

Art and Aesthetic Appreciation by Description

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While perceptual experience seems necessary for appreciating some artworks, it is not necessary for appreciating others. We must arguably see a painting or a reproduction of it if we are to appreciate it and listen to a performance or recording of a work of music if we are to appreciate it. However, there are some artworks the appreciation of which does not require us to perceive them or recordings, reproductions or copies of them. Descriptions of the non-aesthetic properties of some artworks can put those with the requisite background knowledge in a position to appreciate them. The puzzle of appreciation by description is why descriptions of the non-aesthetic properties of some artworks could enable us to appreciate the artworks they describe, while descriptions of the non-aesthetic properties of other artworks could not. I solve the problem by giving an account of the general requirements for the aesthetic appreciation of art that explains why descriptions enable the aesthetic appreciation of some artworks but not others. This account also illuminates the conditions that descriptions and perceptual experiences of artworks must meet if they are to enable appreciation of those artworks. This account shows that, contrary to some rival accounts of the prerequisites for the aesthetic appreciation of art, what matters is not the non-inferentiality of our access to the non-aesthetic properties on which artworks' aesthetic properties depend, but the non-inferentiality of our experiential responses to those properties.

While perceptual experience seems necessary for appreciating some artworks, it does not seem necessary for appreciating others. We must arguably see a painting or a reproduction of it if we are to appreciate it and listen to a performance or recording of a work of music if we are to appreciate it. However, there are some artworks the appreciation of which does not require us to perceive them or recordings, reproductions, or copies of them. Descriptions of the non-aesthetic properties of some artworks can put those with the requisite background knowledge in a position to appreciate them. Consider the following descriptions:

4'33" is a modernist composition by American experimental composer John Cage. It was composed in 1952 for any instrument or combination of instruments; the score instructs performers not to play their instruments throughout the three movements. It is divided into three movements, lasting 30 seconds, 2 minutes and 23 seconds, and 1 minute and 40 seconds, respectively, although Cage later stated that the movements' durations can be determined by the musician. As suggested by the title, the composition lasts 4 minutes and 33 seconds. It is marked by silence except for ambient sound, which is intended to contribute to the performance.¹

1 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4'33>.

The Vertical Earth Kilometer is an 18-ton round solid brass rod. It is five centimetres in diameter and one kilometre long. The rod is inserted into the earth so that a five-centimetre-wide end sits flush with the surface of the earth and is embedded in the centre of a two-by-two-meter square red sandstone plate. The work is installed in Kassel, Germany, in Friedrichsplatz Park in front of the Fridericianum, and has no label or plaque marking it as artwork or explaining what it is.²

These descriptions seem capable of putting those with the requisite background knowledge in a position to appreciate the artworks they describe. We do not need to perceive the artworks or reproductions of them to appreciate them. There is a range of further artworks including Duchamp's *Fountain*, Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* and Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* that suitable descriptions could also put those with the requisite background knowledge in a position to appreciate.

The phenomenon of appreciation by description is philosophically interesting because it promises to tell us something about the resources required to appreciate artworks. *The puzzle of appreciation by description* is why descriptions of the non-aesthetic properties of some artworks could enable us to appreciate the artworks they describe, while descriptions of the non-aesthetic properties of other artworks could not. It is not obvious that any description of Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* would be capable of putting us in a position to appreciate it. My aim in what follows is to say enough about the general requirements for appreciation to explain why descriptions enable the aesthetic appreciation of some artworks but not others. In addition, since some descriptions of an artwork may put us in a position to appreciate it while others may not, what I say should help us to explain what conditions a description must meet if it is to enable appreciation of the artwork it describes.

I assume that there are at least some artworks some descriptions of which can put us in a position to appreciate them. The examples just given provide good evidence for this. It remains a matter of debate which artworks descriptions could enable us to appreciate. Some construe appreciation by description as a marginal phenomenon, limited to a subset of conceptual artworks, while others take it to be more widespread. James Shelley (2023) has suggested that descriptions of sufficient quality could enable us to appreciate even paradigm instances of traditional artworks, such as sculptures. For the moment, I will remain neutral regarding which artworks descriptions could enable us to appreciate, although the account I develop will have implications for this issue.

