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# Experience as Medium: John Dewey and a Traditional Japanese Aesthetic

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In *Art as Experience* (1987; 1934), John Dewey seeks to undermine the idea that art has a place above and distinct from ordinary human experience.<sup>1</sup> Instead, he argues that an adequate aesthetic theory must take into account that all art originates in ordinary experience. Artists who create classic works of art do so by finding, manipulating, and developing the aesthetics they experience in everyday life. In other words, Dewey writes, “Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one if its manifest operations” (9). Unfortunately, he notes that most aesthetic theorists attempt to consider art “in itself”—a tendency that can be traced back through Plato. Art is thought to be beautiful not because of how it is experienced, but because of its correspondence to an other-worldly ideal. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to this view as the Western view of aesthetics, realizing that it is a broad overgeneralization.

One of Dewey’s foundational concepts is that experience involves more than our intellectual account of it. Consequently, he argues that the Western attempt to capture art entirely in theoretical knowledge is inherently problematic. Having defined art and aesthetics as “the sort of thing that is in museums,” we dichotomize our experience into things aesthetic and things useful, cheapening our understanding and experience of both. We cut off one from the other not only in thought, but in the way we organize our environment. We fail to observe or appreciate other kinds of aesthetic experiences that, if developed, could be far more relevant to our lives than the art in museums. Furthermore, by focusing on ideals instead of experience, we diminish those experiences that we already consider aesthetic.

In this paper, I will discuss some traditional Japanese aesthetic conceptions, as articulated by Jun’ichiro Tanizaki (1977) and Leonard Koren (1994). These thinkers describe how a different historical experience has led to a set of aesthetic ideas that oppose the Western one in several ways. Like Dewey, they emphasize the importance of “ordinary” experience. Notably, they consider elements unique to experience—ones that resist being made into timeless ideals. I hope that my

consideration of these thinkers might illustrate how the application of Dewey's ideas might bring deeper significance to our "ordinary" experience.

In the face of the error and ambiguity, thinkers have sought refuge by claiming, in various ways, that there exists a reality apart from our experience (Dewey 1984, 21–22). Our imperfect experience, therefore, is something less than real. It is to be disregarded upon the attainment of proper knowledge. Dewey argues that all experiences, even those that involve mistake and ambiguity, are real. Knowledge is only one mode of experiencing (1977, 158–67). He gives us the example of a person startled by what turns out to be simply a harmless breeze at the window. He differentiates between two experiences: the "I-know-I-am-frightened," and the "I-am-frightened". The initial fear he terms "cognitive"; only later, after it was reflected on, could it be "cognized, as a known object" (161–62). Both of these are real experiences.

We must question the assumption that we have *knowledge* of everything we experience, and that everything we experience is expressible in terms of propositions. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey writes, "the eye is not an imperfect telescope designed for intellectual reception of material to bring about knowledge of distant objects" (1987, 27). Everything we see is real—not just the things later verified as true. In fact, the "true" things depend on context for their label. There is no strict separation between the "mistake" and the "correction": our experiences do not exist as isolated events. The experience of correcting a mistake would not be possible without the mistake, nor would the mistake be realized as such without an experience of its correction.

By focusing on our "knowledge" of what is occurring, we limit our engagement with our environment to the things we "know." This imposes an artificial precision that presses us to identify facts in an experience of ambiguity when, in fact, there are none available. It can divide time into discrete parts and moments, categorizing a full experience of a lightning strike in the darkness into the components of "lighting," "silence," and "darkness" (29).

In the same way, we put a work of art in a museum where it can be observed away from its context. However, the experience is inseparable from the art: a pedestal in an art museum effects how one views a statue, as well as the long walk through the museum hall to view it, and certainly the busload of screaming children running out of the mummy exhibit. Tanizaki gives us an example of the importance of context in aesthetics. I quote him at length:

Darkness is an indispensable element in the beauty of lacquerware. . . . Sometimes a superb piece of black lacquerware, decorated perhaps with flecks of silver and gold—a box or a desk or a set of shelves—will seem to me unsettlingly garish and altogether vulgar. But render pitch black the void in which they stand, and light them not with the rays of the sun or electricity but rather a single lantern or candle: suddenly those garish objects turn somber, refined, and dignified. Artisans of old, when they finished their works in lacquer and decorated them

in sparkling patterns, must surely have had in mind dark rooms and sought to turn to good effect what feeble light there was. (1977, 13–14)

Beauty, here, is not some quality present in the object in itself, or an abstract ideal that this object mimics. Rather, it is the whole experience—the shadows, the subtle changing reflections, and even the *inability* of the perceiver to see the “true” bowl—flooded with light, its details exposed. In this instance we find that the damnable realm of mediation—the “distorter” of perception, the impediment to experiencing truth—turns out to be essential to beauty. The artist’s medium is not simply the objects he produced, but the dark rooms in which he worked. His art was made with and for imperfect human senses.

