On the Relative Unimportance of Aesthetic Value in Evaluating Visual Arts

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Contrary to the received view according to which the value of works of art consists exclusively or primarily in their aesthetic value I argue that the importance of aesthetic value has been grossly overrated. In earlier publications I have shown that the assumption stipulating that the value of artworks consists exclusively in their aesthetic value is demonstrably wrong. I have suggested a conceptual distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic value arguing that when it comes to evaluation the artistic value, which reflects the significance of innovations exemplified by the work, is no less important than the aesthetic value. Here I take the argument a step further by suggesting that the aesthetic value is considerably less important than the artistic value. To show this I draw attention to a neglected aspect of art evaluation, namely to the monetary value of artworks. Although there is no necessary connection between monetary value of works of art (determined by supply and demand) and their aesthetic value or their artistic value, it can nevertheless tell us something important not only about the overall value of works of art (as art) but also about the relative importance of the two component values. I show that the enormous differences between monetary values of different artworks cannot be accounted for by the corresponding differences in their aesthetic value but can be explained by the differences in their artistic value.

1. Introduction

Contrary to the received view according to which the value of works of art consists exclusively or primarily in their aesthetic value, I want to argue, somewhat unorthodoxly and perhaps provocatively, that the importance of aesthetic value has been grossly overrated and that it usually plays only a secondary role in the evaluation of works of visual art. Let me at the same time make clear that my claim has nothing to do with the programmatic demise of aesthetic value by the proponents of so-called conceptual art or with its devaluation by the theorists promoting other forms of postmodern art. I fully subscribe to the time-honoured traditional view that aesthetic value is a *sine qua non* in the arts.

Where I depart from the tradition is in rejecting the almost universally accepted assumption of both classical and modern aesthetics, according to which the value of works of art (as art) consists exclusively in their aesthetic value. In my earlier publications I have tried to show that this assumption, which I call the assumption of aestheticism, is demonstrably wrong. I have suggested making a conceptual distinction between aesthetic value and artistic value, arguing that when it comes to art evaluation artistic value is no less

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important than aesthetic value (Kulka 1981, 1982, 1996, 2005). Here I want to take the argument a step further and show that in the visual arts aesthetic value, to which aestheticians and philosophers of art have devoted so much attention, is less important than it has been hitherto generally assumed and that in comparison with artistic value it mostly plays second fiddle.

To show this, I shall first draw attention to an aspect of art evaluation that has been neglected by aestheticians—namely, their monetary value.[1] I shall argue that although there is no intrinsic or conceptual connection between the monetary value of works of art (determined by economic factors such as supply and demand) and their aesthetic value (which depends on their aesthetic properties) or their artistic value (which has to do with the significance of their innovations), it can nevertheless tell us something important not only about the overall value of works of art (as art) but also about the relative importance of the two component values. I shall argue that the differences between the monetary value of different works of art cannot be accounted for by the difference in their aesthetic value but can be explained by the corresponding difference in their artistic value.

2. The Young Ladies of Avignon

Let me begin with a partial reiteration of two arguments each of which was devised to show that the assumption of aestheticism is untenable and that apart from aesthetic value one has to acknowledge the existence of another value that plays an essential role in evaluating and appreciating works of art. The first argument is based on a case study of Picasso's famous painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. The second derives from the inconclusive debates concerning the aesthetic status of forgeries and from the bizarre conclusions that the philosophers participating in this debate have reached. I will start with the first.

There is a consensus among art critics and historians of art that this painting is one of the most important works of twentieth-century art. As Peter Plagens (2007, p. 22) notes, it has retained the status of the most influential work of art for more than a hundred years after it was created. We may therefore be surprised to learn that when it was painted in 1907 the picture was not received with great enthusiasm. Picasso himself was not quite satisfied with it, and his friends did not like it at all. We learn from John Golding (1959, p. 18) that 'when Picasso painted the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, those of his friends that were allowed to see it have felt that in some way he [Picasso] had let them down'. 'They could not grasp it at all: their only reactions were shock, alarm, regret, dismay, some nervous or indignant laughter', writes Patrick O'Brian (1976, p. 151), and Gertrude Stein (1951, p. 18) reports that the Russian art collector 'Tschoukine, who had so much admired the painting of Picasso … said almost in tears: what a loss for French painting'.

How are we to reconcile such reactions with the following praise of contemporary critics?

> It is incontestable that the painting marks a turning point in the career of Picasso and, moreover, the beginning of a new phase in the history of art (Golding, 1957, p.47).

1 One notable exception is Sagoff, 1981, on which I shall comment below.

> *The Young Ladies of Avignon*, that great canvas which has been so frequently described and interpreted, is of prime importance in the sense of being the concrete outcome of an original vision (Elgar And Maillard, 1956, p. 56).