In section 1, I distinguish two approaches to the puzzle of appreciation by description and identify which I will take. One takes appreciation by description to be non-aesthetic, but I will take it to involve aesthetic appreciation. In section 2, I explain what aesthetic appreciation is and describe the role that perceptual experience has been thought to play in it. This construal of that role precludes the

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Vertical_Earth_Kilometer. It is possible that *Vertical Earth Kilometer* is a site-specific work. If that were so, any description that enables appreciation of it would also need to capture elements of its siting.

possibility of appreciation by description. In section 3, I describe the challenge that the aesthetic appreciation of literature poses to this construal and outline an alternative construal of the relation between perceptual experience and aesthetic appreciation that is consistent with the aesthetic appreciation of literature and might seem to accommodate appreciation by description. In section 4, I argue that this construal is also incompatible with the phenomenon of appreciation by description because it cannot accommodate the nature of some descriptions that enable us to appreciate the artworks they describe. In section 5, I outline two previous claims concerning the epistemology of aesthetic appreciation and argue that they lack the resources to solve the puzzle. In section 6, I develop an alternative epistemology of aesthetic appreciation. In section 7, I argue that it accommodates the way in which descriptions enable appreciation. Finally, in section 8, I explain how it solves the puzzle of appreciation by description and identify some of its other explanatory advantages.

1. Two approaches to the puzzle

We can distinguish two main approaches to the puzzle of appreciation by description. The first takes the philosophically important difference to be between types of appreciation. For example, Timothy Binkley claims that descriptions can enable us to appreciate some artworks only because the qualities for which we appreciate those artworks are not aesthetic (Binkley 1977). In his view, those artworks that are to be appreciated aesthetically must be perceived to be appreciated, while those artworks the appreciation of which is not aesthetic need not. Perceptual experience, he insists, is necessary only for aesthetic appreciation. This approach requires Binkley to deny that there is any necessary connection between art and the aesthetic. This will strike some as a high price to pay, especially those who hope to define art by appeal to its relation to the aesthetic, since it precludes the possibility of such a definition.

By contrast, the second approach takes the appreciation of all artworks to be at least partly aesthetic. It is therefore consistent with the possibility of an aesthetic account of art. However, as we will see in the next section, it is inconsistent with some prominent construals of the relation between aesthetic appreciation and perceptual experience. Shelley notes that the properties we ascribe to those artworks that descriptions can enable us to appreciate seem to stand to those works as standard aesthetic properties stand to other works (Shelley 2003: 369–70). For example, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is audacious and *Fountain* has been described as daring, impudent, irreverent, witty, and clever (Danto 1981: 93–4). There is no uncontroversial test for whether the properties for which we appreciate such works are aesthetic. Nevertheless, there is good reason to think that we appreciate them at least partly for aesthetic properties. Shelley (2003: 370–1) canvasses four criteria that might be considered distinctive of aesthetic properties: (1) that they are necessarily relevant as grounds for judgements of overall artistic merit; (2) that they are properties we take pleasure in simply for their own sakes; (3) that they are response-dependent properties that ultimately depend on properties that are not response dependent; and (4) that they are essentially perceptual. Whether or not they meet the final criterion, properties such as *Fountain*'s wit, impudence, and daring meet the first three.

I think Shelley and others (e.g. [Konigsberg 2012](#)) are right to construe our appreciation of *Fountain* as at least partly aesthetic. In what follows, therefore, I will take this second approach to solving the puzzle of appreciation by description. Solving the puzzle requires something that neither Shelley nor Konigsberg provides, namely an explanation of why perceptual experience is necessary for the aesthetic appreciation of some artworks, but not of others. To provide such an explanation, I will need to say enough about the general epistemic requirements for the aesthetic appreciation of artworks to explain why descriptions of some artworks could satisfy them, while descriptions of others could not. As a preliminary, in the next section, I clarify what I take aesthetic appreciation to be and describe one conception of the relation between aesthetic appreciation and perceptual experience that is inconsistent with the possibility of aesthetic appreciation by description and must therefore be countered if my approach is to succeed.

