' style.

The Signature View of Style

- Stylistic properties are **proveniential properties** that relate a work to its author, provenience, and original context, testifying to the work's history of making.
- For this reason, they play a key role in the process of **identifying an artwork** and are integral to its correct **authentication** (Goodman 1975, 1978).
- According to Goodman (1975), style serves in this sense as '**an individual or group signature**', answering questions such as Who (made the work)? When? Where? and helping us place the work in the appropriate context.

Style as a Symbol System

- Style is however more than an instrument for identifying and cataloguing artworks, for it can represent the **intentional focus** of aesthetic appreciation.
- Stylistic properties transpose the psychological/historical/cultural character of an artist or period into the artwork's perceptual features.
- In this sense, style works much like a **symbol system** of some sort (Genova 1979).
- Stylistic properties **express or exemplify metaphorically** a certain content through form, in a way that makes such a content manifest and perceivable.



Style as a Symbol System

- Two points are essential for this notion of **expression** (Goodman 1968) as applied to style
 - Expression is a form of **metaphorical exemplification**.
1. In the case of expression, the properties exemplified by the symbol are acquired **metaphorically**.
 2. With expression the properties or predicates expressed are always displayed so that the symbol shows as well as says what it is about.



Style as a Symbol System

- Stylistic properties are able to metaphorically exemplify, in Goodman's sense, predicates describing what the work is about.
- By **wedding form to content**, style transposes the imperceptible properties of a work – its cultural and social meaning – into perceptible features that experientially bear upon the work's aesthetic appreciation.
- Style is thus tied to history as well as to the aesthetic impact of an object. To paraphrase Danto, **it brings artworks' history to their surfaces**.

- While being proveniential properties, stylistic properties are perceptually discernible.
- We can determine whether a work belongs to a style merely by perceiving it; to the same extent, we can ‘see’ or ‘hear’ whether it does not.



- Stylistic properties **are not simply aids to aesthetic judgment**, they do not merely provide us with hints concerning what aesthetic content might be found in a work.
- They impact the quality of aesthetic appreciation by **partly determining what manifest aesthetic properties** a work has.
- The manifest aesthetic properties of a work materialise when the work is perceived under a certain style.



Recognizing Styles



- The fact that stylistic features can be perceptually discernible does not imply that they can be immediately discerned.
- Recognising a work as a work in a certain style is a **skill** that must be acquired by **constant training**, forming the eye and ear to discriminate significant stylistic properties.
- If none has ever explained to me what is distinctive about the Baroque style in architecture, I may never have learned to recognise it.

Recognizing Styles

- To learn a style, abstract knowledge is not sufficient: we must learn how to grasp this information by **directly perceiving** it in the work.
- Historical facts may help determine whether a painting is, say, *Fauve*, but we must learn to **see** the painting as Fauve to understand why this style is truly attributable to the work.
- Similarly, it is no use just immersing in one particular work in a style. We must train our perceptive skills and see style as **exemplified** by the work.



Recognizing Styles

- Exposure to a works having the style in question is an essential part of this training because it offers an unlimited pool of knowledge to improve our perceptive discrimination skills.
- Familiarity provides us with the capacity for generalisation and differentiation.
- The greater a viewer's familiarity with works in one style, the finer her capacity to recognise its relevant features.



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Conclusions

- Stylistic properties, as a subset of proveniential properties, exemplify aspects of the work related to its origins and context of production.
- Being directly (yet not immediately) discernible in experiential encounters with an artwork, stylistic properties make facts about the history of the work aesthetically valuable.
- Moreover, stylistic properties help determine what the manifest aesthetic properties of the work are.
- This entails a positive answer to the question of the aesthetic relevance of at least some proveniential properties, namely those related to style.

Conclusions

- The underlying assumption is that for a property to be aesthetically relevant, it must be discernible perceptually, i.e., it must make some difference to how we experience the artwork.
- The aesthetic value of a work is thus tied in some way, yet not straightforwardly, to our experiential engagement with the work.

A painting of a stage set. The scene is dominated by heavy, dark green curtains that are pulled back to reveal a gold-colored backdrop with intricate, repeating floral or scrollwork patterns. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a sense of depth and texture. The overall mood is formal and theatrical.

Merci!

Thank you!