To explain this apparent discord we could, for example, refer to Kendall Walton (1970), from whom we have learned that the correct ascription of aesthetic properties to a work depends on perceiving it in the appropriate artistic category, that is, in the category to which it belongs. Being the first Cubist painting, Picasso's *Demoiselles* obviously belongs to the category of Cubism. But at the time of its creation this category did not exist and perceiving it in any other category could only lead to negative assessments—the painting did not make any sense. We know from the history of art that works that violate existing norms and foreshadow new artistic movements are usually met adversely at first. Just think of Van Gogh who sold a single painting during his lifetime or of the scandals occasioned by the first Impressionist exhibitions. But, once the category of Impressionism was established, people began to see and appreciate the beauty of the Impressionist works, and the same paintings that were mercilessly ridiculed by the critics in the 1870s found their way into prestigious galleries by the turn of the century.

Picasso's famous painting, however, is not just another instance of a work that was rejected at first and had its beauty recognized only later. This case is different, for contrary to the happy ending that awaited the Impressionist artists, one would look in vain for aesthetic merits in Picasso's painting when it is perceived in the appropriate category. For when the category of Cubism became established and the *Demoiselles* started to make sense to a wide range of viewers, it was not beauty but grave aesthetic defects that came to the fore. The very same art critics whom I have just quoted describing the painting in superlative terms also point out its serious aesthetic faults:

> In itself the work does not bear close scrutiny, for the drawing is hasty and colour unpleasant, while the composition as a whole is confused and there is too much gesticulation in the figures … (Elgar and Maillard, 1956, pp. 56–57)

> It is not hard to understand why it disappointed Picasso's friends. It is in many ways an unsatisfactory painting. To begin with there are obvious inconsistencies of style. Even a cursory glance is enough to show that Picasso had several changes of mind while he was working on the canvas; indeed, he himself considered it unfinished (Golding, 1956, p. 48).

These are by no means dissenting assessments. Similar criticism can be found in almost every publication that analyses aesthetic features of the painting. Thus, in his *Concise History of Modern Painting*, Herbert Read (1959, p. 68) concludes that the picture is 'stylistically incoherent' and Peter Plagens (2007, p. 22) writes about 'the merciless mishmash of styles', pointing out that 'only two of the five heads are painted in the same style as the bodies to which they belong'. I think there is no need for more quotations of negative criticism: just look at the picture and judge for yourself.

The question is how to reconcile these conflicting assessments? How could the same authors I have just quoted who think so highly of Picasso's first Cubist painting express such devastating criticism of its aesthetic qualities? Should we accuse them of being inconsistent?

Before jumping to conclusions, we should first consider whether their admiration and their criticism refer to the same aspects of the work. When they praise the painting, they invoke its originality, its importance in the history of art, its being a turning point, the beginning of a new phase, and so forth, implying that this work was highly influential in the subsequent development of modern art. When they criticize it, they refer to its composition, combination of colours, stylistic incoherence, that is, the aesthetic properties of the canvas. Both types of judgement pertain to the value of Picasso's painting, each of them, however, relates to a different kind of value. One to the artistic, the other to the aesthetic.

Whether a work is original, whether it violates prevailing representational norms, whether it foreshadows the beginning of a new era and so on, are relevant and important features for its evaluation. They are not, however, features on which aesthetic judgements are based. From the aesthetic point of view, originality, for example, can be positive but it can also be negative. The two values are conceptually distinct: different factors play different roles in their determination, and different parameters are relevant for the assessment of their magnitudes. Whether the composition is well balanced, whether the colours are harmonious, whether the picture expresses tension, and so on, are features that are relevant for the appraisal of its aesthetic value. What inspired the work, to what extent it is original, whether it points to new directions, or how its new features were further developed by other artists are factors that are relevant for the assessment of the other type of value, which I call, for want of a better name, artistic value.

What the authors of the quoted passages say is thus not only consistent but also quite straightforward. They simply state that the painting is particularly important for the development of modern art despite its aesthetic faults. As Elgar and Maillard (1956, p. 58) aptly put it, 'this famous canvas was significant for what it anticipated rather than for what it achieved'. In other words, although its aesthetic value falls short of Picasso's standards, no other modernist painting matches its artistic value. We thus have to conclude that the assumption of aestheticism that the value of a work of art consists exclusively in its aesthetic value must be rejected. Otherwise, the assertion that the painting is extremely valuable as art, despite its serious aesthetics faults, would be a contradiction in terms, which it is evidently not.

The time has come to spell out what this artistic value is. I suggest the following informal definition: the artistic value of a work of art reflects (1) the artworld significance of the innovation exemplified by the work and (2) the potential of this innovation for subsequent artistic/aesthetic developments.