2. Aesthetic appreciation and perceptual experience

We can distinguish two notions of aesthetic appreciation. One is factive. On this notion, if we appreciate an artwork as having certain aesthetic properties, it follows that it has those properties. On the other, non-factive notion, we can appreciate an artwork as having aesthetic properties it does not in fact possess, although our appreciation is in this case incorrect. The factive notion of appreciation (or that of correct appreciation) is clearly more philosophically interesting than the non-factive notion, and it is this notion that concerns me here. Henceforth, when I talk of appreciation, I mean correct appreciation.

Aesthetic appreciation is distinct from aesthetic judgement. While aesthetic appreciation involves making correct aesthetic judgements, it also incorporates a necessary experiential element. Appreciating an artwork is not just a matter of knowing that it is aesthetically valuable or knowing what its aesthetic properties are, but of responding experientially to its aesthetic properties. By responding experientially to these properties, one may come to know what they are, but this knowledge does not suffice for appreciation.

Contrary to Richard Wollheim, judging an artwork aesthetically does not seem to require one to perceive it. Wollheim writes that ‘judgments of aesthetic value [...] must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another’ ([Wollheim 1980: 223](#)). However, there seems no reason why a description of an artwork as possessing certain aesthetic properties could not, under appropriate circumstances, enable me to judge that it possesses those properties.

The situation may seem quite different in the case of appreciation. One might think that appreciation by description cannot be aesthetic appreciation because one must perceive an artwork if one is to appreciate it aesthetically. For example, Malcolm Budd argues that only the direct perceptual experience of an artwork can provide us with the experiential engagement necessary for appreciation. He writes that:

Appreciation of a work is not a matter of knowing what its aesthetic properties are, but of perceiving them as realized in the work. So you do not appreciate a work even if you know at second hand as full a characterization of its aesthetic

properties as might be given by one who is perceiving the work. And attitudes and reactions linked to appreciation—liking or disliking, admiration, contempt, revulsion, and so on—are denied to you: you cannot like a work’s gracefulness if you are unacquainted with the work.

(Budd 2003: 392)

Budd takes acquaintance with a work to be necessary for appreciating it. The notion of acquaintance at issue here seems to be the familiar, epistemological notion of acquaintance as including ‘any kind of direct access to an object, property or fact’ (Lord 2018: 88). On direct realist accounts of perception, perceptual experiences are sources of acquaintance. If you perceive an artwork directly, you are acquainted with it; if you perceive its beauty directly, you are acquainted with its beauty; and if you perceive that the artwork is beautiful, then you are acquainted with the fact that it is beautiful.

As Paisley Livingston (2003) has noted, the view that acquaintance with an artwork is necessary to appreciate it cannot be quite right as it stands, because perceiving a good reproduction of an artwork can put us in a position to appreciate it. He advocates the weaker view that acquaintance either with an artwork *or with an adequate perceptual surrogate for it* is necessary for appreciating that artwork. Perceptual surrogates include copies, recordings, and reproductions of artworks that share many of their perceptible properties. On this view, to appreciate multiple artworks such as works of music, we need to be acquainted with *instances* of those works, or adequate copies, recordings, or reproductions of those instances.

This raises the question of what determines whether a copy, recording, or reproduction is adequate for appreciation. As Shelley (2023) points out, the same question arises for perceptual experience of an artwork or of one of its instances. Some perceptual experiences are too cursory or superficial to enable appreciation. Not every copy, recording, or reproduction of an artwork is good enough to enable appreciation and not every perceptual experience of an artwork is good enough to do so. Moreover, some perceptual experiences and some perceptual surrogates may enable partial appreciation by enabling us to respond experientially to some of an artwork’s aesthetic properties but not others. Different experiences may enable different degrees of appreciation. In section 8, I will return to the questions of the conditions under which perceptual experience of an artwork or of a copy, recording, or reproduction is adequate for appreciation and of what determines the degree to which such an experience enables appreciation.

