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Kant on Form, Function and Decoration

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Abstract. Kant says little explicitly about the beauty of functional objects. We argue though that his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* contains both the conceptual resources to illuminate the category as well as interesting examples of such artifacts. Succinctly, the beauty of functional objects is a type of dependent or adherent beauty. Pleasure in these objects is dependent on the concept of the end they are designed to serve. In a beautiful functional object the excellence of its design is visible or perceivable and it is through reflection upon what is perceived that we are led to recognize the excellence of the object.

Any interpretation of Kant's view of the beauty of functional objects should acknowledge at the very beginning that it is an interpretation of very little text indeed. More precisely, what little is implied about the subject is arguably a by-product of the attempt to explain the distinction between the beauty of natural objects and the beauty of works of fine art. Nevertheless, we believe that Kant's *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment* contains both the conceptual resources to illuminate the category of beautiful functional objects as well as interesting examples of such artifacts.

§16 of the Analytic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment opens with a highly important claim: There are two kinds of beauty, namely, free beauty and adherent or dependent beauty. In judging free beauty: 'No concept of any end [...] is presupposed' (CPJ 5:229-230).[1] But adherent beauty does

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[1] Quotations from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* are taken from the Guyer and Matthews translation in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Kant 2000). They are followed by the abbreviation CPJ and the Academy volume number and pagination.

'presuppose a concept of the end that determines what the thing should be, hence a concept of its perfection' (CPJ 5:230). Kant's primary reason for introducing the distinction is made perfectly clear much later in the text:

> In order to judge a beauty of nature as such, I do not need first to have a concept of what sort of thing the object is supposed to be, i.e., it is not necessary for me to know the material purposiveness (the end), but the mere form without knowledge of the end pleases for itself in the judging. But if the object is given as a product of art, and is as such supposed to be declared to be beautiful, then, since art always presupposes an end in the cause (and its causality), a concept must first be the ground of what the thing is supposed to be, and, since the agreement of the manifold in a thing with its inner determination as an end is the perfection of the thing, in the judging of the beauty of art the perfection of the thing will also have to be taken into account, which is not even a question in the judging of natural beauty (as such). (CPJ 5:311)[2]

This important passage tells us that in judging the beauty of natural objects concepts play no role, that is, we set aside or hold in abeyance all knowledge of what the thing we are viewing is. The beauty of natural objects is free precisely in the sense that its appreciation is free of concepts and so 'the mere form [...] pleases for itself in the judging'. Although this is a contested matter, our claim is that in judging the beauty of natural objects we respond merely to their spatial or, more rarely, spatio-temporal form.[3] It is in this precise sense that judgments of natural beauty are aesthetic – indeed purely aesthetic or pure judgments of taste. For space and time, Kant holds, are the *a priori* forms of what is given to us sensibly. This emphasis on spatial or spatio-temporal form will prove of importance for what follows.

[2] Janaway explicitly rejects these apparently clear and emphatic formulations. See, Janaway 1997: 473.

[3] For other interpreters who hold this view see: Biemel 1959: 52-58; Gotshalk 1967: 251; Uehling 1971: 18-34; Johnson 1979: 170-171; Lorand 1989: 35; Düsing 1990: 183; Wicks 1997: 387, 388; Hanna 2005: 285 note 49; Geiger 2010: 76. Allison and Fricke acknowledge that some passages clearly suggest this understanding but they think it should be rejected. See: Allison 2001: 133, 135-137; Fricke 1991: 630-631.

Works of fine art, however, always presuppose an end. They are products of intentional causality. Artists aim to express or convey a certain idea, thought or emotion; and they do so by giving them body or realizing them in a work of art. Though again this is a contested matter, we are claiming that when Kant says that adherent beauty does 'presuppose a concept of the end that determines what the thing should be' the concepts of which he is speaking are just these ideas, thoughts or emotions. This intentional content is incarnate in the work of art that realizes it and 'will have to be taken into account' in appreciating its beauty. These are the concepts to which aesthetic judgments of art adhere or upon which they are dependent.

So Kant's principal aim in drawing the distinction between free and adherent beauty is explaining the difference between the beauty of nature and the beauty of fine art.[4] But in speaking of beauty that depends upon concepts of human ends he has, as a matter of fact, circumscribed a wider category than works of fine art. Indeed, works of fine art, though paradigms of beauty, are not the only products of human labor we think of as beautiful. We also appreciate the beauty of functional objects.[5]

It might be thought that this last claim is anachronistic and that for Kant the fine arts exhaust the realm of beautiful human production. They are, after all, for Kant and his contemporaries, the beautiful arts, *les beaux arts*, or *die schönen Künste*. But among Kant's examples of human-made dependent beauty are a few that very clearly are not works of fine art.