From the first part it follows that artistic value cannot be assessed just by contemplating the work by itself. No amount of scrutiny will reveal whether it exemplifies a significant innovation, since this is not an intrinsic property of the work but a complex relation between its properties and a relevant class of antecedent works. To assess the artistic value, it is thus not enough to have refined taste and a capacity for aesthetic discrimination, as the formalists (like Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Monroe C. Beardsley) would have it. We must have the relevant art-historical knowledge. From the second part of the definition, it follows that an appraisal of artistic value requires hindsight. To evaluate a work's potential for further aesthetic or artistic exploitation, one must be familiar with the subsequent developments. The artistic value can thus never be fixed once and for all. It is a dynamic component that may be changing with time, reflecting subsequent developments in the history of art.

The distinction between the artistic and the aesthetic value, which applies to all forms of art, may also draw some support from the common-sense answer to the question of what is the artist trying to accomplish? The artist has at least two chief aims: (1) to make something new, and (2) to do it well. The extent to which he or she succeeds is then reflected by the artistic and the aesthetic value of the work.

Concerning aesthetic value, I believe that the conception I have adopted is quite standard. Like many other philosophers, I cannot accept Beardsley's formalist theory according to which the aesthetic value of works of art should be judged simply by what can be perceived in them.[2] Such a conception is too narrow. I fully subscribe to Walton's view that art criticism cannot be altogether separated from the history of art because '(some) facts about the origins of works of art have an essential role in criticism, [and] aesthetic judgements rest on them in an absolutely fundamental way' (Walton, 1970, p. 337). More specifically, to estimate correctly the aesthetic value of a given work one has to perceive it in an appropriate category, and determining this category may require some contextual knowledge that cannot be derived from its appearance.

Thus, not only estimates of artistic value but also judgements of aesthetic value require some art-historical knowledge. It also follows from Walton's theory that sometimes a certain period has to elapse before the aesthetic potential of artistic innovations can be fully appreciated because the appropriate category in which the work is to be perceived has not yet been established. Thus, since external knowledge and a delay are also required for the appreciation of artistic value, one may legitimately ask whether the two values are indeed conceptually distinct and independent of each other. Could it not be the case that my 'artistic value' is not really a distinct and self-contained value but could be explained away by the claim that aesthetic value can be fully appreciated only with a certain delay.[3]

Now, though it is true that some time may elapse before each of the two values can be fully appreciated and that their judgements may require art-historical knowledge, it does not mean that the distinction between them collapses or that one of them could be reduced to the other. The point is that the reasons why we may need certain time delays for judging the two values are quite different in each case and the art-historical knowledge is of a different type and serves a different purpose. For judgements of the aesthetic value of exceptionally innovative works, the delay is needed just to allow for the establishment of an appropriate category in which the work is to be perceived.[4] For judging artistic value, the length of time remains important even once the appropriate category has been established, because this value also depends on subsequent developments in the relevant domain of art. And whereas the art-historical information for determining the appropriate category concerns just a few specific facts,[5] judgements of artistic value involve richly structured

2 This may not be sufficiently clear from my first two publications on this topic, which are mentioned in the introduction.

3 I thank Jakub Stejskal for raising this objection.

4 If the work does not exemplify a radical innovation, no time delay is required because the appropriate category is already at hand.

5 Namely, in what category the author had intended his work to be perceived and whether the category has been recognized in that particular society at the time the work was created.

art-historical narratives concerning works of art or movements that have been influenced by the work in question. We should also note that once the correct category has been determined, aesthetic value remains relatively fixed, whereas artistic value is subject to alterations that depend on what happens in the ensuing history of art.

Picasso's *Demoiselles* is perhaps the most striking example of a work that was highly influential despite its aesthetic defects, but it is by no means the only one. Another case in point is Manet's *Le déjeneur sur l'herbe* (Figure 1). The painting that caused a scandal at the Salon des Refusés in 1863 is now being prominently reproduced in almost all books about modern art since it is considered the first modernist painting. Yet, as Ackerman (1979, p. 456) points out, Manet's 'fields and forest are dully and indecisively painted in numerous areas and the figures do not seem to have left the studio or even to have been in the studio at the same time'. He concludes that 'the exalted content is inadequately supported by the form' (Ackerman, 1979, p. 461).[6]

In the history of art, one often finds that works which have stood at the forefront of the development of emerging styles are aesthetically cruder than more mature works executed from the vantage point of accumulated experience and are thus aesthetically more refined. Yet it is the former that figure pre-eminently in the art books, because their aesthetic shortcomings are more than compensated for by their high artistic value.

If one accepts that works of art have not only aesthetic value but also artistic value, the question arises whether the two values are the only ones. The answer surely must be that works of art can have many different sorts of value—for example, moral, cognitive, religious, propaganda, sentimental, or economic value. As Malcolm Budd (1995, quoted from Lamarque and Olsen, 2004, p. 262) rightly argues, a work of art 'can possess as many kinds of value as there are points of view from which it can be evaluated'. These other values, which we may find useful to call contingent, supplementary, or secondary, are, however, very different from the two fundamental values because they have nothing to do with the essence of art. While the artistic and the aesthetic values of art are necessary conditions of arthood (every work of art must have them in some degree or other[7]), the other values are not. Some works may have some of them, others may not.