This weaker construal of the requirements for aesthetic appreciation is also incompatible with the possibility of aesthetic appreciation by description. Descriptions of artworks are not perceptual surrogates for them, since they do not share the perceptible properties of the artworks they describe. A solution to the puzzle of appreciation by description that is consistent with appreciation by description being at least partly aesthetic therefore requires an alternative account of the role that perception plays in aesthetic appreciation. This account must both accommodate the possibility of aesthetic appreciation by description and explain why the aesthetic appreciation of some artworks nevertheless requires acquaintance with those artworks, instances of them, or copies, recordings, or reproductions of them. In the next section, I consider a construal of the relation between aesthetic appreciation and perceptual experience that is independently motivated by the aesthetic appreciation of literature and might seem to do just this.

3. The aesthetic appreciation of literature

The aesthetic appreciation of literature is not obviously a counter-example to the claim that acquaintance with an instance of a multiple artwork or with a perceptual surrogate for such an instance is necessary for aesthetic appreciation. It seems plausible that, to appreciate a work of literature, we need to read a copy of it or listen to a recounting of it. This is so even though one may have a choice about whether to read or to listen to a novel, and thus about the sense modality through which one engages with it.

It is, however, incompatible with one putative explanation of why acquaintance should be necessary for aesthetic appreciation. According to this explanation, aesthetic properties necessarily depend at least partly on sensory non-aesthetic properties. We must therefore perceive the sensory non-aesthetic properties on which an artwork's aesthetic properties depend if we are to respond experientially to the work in the manner required to appreciate it aesthetically. Some of the aesthetic properties of works of literature depend partly on their sensory non-aesthetic properties. For example, the mellifluousness of a passage of poetry depends on the sounds of its constituent words. Nevertheless, this is not true of every such property. For example, a novel's power or eeriness may depend on its semantic rather than its sensory properties. It is therefore implausible that the aesthetic properties of works of literature necessarily depend partly on sensory non-aesthetic properties. The same is true of the aesthetic properties of theorems and proofs.

I take it to be obvious that works of literature, theorems, and proofs can have aesthetic properties and therefore that aesthetic properties do not necessarily depend at least partly on sensory non-aesthetic properties. This raises the question of in what sense, if any, aesthetic properties are necessarily perceptual. [Shelley \(2003\)](#) offers an answer to this question that is consistent with the aesthetic appreciation of literature, theorems, and proofs and, one might think, with the possibility of aesthetic appreciation by description.

Shelley argues that there is a sense, with clear historical pedigree, in which properties such as *Fountain's* wit, impudence, and daring are essentially perceptual, even though they do not depend on narrowly sensory properties. He claims that Hutcheson, who is considered to have provided the first philosophically sophisticated account of the aesthetic, deliberately includes the cognitive within the aesthetic, holding that the idea of beauty is an 'internal', 'mental' sense, rather than a sensation received via the five senses, such that we can find ourselves struck by the beauty of theorems and universal truths ([Shelley 2003: 376](#)). In Hutcheson's view, the experience of beauty is sensible rather than rational because we cannot reason our way to the experience of beauty from knowledge of any principles. Similarly, Shelley argues, Sibley holds that aesthetic properties are perceptual only in the sense that they must strike us and cannot be inferred. This, he claims, is how Sibley understands perception in the following passage:

People have to see the grace and unity of a work [...] *feel* the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. They may be struck by these qualities at once, or they may come to perceive them only after repeated viewings, hearings or readings, and with the help of critics. But unless they do perceive them for themselves, aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgment are beyond them. Merely to learn from others, on good authority, that the music is serene, the play moving,

or the picture unbalanced is of little aesthetic value; the crucial thing is to see, hear, or feel.