Therefore, Dewey suggests, we must start at the “bottom:” at the ordinary, “raw” aesthetic experiences in everyday life (1987, 10). We must consider “The sights that hold the crowd- the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in the air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts” (11). Our ideas are grounded in this “low” experience. It is true that our cognitive capacity allows us to experience our environment with more meaning, and to manipulate the elements of experience with increasing complexity. But before this manipulation can take place, experience must be felt at the “lower” levels of sense. The artist learns how things in his environment come to satisfaction; only after he has observed and interacted with them can he begin to manipulate them for purposes of art. Thus, we must elevate and develop our senses. Dewey argues “any and every derogation of them, whether practical or theoretical, is at once effect and cause of a narrowed and dulled life-experience” (28).

Tanizaki provides us with another story to demonstrate:

The quality we call beauty . . . must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadow, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty’s ends . . . and so it has come to be that the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows—it has nothing else. . . . Of course the Japanese room does have its picture alcove, and in it a hanging scroll and a flower arrangement. But the scroll and the flowers serve not as ornament but rather to give depth to the shadows. We value a scroll above all for the way it blends with the walls of the alcove, and thus we consider the mounting quite as important as the calligraphy or painting. Even the greatest masterpiece will lose its worth as a scroll if it fails to blend with the alcove, while a work of no particular distinction may blend beautifully with the room and set off to unexpected advantage both itself and its surroundings. (1977, 19)

Art for Dewey is the idea of learning to manipulate the environment to greater degrees of satisfaction and meaning. Human intelligence “converts the relations of cause and effect that are found in nature into relations of means and

consequence” (1987, 25). Historically, this included all activities of organization; the Greeks thought of both politics and sculpture as arts (25). Therefore, Dewey contends that the idea of art is “the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity (25).” It is fundamental and much larger than “what is in museums.”

It was only later when a distinction of mutual exclusivity was made—between the arts and the sciences, and the aesthetic and the useful. After reality was increasingly identified with knowledge and not experience, we began to take our understanding of things—the meanings we assigned to them—as ultimate. A fork is a tool for eating; a house is to keep us warm; bright light to illuminate. The West adopted a model in which every object exists for a sole purpose. The aesthetic exists to be aesthetic, the useful to be useful. As Alexander writes, this distinction “uncritically takes ends as arbitrarily given and forever immune to any critical evaluation” (1998, 4).

Subsequently, most Western houses are designed to be useful rather than aesthetic. Once technology allowed, candles were replaced with bright electric lights. The aesthetic values that a Western room *does* have are later imported into it as decorations, made for the sole purpose of decorating, and flooded with light to expose the qualities within them. Thus, unfortunately for us, the distinction is self-reinforcing. Having extricated the aesthetic from many aspects of ordinary life, Dewey argues, we design and produce objects primarily according to the functions we have allotted them. It is no wonder that those who arrive on the scene on this artificial world get the impression that the aesthetic and the useful are two inherently different things (1987, 33–34).

On this note, Tanizaki complains that the brightly lit, white Western style bathrooms are designed only with one function in mind: sterility. A more traditional Japanese-style bathroom—darkly lit, wooden—is more to his liking. He writes,

Indeed, one could with some justice claim that of all the elements of Japanese architecture, the toilet is the most aesthetic. Our forebears, making poetry of everything in their lives, transformed what by rights should be the most unsanitary room in the house into a place of unsurpassed elegance, replete with fond associations with the beauties of nature. (1977, 3–4)

Here there is no strict distinction between aesthetic and useful; the toilet can be both. The Western organization deprives an aspect of everyday life of its potential aesthetic depth.

In order to develop aesthetic experiences and values, Dewey suggests, we must be receptive to new kinds of experiences. The ancient Japanese artist could not have reasoned his way to the aesthetic qualities of shadow. It was only by experiencing them, and being open to aesthetics he was not previously aware of, that more modern aesthetic ideas developed. Consequently, by holding narrow conception of art, the Western thinker severely limits the possibility of experi-

encing shadows as aesthetic. By paying attention to our senses, we can perhaps reclaim some of our aesthetic experiences.

While receptivity to new experiences is essential, we must consider another aspect of experience: the attention cannot simply be open, or receptive. It must be active as well. Active participation is the difference between what Dewey terms “experience” and “an experience.” Experience occurs all the time, but it does not constitute *an* experience unless the elements are brought together into a coherent whole in conscious intent. The elements must develop meaning in relation to each other. They cannot simply occur one after the other, but must end in a common culmination. He writes, “An experience has a unity that gives it its name, that meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship” (1987, 44).

This unity is essential to art, as well. Dewey writes, “In short, art, in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience” (54). Thus, when an aesthetic theory considers a work of art in itself, outside of the time and space of our experience, it is leaving out ingredients vital for an aesthetic experience. Dewey notes that the terms “artistic” and “esthetic” have become distinct. “Artistic” signifies the act of production, and “esthetic” the enjoyment of the product. The West has long considered the art in museums something to be merely enjoyed. Dewey writes, “When we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us and, for lack of answering activity, we do not perceive that which bears us down. We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to take in” (60). The observer must actively imagine the creation of the painting, taking the perspective of the artist, in order to perceive it as a work of art (60).