The term 'artistic value' has been used by different authors in different contexts with meanings that differ substantively from those I have specified above. (see Korsmeyer, 1977; Kivy, 1980; Best, 1982; Mitias, 1982; Dziemidok, 1983, 1986; Hermerén, 1983). In a recent article, 'The Myth of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value', Dominic McIver Lopes (2011, p. 518) complained that what believers in artistic value refer to 'has never been set out'. (This is not entirely fair because although explicit definitions are indeed rare, quite a few authors have pointed out problems—often in connection with conceptual art—that cannot be resolved without postulating a non-aesthetic artistic value.[8]) Lopes (2011, p. 533)

6 It should be noted that these aesthetic shortcomings are much less serious than those of Picasso's first Cubist painting.

7 A purported work of art with no innovation whatsoever could only be a copy or a forgery of some existing artwork and as such it would not normally be considered as art.

8 Dziemidok (1988) charts out and references different positions held by different authors in this debate, and discusses their conceptions of artistic value. Ibid.

Figure 1. Éduard Manet, *Le déjeneur sur l'herbe*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 208 cm x 264.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris ,public domain, source: Wikimedia Commons.

wants to remedy this by articulating his own conception, which reads as follows: 'V is an artistic value = V is a value of an artwork as K, where K is one of the art forms, *genres*, or other familiar art kinds'. Like other philosophers, he points out that not all the values that works of art may have contribute to their artistic value, that is, to their value as art. The question is how to draw a line between the kinds of value of works of art that are relevant to their artistic value and those that are not. Lopes (2011, p. 534) examines some theories that could resolve this problem, and after finding them unsatisfactory he states: 'Without some principled way to distinguish some values as characteristically artistic', we have to accept 'that there are many values in art, none of which is characteristically artistic (except maybe aesthetic value)'. From here he concludes: 'If artistic value just is the aggregate of pictorial value, musical value and other such values, then there is nothing it is to have artistic value distinct from aesthetic value and stronger than mere value in art' (Lopes (2011, p. 535). In other words, 'the characteristically artistic value is aesthetic value, independently conceived' (Ibid.).

In 'The Reality of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value', which is a direct response to Lopes, Louise Hanson rescues the existence of artistic value, but only at the price that it is not a kind of value like an aesthetic, moral, cognitive, or religious value and she claims that to take it as such is a category mistake. On her construal 'artistic value is just that which something has to the extent that it is good art' (Hanson, 2013, p. 502). It thus turns out that 'having artistic value' is synonymous with 'being a good work of art'. What Lopes and Hanson seem to ignore are the motivations for construing another value distinct from aesthetic value: they seem to overlook that aestheticism creates problems, such as how it could be possible that great works of art can be aesthetically seriously defective while other works that are aesthetically unimpeachable may not be worth much as art.

Another participant in this debate, Robert Stecker, is well aware of these motivations. In 'Artistic Value Defended', he argues that Lopes has failed to banish artistic value from aesthetics by pointing out (among other things) that even without defining artistic value, one can have compelling reasons for assuming its existence. 'Artistic value', as Stecker (2012, p. 355) conceives it, 'derives from a set of values relevant to evaluating works of art as art',

including aesthetic value. The main difference between his conception and mine is that he subsumes aesthetic value under artistic value whereas I take the two values to be complementary. Stecker, I think, thus devalues aesthetic value by setting it on the same level as all the other values that works of art may happen to have. Another difference is that while in my view both artistic and aesthetic value are essential for art, in Stecker's account all values are contingent. In his view, the status of a value as artistic depends on an artist's intentions whereas in my conception intentions do not enter the picture.[9] Another important aspect in which my conception of artistic value differs from others is that the determination of artistic values enjoys a considerable degree of objectivity. This is given by its definition, from which it follows that the justification or the explanation of the judgements of the artistic value of a given work of art at a given time consists in tracing the influences of its innovations throughout the history of art. This assumes a form of art-historical narrative which is intersubjectively verifiable (or falsifiable) just like other historical narratives. Art historians usually agree about questions like who was influenced by whom, which can be customarily settled without getting into questions of taste.[10]

3. What Is Wrong with Forgeries: In Defence of Common Sense against Philosophers of Art

Although the history of forging art is almost as old as the history of art itself, the theoretical problems presented by forgeries are recent. The key question may be usefully formulated as follows. Can there be any aesthetic difference between an original painting and its forgery if they are visually indistinguishable from each other, and if so, what does this difference consist in?