(Sibley 1965: 137)

On this construal of the aesthetic, ‘if aesthetic properties did not strike us with their presence, they would have no presence for us to infer’ (Shelley 2003: 372). Shelley rightly takes the fact that we ascribe aesthetic properties to works of literature, theorems, and proofs to provide strong independent reason to hold that aesthetic properties need be perceived only in the sense that they must strike us, and to reject more stringent construals of the relation between aesthetic appreciation and perceptual experience. He argues that this conception of aesthetic properties requires us to accept only the ‘relatively modest’ proposal that aesthetic properties depend on semantic properties in the same way as they depend on sensory properties (Shelley 2003: 365). We feel the power of a novel at least partly in virtue of its semantic properties and not solely in virtue of its narrow sensory properties. On this account of the sense in which aesthetic properties are essentially perceptual, *Fountain*’s wit and impudence qualify as aesthetic properties. *Fountain* strikes us as witty and impudent because of the comments it makes on the art world.

Once one allows that aesthetic properties can depend on semantic properties or meanings in the same way as they depend on sensory properties, we may seem close to solving the puzzle of appreciation by description. This construal of the aesthetic suggests that we can appreciate artworks by description when their aesthetic properties depend on meanings rather than on sensory properties, but not when their aesthetic properties depend at least partly on sensory properties. It seems relatively easy for a description to capture an artwork’s meaning. Indeed, accurate descriptions of an artwork’s meaning include the meanings of the artworks they describe among their own semantic properties. They share the meanings of those artworks. They are therefore directly analogous to reproductions, recordings, and copies that share the sensory properties of the original artworks of which they are reproductions, recordings, or copies. Arguably, both acquaint us with the non-aesthetic properties on which the aesthetic properties of the artworks in question depend. The plausibility of this proposal depends on whether reading or listening to a description can acquaint us with its semantic properties. It can do so if it enables us to perceive the description’s semantic properties. It is controversial whether we can perceive a representation’s meaning rather than merely inferring that it has that meaning from our perception of its lower-level shape or sound properties. Nevertheless, for an argument that we can perceive meanings, see Susanna Siegel (2006).

According to the view under consideration, descriptions put us in a position to appreciate the artworks they describe by acquainting us with the meanings on which the aesthetic properties of those artworks depend. When an artwork’s aesthetic properties depend on its sensory properties rather than its meaning, descriptions of that artwork are unlikely to acquaint us with the non-aesthetic properties on which its aesthetic properties depend. This view explains the distinction between those artworks we can appreciate by description and those we cannot by appeal to the distinction between artworks whose aesthetic properties depend on their meanings and artworks whose aesthetic properties depend on their sensory non-aesthetic properties. In the next section, however, I will argue that this proposal does not solve the puzzle of appreciation by description.

4. How descriptions enable appreciation

The most uncontroversial instances of appreciation by description involve artworks whose aesthetic properties depend on their meanings rather than on their sensory properties. Nevertheless, the descriptions that enable us to appreciate such artworks do not do so simply in virtue of sharing the meanings of those artworks. Descriptions of Duchamp's artworks often allude to 'the intangible linguistic elements that constitute the comments Duchamp's non-perceptual works make on the artworld' (Shelley 2003: 364). However, they seldom, if ever, directly describe the artworks' meanings. Consider the description of *Vertical Earth Kilometer* above. It tells us that the artwork consists in a brass rod a kilometre in length that has been sunk directly into the earth, but does not describe the comments on the exploitation of the Earth's valuable resources that it thereby makes. Similarly, the description of *4'33"* tells us that performances of it consist in four minutes and thirty-three seconds during which performers do not play their instruments, but does not describe their meaning.

Such descriptions do not share the meanings of the works they describe. They therefore do not enable us to appreciate those works by acquainting us with their meanings. Likewise, to enable us to appreciate *Fountain*, a description of it would need to tell us that it consists in a urinal that was submitted to the inaugural exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists along with various other facts about it, but it would not need to describe the witty comments on the artworld that it thereby makes. To enable us to appreciate *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, a description would need to tell us that it was produced by erasing a drawing by de Kooning and various other facts about it, but it would not need to describe the comments on the expressive potential of acts of erasure that it thereby makes. To enable us to appreciate *Inert Gas Series*, a description would need to tell us that it involved releasing volumes of colourless, odourless gases and allowing them to dissipate back into the atmosphere, but it would not need to describe the comments on the limits of materiality that it thereby makes.

