

# The Role of Originals in Aesthetics

## Introduction

The role originals play in western societies may strike the observer as pre-modern or fetishistic. Seemingly, there is no space for the aura of originals in an enlightened, disenchanted world. But people spend an incredible amount of money to purchase original paintings or sculptures and they prefer them over reproductions. From a naturalist or rationalist perspective, this might seem to merely echo some timeworn traditions. The objects of admiration bear no intrinsic features which can be used to justify the role they play vis-à-vis their (relevantly) type-identical counterparts. So, is the fuss about originals based on some implicit beliefs in hocus-pocus? In this paper it will be argued that in the realm of aesthetics the common behavior towards originals is, to a certain degree, totally rational. There is a kind of aesthetic properties some paintings, sculptures and other artworks bear *in virtue of* having an original. Elaborating on an observation made by Gregory Currie concerning the act of producing a painting, we will be able to identify a certain kind of properties which can be used to illuminate the notion of an aesthetically relevant original (section one). These properties

will be referred to as *skill-based properties*; an artifact instantiates such properties in virtue of these properties' being implemented during a skillful action. In the second section, some aspects of skill-based properties will be discussed. It will be shown (i) that they are best conceived of as traces, (ii) that these properties are perceivable, and (iii) that originals can be evaluated with respect to these properties.

#### Part one

Originals are originals because they bear a causal relation to a certain person, a certain culture, a certain era, or to a certain process within a culture or social situation. It will be shown that works having an original exemplify a sort of properties works like composed works of music lack necessarily.<sup>1</sup> These properties *partly make* for a piece of art being an original, *and* they contribute to the artwork's aesthetic value. They make for something's being an original in the sense that they form the relevant link between object and historical process. This is a conceptual point: the notion of an original in the realm of aesthetics depends on the notion of these properties. Put differently: The property of being an (aesthetically relevant) original (in the realm of art) can at least partly be described in terms of relational properties the original bears. The property of being an original, in turn, contributes to the artwork's aesthetic value at least in the sense that ordinary paintings and the like have part of their aesthetic properties *because* the original is an original of the appropriate kind in the realm of art (or: *because* it exemplifies the relevant properties).

Gregory Currie argued that in the case of paintings the actions the artist performs producing the original are aesthetically relevant. He writes:

Part – a very large part – of what the painter’s achievement consists in is his success or otherwise in actually putting paint on the canvas. It is not merely the choices that he makes about the distribution of colors that matter. It matters how he implements those choices by physical interaction with the medium. (Currie 1989: 90)

If this is correct, then clearly, originals have aesthetically relevant properties most reproductions, or, more generally, non-originals necessarily lack. The achievement is subject to aesthetic evaluation.

Currie talks about a difference between *choices* and *implementations of choices*. Obviously, this distinction matters in a metaphysical respect: Works having an original come into existence (or are discovered, if you prefer) only if there exists a physical entity the author of the work interacted with. Contrary to that, one might be inclined to describe the situation for, say, composed works of music as follows: These works can be created (or discovered) by pure thinking. This suffices for a tentative definition of the difference between works having an original and those lacking an original: *An artwork has an original if and only if it is impossible for it to come into existence (to be discovered, if you prefer) by pure thinking.* It will turn out that this criterion points into the right direction. Unfortunately, it is not very illuminating, for it does not tell us anything about the relevant aesthetic difference between artworks having an original and artworks lacking an original, or whether or not there is such a difference. In addition, it will turn out that the aesthetic difference between works associated with an

original and works lacking an original in a sense *grounds* the metaphysical difference. Before it comes to judging this definition, it is worth taking a closer look at the relation between artist and work.

There are a lot of language-data enabling us to elucidate the role physical interaction plays in the process of production of an original. In what follows, paintings will be compared to a kind of artifacts which maybe do not deserve the name 'artwork'. The similarities will enable us to tell a story about what exactly makes for the relevant aesthetic category distinguishing paintings, sculptures and so on from many other works: It is the aspect of bodily skills applied by the artist during the process of production.

The term 'artisan' is transparent with respect to its Latin cognates 'ars' and 'artificium'. This relation to predecessors of our words 'art' and 'artwork' reveals a component of one of the word's senses which is relevant for our concerns: In one of its uses, the word comprises the concept of handicraft or the concept of craftwork. There are at least three striking similarities between artifacts of handicraft and original paintings or sculptures.