> But the beauty of a human being (and in this species that of a man, a woman, or a child), the beauty of a horse, of a building (such as a church, a palace, an arsenal, or a garden-house) presuppose a concept of the end that determines what the thing should be, hence a concept of its perfection, and is thus merely adherent beauty. (CPJ 5:230)

Might there be among these examples beautiful functional objects, or, in terms of the distinction Kant draws in §43, examples of products of han-

[4] Gotshalk denies and Stecker affirms that Kant's primary concern in introducing the distinction is to explain the difference between natural and artistic beauty. See: Gotshalk 1967: 254-255; Stecker 1990: 73.

[5] For the claim that we judge dependently beautiful products of intentional agency, either artifacts or artworks see, Gammon 1999: 160 note 16.

dicrafts or remunerative arts (*Handwerke*, *Lohnkünste*) rather than of the liberal arts (*freie Künste*)?

The answer to this question begins by suggesting that there are two kinds of concepts upon which judgments of adherent beauty may depend: 1) ideas of reason; 2) concepts of determinate human ends or functions. Kant never draws this distinction perfectly explicitly. But it is suggested by his contrast of ideal beauty that has 'at its basis [...] some idea of reason in accordance with determinate concepts', on the one hand, and, on the other hand, beauty 'adhering to determinate ends' (CPJ 5:233). As Kant makes abundantly clear, his view is that works of poetry, painting and sculpture present aesthetically ideas of reason (CPJ 5:314). In Kant's terminology, ideas of reason are concepts of infinite yet interconnected, indeed comprehensive conceptual richness; they are all products of reason's desire for absolute completeness under one concept. Aesthetic pleasure in these fine arts is thus dependent on a particular kind of concept, namely, the endlessly rich ideas of reason they aesthetically present. It is our suggestion that judgments of the beauty of functional objects are dependent on determinate concepts of well-defined human ends.[6]

The question then is what it is to be a beautiful functional object. As a judgment of adherent beauty it presupposes, according to Kant, 'a concept of its perfection' (CPJ 5:230). To give a first and very rough answer, a beautiful functional object is one whose immediately-given sensible properties reveal its excellence or perfection. This means that it will only be possible to speak of the beauty of objects that fulfill their end particularly well.[7] So the concept of the end must be such that allows for gradation and indeed perfection or excellence, which is not to say that there is only one way of being excellent. In appreciating such beauty we do not ask ourselves what it is to be a perfect functional object of a certain kind and then determine that we have before us such an object. We do not mentally produce a check-list of properties that must be present in an object and then pro-

[6] For the claim that conceptual content plays a decisive role in judgments of dependent beauty see, Mallaband 2002.

[7] The end of a functional object must be indeterminate enough for us to think of objects fulfilling the function less perfectly or more perfectly. This responds to a point Stecker makes about very simple objects that apparently always fulfill their end such as tissue dispensers or pipe-cleaners. See, Stecker 2011: 440-441.

ceed to determine whether they are indeed present. In Kant's terminology, that would be to make a determinative conceptual (or logical) judgment. In simple terms, we would be applying a given concept to a particular object.

Judgments of adherent beauty presuppose such determinate judgments. After all, we must know what kind of an object we are looking at to appreciate its beauty as the sort of functional thing it is. But such determinate judgments, though necessary, are only a condition of appreciating the beauty of the object. Aesthetic judgments are reflective and it is precisely reflection on the sensible properties of a particular object that reveals the perfection of the object. Such judgments are then reflective and indeed, in this sense, aesthetic. But they are not pure aesthetic judgments of beauty. We do not respond to sensible properties alone. Unlike judgments of free natural beauty, in which we take pleasure in the mere spatial or spatio-temporal form of an object, they are dependent on concepts. For the reflection upon the sensible properties of the object is an appreciation of them as properties of this kind of an object. Simply put, in a beautiful functional object excellence is visible or perceivable and it is through reflection upon what is perceived that we are led to recognize the excellence of the object.[8]

To understand better the notion of adherence and so the pleasure we take in adherent beauty it is important to recall Kant's sharp distinction between the understanding as the faculty of concepts and intuition as the faculty of sensibility. Our concepts contain (among others) names of sensible properties. But in a judgment of adherent beauty we set out from the sensible qualities to which our concept refers. The directionality of reflective judgments is the converse of determinative judgments. They move from the sensible given to the concept. Specifically, in judgments of the beauty of a functional object, the move is from sensible qualities to properties definitive of the excellence of such an object. The aesthetic pleasure in these properties thus sensibly enlivens our concept. Judgments

[8] We thus disagree with the claim that judgments of dependent beauty are mere combinations of the judgment that a thing is a perfect specimen of its kind and a judgment of free beauty occasioned by it. See: Budd 2002: 37; Rueger 2008: 540-544. For a similar view see, Janaway 1997: 473-474. On our view, furthermore, the relation of adherence is more intimate than relations, in which function serves either as constraint or as a necessary condition of beauty. See: Guyer 1999: 357-361; Guyer 2002: 358-361.

of adherent beauty are expressions of such pleasure.

