

Is Wine an Art Object?

“Is Wine an Art Object?” is the title of an article written by William B. Fretter, which appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* almost forty years ago.¹ The author has argued for an affirmative answer to the posed question. Since the question is clearly legitimate and philosophically interesting, and Fretter’s answer is provocative (we do not normally consider wine to be art), one would expect that his arguments will be taken as a challenge and that his article will spark a lively debate. Yet, nobody has picked up the glove: as far as we know, Fretter’s article has not induced any reaction whatsoever.²

In 2007, a collection of ten essays on wine titled *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine*, edited by Barry C. Smith, was published.³ The authors include philosophers, wine experts and a linguist. Many interesting philosophical and aesthetic questions (mainly concerning the status of properties ascribed to wine) were raised but only one essay, “Wine as an Aesthetic Object” by Tim Crane, deals with the question of whether wine should be considered an object of art.

Crane's answer to the question is not as definitive as Fretter’s one; Crane’s hesitations are, however, far more instructive. He notes, on the one hand, that wine is not generally regarded as a work of art (the view he sympathizes with) yet, on the other hand, he argues, and quite cogently, that none of the arguments against taking wine to be an object of art is convincing. Clearly, this posits a dilemma: either practice or philosophical analysis is wrong. Reluctant to admit either, Crane closes his essay with a somewhat schizophrenic statement: “Despite the fact that the arguments against the idea that wine is an art object are not very good ones; and notwithstanding the fact that we seem to have a model of aesthetic value of an artefact where its value derives from that of the sensory experience of the artefact (i.e. music), despite of this, it seems like a pointlessly provocative linguistic stipulation to insist that wine is a work of art.”

As a matter of fact, we do think that wine is an art object. To defend this view we propose to survey definitions of art that have been put forward in the second half of the twentieth century with intent to examine whether they effectively rule wine out. We want to challenge the received view that wine is not art in a more serious manner than Fretter or Crane. If we,

¹ Fretter, William B.: “Is Wine an Art Object”, *JAAC*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn 1971), pp. 97-100.

²The article has been referred to only twice and on both occasions by the same person – Peter H. Karlen. See his: “Aesthetic Quality and Art Preservation” (*JAAC* 41, 3, 1983) and “Worldmaking: Property Rights in Aesthetic Creations” (*JAAC* 45, 2, 1986). The contents of both references are irrelevant in the present context.

³ Barry C. Smith (ed.): *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine* (London: Signal books 2007).

similarly to Crane, do not find the arguments against wine as art persuasive, we will go on to explain why people usually do not think that wine is art, for without such an explanation, no affirmative answer to the question is likely to be convincing.

Our paper will begin with a critical review of Fretter's article. Apart from finding some of his arguments not compelling we consider the main fault to be the somewhat arbitrary choice of his characterization of what art is. This is why we focus systematically on explicit definitions of art. Definitions of art which will be discussed in some detail include the institutional definition of George Dickie and the one of Arthur Danto, the cluster theory of the concept of art of Berry Gaut, the aesthetic intention conception of Monroe C. Beardsley as well as the semiotic definition of art of Nelson Goodman based on the 'five symptoms of the aesthetic' and Jan Mukařovský's semantic conception founded on the idea of the dominance of the aesthetic function. We shall then try to present arguments against the claim that wine is art in terms of these definitions with the underlying assumption that if wine passes the test of the constraints of these definitions (at least as well as some objects that are consensually considered art objects), its claim to arthood should be taken seriously. We will show that this indeed is the case.

We shall see that wine will fit some conceptions of art (notably Berry Gaut's cluster conception) with a surprising ease. We shall note that before deciding on a celebration of the fact that we have a compelling reason for granting wine the status of art one should examine whether other commonplace objects (especially those that are not even aesthetic objects) do not pass the test with flying colours as well. We will also show that Dickie's institutional definition of art is infected with similar faults. More interesting is the confrontation with Goodman's theory which establishes symbolic functioning as a necessary condition of art, for we normally do not think of wine as referring to anything. We shall nevertheless show that wine, just like abstract art (which also does not denote anything), exemplifies and expresses some of its properties and that exemplification and expression are in Goodman's theory clearly species of reference. The symbolic function of wine will be considered again in terms of Mukařovský's theory of art. We shall conclude with two observations: 1) that wine satisfies the conditions of all the considered definitions and theories of art, and 2) that some of these theories are not satisfactory.

We are naturally aware of the fact that we have not demonstrated or proven that wine is art. This also was not our ambition. The purpose of this paper is to provoke a discussion on the artistic status of wine, discussion whose potential has not been, strangely enough, fully explored yet. A supplementary aspiration is to stimulate a new interest in the dying inquiry

concerning the definition of art - inquiry which, in our opinion, does still deserve attention and which is, after all, more important a task than eventually to decide whether wine is an art object or not.