The reason why this polarizing question became topical only in the second half of the twentieth century probably had to do with the prevailing influence of aesthetic formalism culminating in Monroe C. Beardsley's *Aesthetics: Problems in the Theory of Criticism*, in which the author asserts that 'two objects that do not differ in any observable qualities cannot differ in aesthetic value' (Beardsley, 1958, p. 503). Beardsley does not offer any arguments in support of this claim since he considered it self-evident. And so did other philosophers of art until the publication of Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* (1968) which challenged Beardsley's stance on forgeries. This prompted a lively discussion on the pages of philosophical journals, on which I have commented in the publications mentioned in the introduction. I have criticized the theories of forgery of Beardsley, Clive Bell (1949), Arthur Köstler (1975), Nelson Goodman (1968), Mark Sagoff (1976), Denis Dutton (1979), and Eddy M. Zemach (1986), pointing out problems in their argumentation. But, rather than repeat my arguments, I shall focus here on what their theories have in common, that is, I shall consider the role that the assumption of aestheticism has played in their 'solutions' of the problem of forgery, since these authors have reached their implausible conclusions

9 'Artistic value derives from what artists intend to do *in* their works as mediated by functions of the art form and genres to which the works belong'. Stecker, (2012), p.359.

10 Thus, even if it were true that assessments of aesthetic value are subjective (which I do not believe is correct), it would not be true about the overall value of works of art (as art).

largely because they have accepted the assumption that the value of a work of art consists exclusively in its aesthetic value.

Let me begin with basic intuitions. I take it that we could all (perhaps with the exception of a few philosophers of art) agree with the following two common-sense theses:

1. Originals are more valuable than forgeries.
2. A forgery which is visually indistinguishable from the original has the same aesthetic properties and therefore the same aesthetic value as the original.

Note that the two theses are compatible. When Aline B. Saarinen (1961, p. 14) asks whether the expert fake is 'as satisfactory a work of art as if it were unequivocally genuine', we can justifiably disagree, without claiming or implying that the difference must be aesthetic; forgeries can be unsatisfactory for other reasons. All that is needed to complete the answer is to specify what these reasons are and explain why they are relevant for art appreciation. This satisfactorily answers the question presented by forgeries and the philosophical problem (if there ever was one) is resolved. But if the question is formulated with the built-in assumption of aestheticism, that is, that only aesthetic value is relevant for art evaluation, it instantly turns into a philosophical trap. And this is exactly what Goodman has (unwittingly) done. In his *Languages of Art*, he quotes Saarinen for the epigraph of his chapter on forgeries only to reformulate it into the question of whether there can be any aesthetic difference between an original painting and its forgery (Goodman, 1968, p. 99). But once we accept this question (and this is what all the authors who participated in the discussion have done) we are in trouble. For now the two theses of common sense are turned against each other and we face a false either-or dilemma: either the originals are not more valuable than forgeries or even the best copies must aesthetically differ from them. The philosophers who accepted the assumption of aestheticism thus saw no alternative but to discredit one of the horns of the 'dilemma'. They either negated the first thesis to the effect that deceptive forgeries have the same value as originals (Beardsley, Köstler, Zemach), or the second—claiming that there is an aesthetic difference between originals and forgeries even when one cannot tell them apart (Bell, Dutton, Goodman, Sagoff).

However, there is a price to be paid for rejecting either of the two common-sense theses, because they are not only quite reasonable but also deeply rooted in our cultural practices. The first, which places value on originality, forms the basis on which art criticism, art collecting, museums, and auction houses function. The second thesis is no less fundamental. Our knowledge of art history is based more on reproductions than on direct acquaintance with originals, many of which are in private collections. One wonders whether the philosophers who competed with each other to show how dramatic the aesthetic differences between originals and forgeries are realized that their arguments must also a fortiori apply to high-quality photographic reproductions. For if they were right to claim that even the most accurate copies differ substantially from the originals in their aesthetic properties, standard practices of teaching art history would not make sense. Moreover, rejecting the second thesis has the unenviable consequence of having to explain how two indistinguishable pictures can have significantly different aesthetic properties.

I think that the acceptance aestheticism is the very reason why such sophisticated philosophers reached such wildly unintuitive, if not absurd, conclusions such as that the slightest

difference between originals and forgeries is felt immediately (Bell), that even an unperceived (microscopic!) difference can have a decisive aesthetic impact (Goodman), that originals and forgeries are not painted in the same style (Sagoff), or, from the other side, that the preference for originals is an expression of snobbery (Köstler) or of fetishism (Zemach), or that originality is irrelevant for evaluating works of art (Beardsley).

The conceptual distinction between aesthetic value and artistic value suggests a simple resolution of the problem. Indeed, we have good reasons to prefer originals to forgeries, although Beardsley is right that if the forgery is so accurate that no perceptual difference can be detected it must have the same aesthetic value. The difference, then, is in their artistic value. A forger can reproduce the aesthetic qualities of the original, but cannot, (by definition) re-produce its artistic value.

In conclusion, if the case study of Picasso's famous painting has shown that the assumption of aestheticism is wrong, the analysis of the dispute about forgeries has further demonstrated how damaging this assumption can be for debates in the philosophy of art.