(i) The metaphysical criterion mentioned above can be applied to craftwork as well: No artist producing an original canvas can do so by pure thinking, just like the artisan cannot produce the artifacts she produces by pure thinking. Note that a *designer* can, such that there is a distinction in the realm of non-art artifacts which is strongly analogical to the distinction

between paintings and so forth on the one hand and composed works of music on the other.

(ii) People seem to prefer products of craftwork over their mechanically produced counterparts, and they do so in virtue of aesthetic differences. Some people are ready to pay much more money for artifacts of handicraft than for an artifact being intrinsically equivalent but produced mechanically. This is why: *People appreciate the bodily skills, the techniques, the intentional or automatic control of bodily movements performed or applied during the process of production.* Products of craftwork can sometimes be described as being perfectly produced, which is an aesthetic evaluation and an implicit reference to the technical skills the artisan applied producing the artifact.

(iii) You find borderline-cases between arts and handicraft in the *Arts and Crafts Movement* or in the *Art Nouveau*. In these cases, the connection between an artist producing an original and an artisan producing aesthetically evaluable artifacts becomes apparent: Both apply complex bodily skills producing the artifact. This is what people appreciate and what they base their aesthetic evaluation on.

Part of the aesthetic value of both, original-art and handicraft, depends on skills applied during the process of production of the artifact. Interestingly, artworks which lack an original, unlike sculpture, painting, etching etc., lack this similarity to craftwork. From these observations, the following definition of the relevant kind of properties can be derived:

*Property p belongs to the category of skill-based-properties iff necessarily, if an object x has p, then p is the result of an application of bodily skills applied during the process of production of x.*

Here, we have defined a relational property. One of the relata has already been described: a skillful action. The objects standing in the relevant relation to the skillful action are, in the cases we are concerned with here, originals. Unfortunately, the definition is somewhat underdetermined: It is not at all clear where to draw the line between what counts as a result of an action and what does not. Assuming that the aesthetic value of an artwork *depends* on the outcome of skillful actions, we could describe them as the *result* of an application of bodily skills applied during the process of production. Assuming that an original (a physical object) can have the aesthetic properties the artwork it instantiates has, some aesthetic properties turn out to be skill-based properties. Under this interpretation, we cannot explain the occurrence of aesthetic properties of the relevant kind referring to skill-based properties. To get an idea of where to draw the line between results and non-results of a skillful action in this sense, let us consider some examples of aesthetic properties depending on the application of skills: being a masterpiece of handicraft, being perfectly produced, belonging to the realm of craftwork, being produced with unbelievable precision, or being produced very badly – these properties depend on skill-based properties. Skill-based properties are, for example, the particular shape of a certain piece of color, the texture of the oil paint on the canvas which was produced by the artist using a brush or a scraper, the

shape of the marble-sculpture – all these properties can be alluded to to ground judgments about the relevant aesthetic properties. This is what Currie referred to claiming that “[p]art – a very large part – of what the painter’s achievement consists in is his success or otherwise in actually putting paint on the canvas.” A skill-based property, then, is a relational property holding between some *physical feature* of the original and the relevant skill applied. For what follows, I will presuppose an intuitive notion of a bodily skill and assume that the line between relevant results of the application of a skilful action and non-relevant results is intuitively clear.

Now, we can use the notion of skill-based properties in order to draw a distinction between arts which have an original and those which lack an original.

*An artwork x has an original only if there is an instance of x, y, and part of the aesthetic status of x depends on skill-based properties of y.*

Since there are artworks which require some objects to have certain skill-based properties without having an original, like comics, we have to state this as a necessary condition only. The criterion is based on the assumption that skill-based properties in fact contribute to the aesthetic status of the work. In that, the criterion is transparent with respect to the aesthetic relevance of the notion of an original within the realm of art. Some artworks have part of their aesthetic status in virtue of skill-based properties exemplified by their instance(s).

Now, the criterion can be used to explain the metaphysical difference between, say, composed works of music and ordinary paintings. The latter come into existence via the production of an original necessarily *because* this is the only way to create aesthetic objects of the appropriate kind – aesthetic objects some properties of which depend on skill-based properties. The former necessarily lack these properties. Therefore, they have to be created by a set of choices (which can sometimes be written down or fixed using a notational system). In this case, we can talk of an *explanatory priority* of aesthetics over metaphysics in the sense that it is up to the artist which type of aesthetic object she wants to create. It is an aesthetic decision; the aesthetic difference is not a mere by-product of the metaphysics of different artworks.

