

## Contextualizing Kant's Concept of Genius & Aesthetic Ideas

Immanuel Kant's theory of art, as outlined in his *Critique of Judgement*, establishes itself as being about more than just beauty or pleasure. Kant believes that art, more specifically *fine* art, is about the confluence of genius, intellectual engagement, and art itself. Moreover, he believes that fine art is not about aesthetic/technical excellence or demonstrations of skill (which, Kant says, can be acquired)—rather, it is about something that can stimulate thoughts, challenge or reinforce concepts, and express the ineffable. To Kant, this can only be possible as the product of genius (Kant 2000, 186). This essay will explore these very ideas of genius and aesthetic ideas, attempting to contextualize their place in our perception of art today, and how that perception evolved over many years.

At the heart of Kant's philosophy on *beautiful art* lies the concept of genius. He defines genius as an “inborn predisposition of the mind through which nature gives the rule to art” (186). Kant sees genius as an inborn, inherent quality that allows one to create works of art that do not simply defy rules, but in a way give way for those concrete rules to be irrelevant. The work must be exemplary, he says, in that they do not provide any guidelines for replication but, in their unique expression, represent a ‘model’ work. Moreover, it is important to note that not only did Kant not believe that there were rules for creating beauty, he rejected the notion that there are specific signifiers for beautiful or good art. His idea that predefined rules and/or specific templates for artistic excellence simply did not exist superseded his claim that taste and skill were required too. However, Kant believes there is more that is required, and that genius alone cannot produce fine art, and the recognition of beauty is not validated by the thing being simply beautiful.

Kant contends that fine art must present what he designates as “aesthetic ideas.” These are representations of ineffable—evocations of thoughts and feelings that suggest “much thinking without it being possible for any determinate thought” (192). This highlights contention that beautiful art requires not the communication of some kind of tangible concept or visible technical prowess, rather it is characterized by a need for ideas that go beyond immediate sensory experiences. To Kant, the creation of fine art therefore requires more than just skill and taste—aesthetic ideas are what take primacy, and the only quality that can bring this out is genius. Ultimately, Kant’s insistence on aesthetic ideas as being the key indicator of beautiful art challenges the idea that art is merely an object to be found pleasurable as a function of its beauty. Conversely, Kant suggests that art’s true value, therefore, lies in its ability to transcend sensory stimulation and the limits of language. These ideas continued to shape both artistic creation and through many art movements.

For its uncanny alignment with Kant’s aesthetic theory, the Romantic Movement of the 18th and 19th centuries serves as a potent example of what he contends is the true value of fine art. The movement emphasized, more so than past ones, the importance of individual artists and their respective genius that brought about works steeped in emotional depth. Favoring more esoteric and complex, emotionally-steeped representations over the Enlightenment Era’s fascination with reason and morality, the Romantic movement birthed works that expressed more personal and emotionally-charged ideas. The works of Francisco Goya or J.M.W. Turner invites the observer to sense something beyond representational clarity and non-ambiguity; rather, they encapsulate inexplicable meaning. Kant’s aesthetic ideas, here, signify the victory of complexity over clarity; abstraction over definition. Romanticism, as an art movement, espoused perfectly his idea of genius and inner vision.

Furthermore, the Modernist movement in the late 19th Century refined Kant's idea about beauty and the role of genius in art. Artists like Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall strayed as far as they could from traditional notions of beauty, opting for creating works that, in the same way, subverted conventional thought. Picasso's disjointed and asymmetrical style does not inherently contain beautiful form—and as Kant would agree, it is not universally pleasurable—yet it accomplishes what Kant would situate as presenting many aesthetic ideas.

Herein lies a contradiction of sorts that can be reconciled when we look at Kant's concept of beauty itself. To Kant, agreeableness, which is what he terms as a form of pleasure that arises simply as a result of sensory activity, is different from the *beautiful*, which is disinterested and a pure aesthetic judgment. So, art, for Kant, is not beautiful simply as a descriptor of pleurability, but something that stimulates and engages our mental faculties—the imagination and the understanding. While Picasso's work may not fit under conventional notions of beauty, even for Kant, it can be argued that it does fit under his broader philosophy of aesthetics because it does present aesthetic ideas. In Modernist works, beauty is not the primary objective for the artist. What stands out, and what makes the work aesthetically excellent, is the evocation of the ineffable, as mentioned earlier. For Kant, beauty is “purposiveness without (§10)—a harmonious engagement with art *viz.* our own imagination and understanding of the world.

The lasting impact of Kant's ideas have been met with much, albeit indirect, opposition, most evident in modern and contemporary art. Conceptual art, for example, challenges Kant's contention in that it may not involve *genius* in the way he terms it. For example, On Kawara's work, while certainly artistic, is not necessarily a product of an “innate disposition,” nor is it “exemplary”—the work is born out of sheer commitment with an emphasis on discipline. The value of the work lies not in its perception or appearance, but the *idea* behind it. In this sense,

Kant's argument for aesthetic ideas is satisfied, but can we really call such conceptual art the result of genius? Is personal reflection or expression necessary for good art?

Kant's argument, while susceptible to rebuttal and nuance, stands in today's time though, since it highlights the deeper intellectual and emotional dimensions of art. In a much more relevant way, Kant does not believe that the value of art lies in the pleasure it brings, but the ideas it stirs up. Similarly, but not entirely so, conceptual and avant-garde art puts emphasis on the process of creation, rather than any ideas it may project. In this way, Kant's aesthetic theory has evolved in a human world that is characterized by continual searches for meaning and conclusiveness—ideals near impossible to reconcile.