4. Art and Money

As I mentioned in the introduction, while I have so far only argued that artistic value is no less important than aesthetic value, here I want to go further and suggest that in most cases artistic value is more important, sometimes considerably so, and that when we evaluate great works of art their aesthetic value has a lesser share in their overall value as art.

Clearly, money has nothing to do with the essence of art. In this respect monetary value is like the other secondary values, but it differs from them in one important manner. No other secondary value can, even in principle, be associated with every work of visual art. But a price may be legitimately assigned to any work of visual art even if only for insurance purposes. This makes it possible to ask questions about the relationship between the price of a work of art as a commodity and its worth as a work of art.

I believe Sagoff (1981, p. 318) was the first to ask this question in a philosophical context. 'I want to see if any light can be shed on the concept of aesthetic value by examining the economic value of art', he writes at the beginning of 'On the Aesthetic and Economic Value of Art'. He ponders over the astounding sums that people are willing to pay to possess a first-rate work and asks why they would. His essay should be of some interest to investors, since he writes about the 'iron law' of rising prices according to which 'the prices of [works of art] always go up, never down' (Sagoff, 1981, p. 320). He concludes that the willingness to pay exorbitant sums for famous works of art is an expression of our respect for the history of our culture, for our cultural heritage, and for our history as such. Since Sagoff also accepts the assumption of aestheticism, he does not ask why some works of art are considerably more expensive than others, because he assumes that he already knows the answer: the differences in economic value reflect the differences in aesthetic value.

Despite manipulations in the art market (which pertain mainly to contemporary art), very good works of art are extremely expensive while lesser ones are much cheaper. I believe that monetary value is not a bad indicator of the overall worth of works of art (as art), and I would even venture to say that the better the work, the more expensive it is. Since,

as I have tried to show, the overall value of works of art consists in their artistic and their aesthetic value, it is legitimate to ask how each of the two component values contributes to the overall value. Consider paintings that are priced in a range from ten thousand to a hundred thousand dollars and paintings in a price range from ten million dollars to a hundred million dollars—the painting from the upper range will thus be a thousand times more expensive than those from the lower one.[11] (The reader should choose a couple of paintings, one from each price range, that she is familiar with, so that she could judge whether the following claims are credible.) While it is extremely unreasonable (if not absurd) to claim that the works from the higher price range are a thousand times more beautiful (more harmonious, more elegant, more refined, and so forth) than those from the lower range, it is neither absurd nor unreasonable to say that they are a thousand times more important with regard to the significance of the role they play in the history of art.[12] In other words, the enormous differences in monetary value do not reflect the differences in the aesthetic value (which are usually small) but the differences in artistic value (which can be substantial).

Let us take an example. I have already quoted Ackerman's critical assessment of Manet's *Le déjeneur sur l'herbe*, which he now compares with another painting from the same period which has a similar motif,[13] Ford Madox Brown's *English Autumn Afternoon* (Figure 2).

After pointing out some aesthetic merits and minor aesthetic faults and merits in both paintings, Ackerman (1979, p. 459) concludes that '[t]he two pictures could be compared in greater detail, but I have already made the point that the comparisons lead to a draw with respect to evaluation' (meaning aesthetic evaluation). He also observes that the painting 'by Manet appears in all the textbooks, and the other, by Ford Madox Brown, is relatively obscure and rarely praised, though viewers at the time would have certainly reversed that judgment' (Ackerman, 1979, p. 456). Ackerman, who also believes that the value of works of art consists exclusively in their aesthetic value, thinks that this difference in assessment is due to 'bias'.[14] Be that as it may, it seems reasonable to assume that were the two paintings, put up for auction at Christie's or Sotheby's, the price of the first would likely exceed the limit of a hundred million dollars while the second would stay within the limit of a hundred thousand dollars. And the reason for this is roughly the one which Ackerman points out: the first is an acknowledged masterpiece, the second is obscure, little known. Although he does not make the distinction between the two values, Ackerman's conclusion vindicates my point:

> the *Déjeuner* is called a masterpiece because it broke with traditional form in the rendering of the figure and with traditional subject matter in presenting a Renaissance pastoral group in modern dress and undress, and because it and other works of Manet

11 I have chosen such a large gap between the two price ranges to forestall objections pertaining to various price manipulations and other contingencies which could apply if the price ranges were too close to each other.

12 We should note that it will not weaken the argument if we substitute 'thousand times more beautiful … than …' by 'five times more beautiful … than … ' or even by 'twice as beautiful … as … '.

13 Both are 'pictures of bourgeois ladies and gentlemen relaxing in the country'. (Ackerman, 1979, p. 456).

14 Ackerman believes that the two pieces are equally worthy as works of art and that the 'reasons for either praising or condemning the two paintings are faulty because they are not related to the works themselves but to external absolutes'. (Ackerman, 1979, p. 459).

Figure 2. Ford Madox Brown, *An English Autumn Afternoon* (1854). Oil on canvas, 71.2 cm x 134.8 cm. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, public domain, source: Wikimedia Commons.