To sum up: An artisan interacts in a special way with the medium she is working on. Some artists behave similar to artisans (at least in some respects), others do not. The former produce originals (or original parts), the latter do not. The relevant aesthetic difference lies in the fact that artworks having an original or original parts are evaluable with respect to the producer's bodily skills applied during the process of production, aspects of the history of production we appreciate.

Part two:

Doubts about these claims assumingly stem from the fact that we cannot directly detect the history of production in the original. Taking this intuition seriously, the differences in peoples' behaviors towards originals on the one hand and mechanically produced entities on the other seems, at

first sight, rather absurd and vain (as, for example, Eddy Zemach seems to believe (Zemach 1986; 1989; 1991)). So, even if there are skill-based properties, and even if many aesthetic judgments are in fact based on these properties, like in the field of handicraft – are these properties really aesthetically relevant, if they are not, so to speak, *present in the object*?

Peter Lamarque seems to believe that, in a sense, they are present in the original. He claims that 'there is a unique experience [...] attached to seeing the original object, a live causal connection with genius' (Lamarque 2002: 160). If something like 'live causal connection with genius' is possible when we observe an original, then the relevant properties have to be present in some way or other. Being *present in the object* is metaphorical. But what this phrase points to becomes apparent when we take a look at the notion of a trace. In this section it will be argued that (i) there is a "connection with genius" because skill-based properties can be conceived of as traces of aesthetically relevant actions the artist left, that (ii) in a sense, the history of production is perceivable, and that (iii) trace-perceptions are relevant for aesthetic evaluation.

In order to get rid of the metaphor of *being present in an object*, it is worth reflecting on the notion of a *trace* and the role traces play in the evaluation of a piece of evidence in juridical contexts. Pieces of evidence bear traces. Traces are not individuated by their intrinsic physical features – they are (at least partly) individuated by a history of production. Even though traces are relational (they are traces *of* something or someone in the past), we are ready to say that an entity *actually* bears traces of actions or agents – they

are subject to empirical investigation, which requires them to exist at the time of investigation. Artists leave traces on the artifact they work on, and for any action performed during the process of production which leads to some sort of final state of a part of the original, there will be a bunch of traces in or on the original. *Skill-based properties, qua being the causal outcome of skillful actions, are traces of skillful actions.* Now we are in a position to draw the line between relevant and irrelevant results of the application of a skill: The relevant results are traces, which are at least partly defined by physical features of the final state of the object the artist worked on. So, aesthetic properties depending on skill-based properties can easily be distinguished from the latter (they are not traces of the skillful action). So, the gut feeling that the past simply does not matter when people talk about an object and its *present role and properties* is mistaken (point (i)).

In order to establish points (ii) and (iii) it is worth looking at a discussion in a completely different field of philosophy: The philosophy of social perception.

In social interaction, agents often directly react to facial expressions, movements, and artifacts in an appropriate way. They perceive faces as faces, anger as anger, and cars as cars. Subjects often manage to do so without engaging in complex cognitive processes, like consciously drawing inferences (Goldman 2006: 3). This gives rise to a problem very similar to the problem of originals: What subjects actually detect on an object's or a body's surface is so to speak *not transparent* with respect to its history of production. What looks like a table could be some random arrangement of

particles and what looks and sounds like laughter is thereby not necessarily laughter. For these things to be what they are (or to fall under the relevant description), a certain history of production is required. This history of production is often hidden away from an observer: Subjects do not have direct access to other persons' minds, even though the properties which are directly detectable (part of the properties located at a body's surface) give good hints to what goes on in the others' minds.<sup>2</sup> So do kinds of shapes and sounds of artifacts: What looks or sounds like a car normally is a car.

However, there is a gap between the property of being a car (a property depending on a history which is not directly detectable) and perceiving the property of being a car (which must be based on properties directly accessible). This gap mimics the gap between the history of production of an original and the properties perceivable on the original later. But even though there is this gap, (trained) subjects see cars *as cars* and hear them as what they are.