Koren caricatures the problem in his description of modernism, a term he uses to describe artistic movements that involve bright colors, straight lines, geometric shapes, and fully lit displays. Modernism leaves nothing to the imagination, as if trying to minimize the barrier of actual experience. In contrast, he describes the Japanese term *wabi-sabi*: “Greatness consists in the overlooked details” (1994, 50). Because *wabi-sabi* is not obvious, it demands the attention of the beholder. The beholder is forced to develop careful scrutiny—to search the art and participate in it imaginatively. Koren writes, “*Wabi-sabi* is about the minor and the hidden, the tentative and the ephemeral: things so subtle and evanescent they are invisible to vulgar eyes” (50). In contrast to modernism’s attempt to input beauty directly into the mind, *wabi-sabi* “solicits the expansion of sensory information” (12). The art form most characteristic of *wabi-sabi* is the tea ceremony, which calls for all participants to deeply engage in what they are doing and the environment that surrounds them.

While a modern work of art is a finished result, *wabi-sabi* is incomplete and imperfect. We are forced to realize that it is a work in progress—not just a finished product for us to look at, but something that we can engage in ourselves. The features of *wabi-sabi* artwork often point to this process. Koren writes,

“Corrosion and contamination make its expression richer” (28). Tanizaki expresses a similar sentiment: tarnish adds to an object the sense of its past. He writes,

While we do sometimes indeed use silver for teakettles, decanters, or sake cups, we prefer not to polish it. On the contrary, we begin to enjoy it only when the luster has worn off, when it has begun to take on a dark, smoky patina. Almost every householder has had to scold an insensitive maid who has polished away the tarnish so patiently waited for . . . this “sheen of antiquity . . .” is in fact the glow of grime. In both Chinese and Japanese the words denoting this glow describe a polish that comes of being touched over and over again, a sheen produced by the oils that naturally permeate an object over long years of handling—which is to say grime. . . . I suppose I shall sound terribly offensive I say that Westerners attempt to expose every speck of grim and eradicate it, while we Orientals carefully preserve and even idealize it. Yet for better or for worse we do love things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colors and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them. (1977, 10–11).

When we use these teakettles and cups, we contribute to the tarnish; we are shaping them artistically and enjoying them aesthetically. In other words, we are engaging with the art—doing and undergoing. As Dewey writes,

The *form* of the whole is therefore present in every member. Fulfilling, consummating, are continuous functions, not mere ends, located at one place only. An engraver, painter, or writer is in the process of completing at every stage of his work. He must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come. (1987, 62–63).

This is not to say that we should draw mustaches on the paintings in a museum in order to understand them. Rather, we must imaginatively participate in the perspective of the artist.

This engagement with the medium, however, does not imply that we know exactly what we are doing. Tanizaki describes an experience of eating soup out of a deep bowl in a dimly-lit restaurant (1977, 15). The ambiguity involved in not being able to see what one is about to eat next is incorporated into the experience. Here, the lack of knowledge is vital to experiencing the art. Dewey cites Keats, who describes Shakespeare as having enormous “negative capacity” to capture the ambiguous aspects of experience (1987, 30).

But where would we be without reason and knowledge? To reason we attribute our progress as a society, and we cannot overlook this. It is only when we trust too much in reason’s ability to sufficiently encapsulate all of experience that we arrive at Tanizaki’s stereotype of the “progressive westerner”:

We Orientals tend to seek satisfactions in whatever surroundings with things as they are; and so darkness causes us no discontent, we resign ourselves to it as inevitable. If light is scarce then light is scarce; we will immerse ourselves in

the darkness and there discover its own particular beauty. But the progressive Westerner is determined always to better his lot. From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gas light to electric light—his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate even in the minutest shadow. (1977, 31)

This sort of progress, Dewey might argue, is quite limited. It sustains the problematic compartmentalization of aesthetic and useful. The Westerner who chooses utility over aesthetic value is perhaps making progress, but at quite a cost.

Of course, Dewey would not argue that we should eliminate the electric light. Rather, we should realize that reason is one art among many. Dewey's treatment of Keats points us to something of a middle ground. He quotes an enigmatic line of Keats:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (1987, 40)

Dewey notes that “In this tradition, ‘truth’ never signifies correctness of intellectual statements about things, or truth as its meaning is now influenced by science. It denotes the wisdom by which men live, especially ‘the lore of good and evil’” (40). Progress involves anything that allows us to bring meaning to our experience. Thus, Dewey writes, “no ‘reasoning’ as reasoning, that is, as excluding imagination and sense, can reach truth. . . . ‘Reason’ at its height cannot attain complete grasp and a self contained assurance. It must fall back upon imagination—upon the embodiment of ideas in emotionally charged sense” (40).

Dewey concludes the second chapter of *Art as Experience* by stating, “Ultimately there are but two philosophies” (41). One looks above experience to an ideal of knowledge that it can never find. “Modernism” as considered here, could be described as attempt to create ideal forms in experience. Seeing our ideas embodied in these harsh and uncomfortable shapes, we perhaps learn something about what our ideas of perfection are actually like. The other philosophy “accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and arts. This is the philosophy of Shakespeare and Keats” (41). I think it is fair to say that it is also the philosophy of Tanizaki and Koren.

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