> had a great influence on the subsequent evolution of painting (Ackerman, 1979, p. 459).

To prevent misunderstandings, I am not suggesting that the aesthetic value is not important as such. It is, as I have noted, a necessary condition of arthood. Nor do I want to suggest that artists should not try to maximize the aesthetic value of their works. Why, then, do I claim that it is *relatively* unimportant? Because when it comes to works of art that matter, that is, to those we encounter in prestigious galleries and museums, the differences in their aesthetic value are usually insignificant, while the difference in their artistic value may be very substantial indeed. This does not mean that some works are not aesthetically more accomplished than others, but all the works in this category are as a rule well balanced, well unified, with their constitutive elements where they should be and well harmonized—we do not ordinarily find grave aesthetic deficiencies among these paintings.[15] Moreover, as we have seen, we value more those works of art that violated the prevailing norms and pioneered new artistic movements than those that followed in their tracks even though the later works are almost always aesthetically more accomplished.[16]

There might be considerable reluctance to accept the claim that the differences in aesthetic value between the works in respectable galleries and museums are very small or even negligible. The reason for this is probably that we tend to think that aesthetic differences imply differences in aesthetic value. It may seem strange that works of art so different from one another could have the same, or nearly the same, aesthetic value, especially since the differences between them are clearly differences in their aesthetic properties, in short,

15 This is of course true about most good works of art, not only those that have made their way into the best galleries. My choice of the works that are in such galleries is merely a matter of convenience intended to put aside incompetent art and focus on those works that have indeed contributed to our culture.

16 Ackerman himself points out that Manet's later works are more refined and aesthetically richer than his celebrated masterpiece.

aesthetic differences. The problem is that the assumption that an aesthetic difference implies a difference in aesthetic value is wrong. The mistake stems from confusing or, rather, fusing two different aesthetic categories that should be kept apart: *aesthetic value* and *aesthetic character*. The aesthetic character of a work of art is that which is aesthetically specific for that work. Two works of art can each have a very different aesthetic character yet have the same aesthetic value.[17] Look at the two pictures shown in Figures 3 and 4.

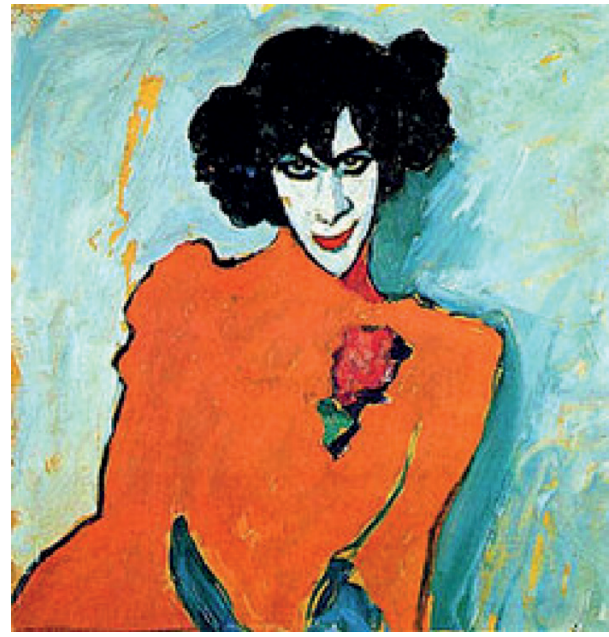

Figure 3. Alexej von Jawlensky, *Portrait of Alexander Sakharov*, 1909. Oil on card, 69.5 cm x 66.5 cm. Lenbachhaus Munich, public domain, source: Wikimedia Commons

Figure 4. Georges Braque, *Still life with clarinet*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 53.9 cm x 73 cm. Phillips Collections, Washington

17 It was Goodman (1982, p. 335) who pointed out this distinction to me in his response to my criticism of his theory of forgery.

I hope the reader will agree that both paintings are very beautiful or that they have very high aesthetic value. We cannot say that one is aesthetically superior to the other, but that is not because they belong to different categories (one is a portrait, the other a still life, one is Expressionist, the other is Cubist), but because we (or the critics) could hardly find any aesthetic faults or imperfections in either of them. Yet the two paintings have completely different aesthetic character. Indeed, everything in each of these two paintings is very different from the other and just as each of them is unique, so are their aesthetic properties unique to each of them.[18]

Coming back to Sagoff, I am not sure that his 'iron law of rising prices' is true, but he is certainly right that prices of many works of art have multiplied quite a few times since they were first purchased. Sagoff has, however, failed to notice that the rising prices of works of art may present a problem for his theory according to which monetary value should reflect aesthetic value. Since the aesthetic properties of the work perceived in the correct category do not change, neither does their aesthetic value. Why should their prices then increase at all, not to speak of dramatic increases? It is difficult to conceive of a convincing argument that would connect the passage of time with the increase in aesthetic value in correlation with the rising prices of works of art. When we turn to artistic value, however, price increases may have their logic, for there is nothing strange about works of art becoming more valuable from the artistic point of view. Some works of art become significantly more important because of subsequent developments in the history of art.[19] Apart from this, with the passage of time the artistic value of most well-known works of art can steadily rise because more and more generations of artists are influenced by them.