Similarly, one can see traces as traces. This sense of 'to see' does not imply certain counterfactuals. Consider seeing a dance: If it had not been a dance (because it was an unintended movement strikingly similar to a dance), it is not the case that one would have seen *that* (everything else remaining equal). Nevertheless, it is a fundamental sense of 'to see', a sense we use every day to describe our experiences.<sup>3</sup>

One can see traces even though one cannot see and will necessarily never learn to see a difference between two entities differing only with respect to relational features of the traces they bear. Exactly these counterfactual considerations seem to ground the more elaborate doubts concerning the

claim that perceptually indistinguishable entities can differ aesthetically. But they can, because *being a trace of the relevant kind* makes for the aesthetic difference. This establishes the second point: We can, in a sense, *see* the history of production as being of a certain type, just like we can see the intentionality of a movement, or the emotion behind a facial expression as what they are. Furthermore, this gives rise to the possibility of an appropriate way of *evaluation*.

We implicitly or explicitly evaluate social situations on the basis of this type of perception. We do so implicitly when we automatically move back from an aggressively behaving person. We do so explicitly when we enter a bar to have an elaborate conversation on a philosophical topic, see the group of colleagues we wanted to join sitting around a table, drinking beer and laughing. Depending on how suspicious we are, we may then try to detect from the way our colleagues laugh whether it is the laughter of joy or the laughter of ingestion of an irresponsible amount of alcohol. Depending on the result of our evaluation we decide what to do: to join the group with a pint and get rid of our intention to talk about philosophical issues, or to join them with a coke, or, in the worst case, to turn around and leave immediately.

The target of our evaluation is what to do in or what to believe about the given situation. This sometimes comprises moral aspects: Imagine a situation in which someone, John, needs some help carrying a heavy box of glasses. Another person, Jim, is approaching John, smiling and showing that he intends to offer some help. Unfortunately, he acts very unhandy, the

box falls down and the glasses shatter. That he acted unhandy was visible. It was also visible that he intended to help, rather than to destroy the glasses John carried. So, when it comes to judging Jim, it would, on the basis of knowledge gained by observation, be irresponsible to blame him morally. There is no evidence available that Jim destroyed the glasses intentionally. Accordingly, we have no reason to blame him morally.

John's intentions form an (ongoing) part of the "history of production" of the succeeding facial expressions or other properties directly detectable. This does not prevent us from evaluating his behavior morally, that is: with respect to his intentions. We base our claims in perceptual judgments about perceptions of facial expressions and movements which are subsumed under properties which involve reference to intentions. It is so common to do so, and it is so reliable a way of forming beliefs, that it seems absurd to deny the appropriateness of this kind of evaluation. Why should we, then, deny that it is possible in the case of originals?

The case is similar: We base aesthetic judgments in perceptual judgments which involve reference to perception of traces, just like we base moral or other evaluative judgments in perceptual judgments which involve reference to perception of something as intentional or emotional behavior. Being a sad face and being an intentional movement comprise a relation to the history of production of the sad face or the intentional movement, just like the property of being a trace of a certain kind comprises a relation to the trace's history of production. What is maybe even more important: In the actual world, the surface properties of paintings which are mechanically (or randomly) produced often (though not necessarily) differ

from those of paintings which are produced by an artist. Training can enable us to become more sensitive to such differences. Even though the surface properties are not transparent with respect to the process of production, they are *reliable*, just like facial expressions are reliable with respect to the emotions they express.

If this is correct, then we should accept that we can not only see traces as traces, we should also accept that basing aesthetic judgments on trace-perception is not mysterious at all. The 'live causal connection with genius' results from a connection to these aesthetically relevant traces left by the artist.

### **Concluding remarks**

It was argued that the aesthetics of original-works (and of many improvisations) partly depend on skill-based properties. These considerations have implications concerning questions related to forgeries, reproductions, and restorations. Sameness of the bodily skills applied during the process of production turned out to be a necessary condition for work-identity. If an appropriate instance of a work has to exemplify all the aesthetically relevant properties, many forgeries and reproductions do not deserve the title of *being an instance of the work*, just because they lack the relevant skill-based properties. Whether or not forgeries (or reproductions) which are produced in a way maximally similar to the original are instances of the relevant artworks depends on whether or not other

contextual aspects are relevant for work-identity, an issue I have not addressed here. Interestingly, traces survive reconstruction. In juridical contexts, traces which are partly destroyed and then reconstructed still count as traces. This gives conceptual reasons for the claim that originals survive restoration, at least if restoration is based on reconstruction of the traces left by the artist.

<sup>1</sup> For reasons of space, improvisations, which bear striking similarities to originals, will not be commented on here.

<sup>2</sup> This claim has been attacked for example, by Shaun Gallagher (Gallagher 2008).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of a sense of 'perception' which comprises this sense of 'to see', see [AUTHOR'S PAPER].

## References

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[Author's Paper]