This may be a quality we know is referred to by the concept. But we may also experience the quality for the very first time, in cases where it is merely implicit in our concept of the object. And yet it is important to emphasize that in neither case are we learning or conceptually gaining anything really new in the aesthetic experience. Positively put, our gain is sensible – an experience. Subsequently though, we might gain conceptually through the experience by making explicit what previously was only implicit in our concept. Indeed, the distinction between aesthetic experiences that only enliven the concept of a thing and those that also make its content explicit can serve to illuminate the different aesthetic pleasures of the expert or connoisseur and the layperson.

It is very tempting to speak here of a gain in knowledge as well. Expressions of aesthetic pleasure might indeed draw from us exclamations such as: 'Now I really know what an X is!' But although Kant helps us understand the deep and intimate relationship between knowledge and adherent beauty, he also allows us to define more precisely such experiences as those in which our concepts are enlivened rather than further determined.

We have so far been speaking of sensible qualities or properties without saying more clearly what precisely this means. Here two possibilities suggest themselves. We claimed above that in judgments of the free beauty of natural objects the spatial form or three-dimensional shape, or, in some cases, the spatio-temporal form alone evoke our feeling of pleasure. In works of fine art too form is of importance. Kant says very clearly that drawing is essential in all the pictorial arts (see: CPJ 5:225, 330). But clearly we do not find a sculpture beautiful merely by attending to its spatial form, nor merely to the preparatory drawing for a painting. Composition, perspective, symbols, gestures, colors and materials used all have a sensible side that is constitutive of artistic expression in the pictorial arts. So is Kant's view that in judgments of the beauty of functional objects we respond to spatial or spatio-temporal form alone? Keeping in mind that as we are talking about adherent beauty we would be thinking of properties such as aero-dynamical form in an object designed for speed. Or does he think we respond to a wider range of sensible qualities? Put slightly differently, there are two possible theories of the beauty of functional objects here. One is austere and focused on spatial or spatio-temporal form alone.

The other employs a far more diverse palette of sensible qualities, which in the case of functional beauty would include spatial or spatio-temporal form but also such properties as feeling-to-hand (for example, stability, weightiness, balance, texture), rigidity and flexibility, etc. Which theory does Kant endorse?[9]

As far as we can see, the text gives no answer to this question. Some might point to the fact (mentioned above) that in §14 Kant emphasizes the importance of form, in the guise of drawing, for the pictorial arts – thus suggesting that spatial or spatio-temporal form alone are the object of judgments of the beauty of functional objects as well (see, CPJ 5:225). But the task of this discussion is to elucidate the proper object of *pure* judgments of taste. Kant is using drawing as presenting in black-and-white on paper the mental representation that evokes pure aesthetic pleasure. He says explicitly that drawing constitutes the 'proper object of the pure judgment of taste' (CPJ 5:225). It is furthermore true that Kant does talk more about form as a means of artistic expression than about other sensible properties. But it is not because form alone is important as a means of expression, but because his primary interest is in the most general and unchanging, in fact in the *a priori* aspect of aesthetic means, namely, space and time.[10]

So the text does not answer the question of the range of sensible properties relevant to the appreciation of functional beauty. But Kant does clarify what kind of sensible properties indeed detract from our appreciation of beauty. In §14, Kant distinguishes between ornaments (*Zieraten, Parerga*) and decoration (*Schmuck*) (CPJ 5:226). An ornament is external to the representation of an object and 'augments the satisfaction of taste [...] through its form' (CPJ 5:226); borders around a painting or colonnades around magnificent buildings are examples. Kant critically calls decoration anything that merely adds charm and emotion (*Reiz und Ruhrung*) and is only subjectively agreeable (*angenehm*) (see: CPJ 5:223, 225, 226). What remains implicit in this discussion is that it is of the most direct importance to the understanding of Kant's conception of functional beauty. For clearly, neither ornamentation nor decoration are of relevance in judgments of natural beauty. Furthermore, ornamentation in art is both lit-

[9] Significantly, the latter list includes properties not accessible by sight or hearing. For this point see, Stecker 2011: 441-442.

[10] For more on Kant's view of artistic means see, Reiter (Forthcoming).

erally and in relation to content external to the work, as a picture-frame is to a picture and as colonnades might be to a building they surround. In functional objects, however, precisely because they are objects to be used, the ornamentation would be found in or upon the object itself. The important point is that ornamentation must augment our pleasure in the appearance of functionality and indeed do so through its form.