Sagoff certainly deserves credit for drawing our attention to the fact that monetary value can tell us something interesting about the value of works of art as art. But the word 'Aesthetic' in the title of his essay 'On the Aesthetic and Economic Value of Art' should be replaced by the term 'Artistic'.

Let me now consider some possible objections. One could perhaps argue that the claim that artistic value is more important than aesthetic value is unreasonable because artists are always seeking to create aesthetic value: they try to move people, delight them, shock them. Could it be that artists almost invariably aim to promote what is of secondary value only?

I agree that most artist try to focus on the aesthetic value of their works within the accepted artistic conventions rather than strive for significant innovations. The question is whether such artists are the best ones, or whether, instead, they belong to those whose names are known only to specialists. We should add that not only pioneering innovations that gave rise to new artistic styles but also relatively minor ones, such as those responsible for an artist's personal style, are significant since they enable us to identify individual painters within a given style and because without them artists could hardly become

18 Indeed, any two works of art that have the same aesthetic value must have a different aesthetic character, unless one is a copy of the other.

19 Works that initiated new artistic styles or movements or contributed to their consolidation are typical examples of this.

famous. Innovations are indeed important in the arts because the history of art is almost by definition a history of innovation.

One might also entertain the idea that originality should be considered an aesthetic rather than an artistic value. Original works, the objection may continue, are more interesting, more exciting. They wake us up from slumber. When artists create original works, they do so because originality is seen by viewers as an aesthetic value.

I think that innovations always have an aesthetic impact—if not on aesthetic value then certainly on aesthetic character. Yet originality as such need not be aesthetically virtuous. As Beardsley has pointed out, a work of art 'might be original and fine, or original and terrible'.[20] We also know from the history of art that originality has not always been seen by viewers as an aesthetic virtue. New artistic movements were usually greeted with adverse reactions and the names of almost all artistic styles have had originally negative connotations. Innovations that were strikingly original, even when viewed positively at some later date, have been aesthetically unacceptable for the artworld public at the time of their creation. And such adverse reactions have their logic: radical innovations violate the norms of the established artistic conventions, which engenders displeasure. Such innovations usually display features that are contra-standard in the category in which the newly created work is perceived. 'We are likely to find such features shocking, or disconcerting or startling or upsetting', writes Walton (1970, p. 352), noting that they 'are perceived as being misfits in a category which the work strikes us as belonging to'.[21] Such disconcerting contra-standard features may later become quite pleasing if they happen to lead to the establishment of new artistic categories in which they become standard or variable (to use Walton's terminology). And this depends on whether the innovation is accepted and developed by other artists. This is the reason why I have stated that assessments of artistic value require hindsight and cannot be fixed forever. The last verdict is always that of history.

One may also wonder why I have confined my claim about the primary importance of artistic value to evaluations in the visual arts. Since the significance of innovations and the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic value apply across the arts, one could reasonably expect that artistic value would also play a similarly prominent role in assessments in other artistic disciplines. After all, every art form has its history, and it seems natural to assume that works exemplifying innovations that have had a noteworthy influence on subsequent developments would be valued more than those that have not.

Although I am inclined to think that this is indeed the case, there are reasons why I have not ventured to extend my claim beyond the scope of visual arts. Given that the received view that the value of works of art consists in their aesthetic value is clearly dominant not only in the history of aesthetics but also in the modern philosophy of art, together with the fact that this received view has recently been vehemently and authoritatively defended (see Lopes, 2011),[22] my claim that aesthetic value is relatively unimportant is likely to be taken as provocative even when confined to evaluations in the visual arts, and as such it will probably elicit adverse reactions. Since I am considerably more familiar with painting and

20 Beardsley, 1958, p. 460.

21 It is clear from the context that the word 'startling' is also used in a negative sense.

22 I refer to Lopes, 2011, pp. 518–36.

sculpture than with other forms of art and their histories, I do not want to venture beyond this territory, where I would then find it more difficult to counter possible objections and disqualify prospective counter-examples. Moreover, the main line of thought supporting my claim about the secondary importance of aesthetic value in the visual arts, which is mainly based on differences in monetary value between different works of art, is obviously inapplicable to works that can be neither purchased nor sold, and I have so far been unable to come up with a correspondingly strong argument that would apply to other arts. This naturally does not mean that others who are more at home in some of those other arts might not devise an altogether different argument showing that the claim applies to them as well. In the meantime, the relative unimportance of aesthetic value in evaluating works of visual arts could perhaps be seen as just another difference between autographic and allographic arts.[23,24]

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23 The distinction between autographic and allographic arts was first drawn by Goodman, 1968, pp. 113–22, 195, 198.

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