We are now in a position finally to return to Kant's examples in §16. Relevant, first, are the works of architecture. Earlier in the text, Kant speaks of works of horticulture and architecture 'insofar as they are fine arts [*sofern sie schöne Künste sind*]' (CPJ 5:225), thus apparently implying that some of their works belong to the mechanical arts.[11] Looking again at the list of examples of dependent beauty Kant gives in §16, it makes sense to think of the church, palace and arsenal as the kind of functional works that might belong to the fine arts and present ideas of reason, but very probably not in all cases. As functional works of fine art, they might express such ideas as God, religious community, or, monarchy, legislation, or, self-sufficiency and freedom. It also appears that such works, precisely because of their essential use, might in some cases be appreciated either as merely functional buildings or as works of fine art. In another passage, Kant might be giving first examples of works of architecture that are more typically beautiful art and then examples of works of architecture that might perhaps in some cases be works of fine art but might also be works of mechanical art. The first include 'temples, magnificent buildings for public gatherings' (CPJ 5:322); the latter include 'dwellings, triumphal arches, columns, cenotaphs, and the like, erected as memorials' (CPJ 5:322).

On the other hand, the garden-house is perhaps more commonly an example of functional beauty. This seems to us probable, because garden-houses are often built for private use and indeed to enjoy what Kant thinks of as the charms of nature. Negatively, it is hard to think of a garden-house or even a private country residence as presenting aesthetically an idea of reason.

We suggested above that Kant might hold either an austere conception of functional beauty that focuses on spatial or spatio-temporal from alone.

[11] That horticulture is sometimes an example of a mechanical art – say in French gardens – might be implied by speaking of the English taste in gardens as an example of free beauty (see, CPJ 5:242).

But he might also think that the appreciation of functional beauty involves more sensible properties. On the latter view, the colors and materials used in a small sanctuary designed to facilitate and enhance the comfortable and immediate joy in a garden would be relevant sensible properties. Woods and stone typical of a region might enhance the pleasures of the garden by bringing together the protected inner shelter and the views towards which they open. The formal spatial properties are even more obvious. Well-located structures with rotational symmetry and affording maximal vistas, for example, are in many gardens well-suited to their end and for this reason are often found aesthetically pleasing.[12]

The second example of functional beauty is, surprisingly enough, the horse, which we understand as an example of an animal bred to serve a function and in this sense an artifact and not a natural kind. A Thoroughbred is a living-being but also a very carefully designed racing machine and our appreciation of its beauty is dependent on the concept of the end it is made to serve.[13] Its beauty obviously differs dramatically from the beauty of a Belgian draft-horse. On the broader conception of relevant aesthetic properties, appreciation of the healthy sheen of a horse's coat might take part in the appreciation of its beauty. But in the case of the horse, clearly the emphasis on spatial and spatio-temporal form gets us very far indeed. In examining a Thoroughbred, for example, close attention is paid to the shape and proportions of the head, chest, back, croup and legs and to their relation to each other. In walking a horse attention is obviously paid to a spatio-temporal pattern. Indications of speed and stamina are sought and again entirely different features and proportions would be sought in a draft-horse. Conformation or the conformity of form to function is both a most important set of concepts used in articulating the excellence say of a Thoroughbred and essentially an aesthetic notion. As the great Vincent O'Brien once said, he always looked for a horse that 'fills the eye'.

Let us conclude by saying this: Probably no principles are more import-

[12] We thus disagree with Gammon's claim that in judgments of dependent beauty the aesthetic assessment of the form of an object is an independent ground of estimation accompanying the primary conceptual assessment of its finality. See, Gammon 1999: 164.

[13] This answers the question of why horses are not classified as natural beauties. See, Scarre 1981: 351, 362.

ant for modernist design generally and architecture specifically than the idea that form and sensible properties generally must express function and a complementary critical or at least cautious view towards what exceeds function. The first idea finds its classic formulation in Louis Sullivan's very-often quoted adage 'form ever follows function'.[14] The second idea finds sweeping and militant expression in Adolf Loos's proclamation that the '*evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from the object of use*'.[15] It was the central claim of this paper that both the first idea as well as the second (in more moderate form) are to be found and indeed are conceptually closely related in Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgments.

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[14] Sullivan 1896: 408. For Sullivan though the claim holds true of natural objects as well as objects designed by human beings.

[15] '*evolution der kultur ist gleichbedeutend mit dem entfernen des ornamentes aus dem gebrauchsgegenstande*'. Loos 1931: 277. The lack of capital letters is in the original.

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