Why must such descriptions describe the determinants of artworks' meanings, rather than directly describing those meanings? One possibility is that these meanings are ineffable and hence impossible to describe directly. This is plausible in some cases, but not all. The fact that, baldly stated, the semantic properties in question are crude and unsubtle points to a better explanation. One might describe Duchamp's comments on the artworld as follows: '*Fountain* shows that the artworld is not prepared to allow artists the artistic self-determination it professes to ascribe to them' and '*L.H.O.O.Q.* suggests that the *Mona Lisa* does not warrant the veneration in which it is widely held'. The results have the character of attempts to explain a joke. They do not help us to appreciate the artworks whose meanings they describe. I am not denying that more adequate characterizations of these comments are possible. The crucial point is that, however they are characterized, these comments play a limited role in determining the aesthetic properties of the works that make them. *Fountain*'s wittiness depends on more than the contents of its comments.

The best explanation of why those descriptions that enable appreciation often do not directly describe the meanings of the works they enable us to appreciate is that the aesthetic properties of these artworks do not depend solely on the messages they convey, but on *the manner in which they convey those messages*. *Fountain* is witty not because it conveys the message just described, but because it does so *by means of the fact*

that it is a urinal that was submitted to an art exhibition and subsequently rejected from it in contravention of the explicitly stated principles of its organizing committee. That is why descriptions that enable us to appreciate these artworks describe the facts about those artworks by virtue of which they convey those messages rather than directly describing the messages themselves.

The role that facts such as these play in determining *Fountain's* aesthetic properties differs from the role that facts play in determining the aesthetic properties of many literary works. A novel's power may also depend partly on the way in which it conveys its contents. However, sensory properties such as the sounds and the rhythm of the novel's constituent words often suffice to determine the manner in which it does so. The role that facts about a novel's history of production play in determining its aesthetic properties is often limited to determining what its semantic properties are. For example, its semantic properties may depend on facts about the language its writer intended to use when writing it. They may also depend on facts about the particular historical context in which the novel was produced, as Borges' story 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote' makes clear. However, these facts do not play a role in determining the manner in which the novel conveys its contents. Their influence on the novel's semantic properties is determined by facts about language and language use that are independent of the novel itself.

By contrast, the meanings of *Fountain* and *Erased de Kooning Drawing* do not depend on symbol systems that exist independently of the artworks themselves. As [Danto \(1981\)](#) argues, these works have their meanings in virtue of having been transfigured into art. Facts play an essential role in determining the aesthetic properties of these artworks by determining the way in which they convey their contents.

The notion of acquaintance, therefore, cannot help us to solve the puzzle of appreciation by description. Firstly, descriptions do not enable appreciation simply by acquainting us with the meanings on which the aesthetic properties of the artworks they describe depend. The aesthetic properties of these artworks do not depend solely on their meanings, but also on the manner in which they convey those meanings. Secondly, the manner in which they convey their meanings depends on facts about those artworks with which no description could acquaint us, since descriptions mediate our access to the facts they describe.

5. Alternative approaches

There are various accounts of the epistemology of aesthetic appreciation to which we might appeal in the hope of finding a solution to the puzzle of appreciation by description. However, these accounts lack the resources to help solve the puzzle, either because they describe the requirements for aesthetic appreciation at too high a level of abstraction, or because they are incompatible with the possibility of appreciation by description.

Errol Lord argues that acquaintance with an artwork's aesthetic properties (e.g. with the particular way in which it is beautiful) is necessary for rational aesthetic appreciation of that artwork ([Lord 2018](#)). He argues that, for our affective and conative reactions to the work's aesthetic features to be justified, and thus for us to rationally appreciate the artwork, we must be acquainted with the aesthetic properties that give us reason to have those reactions to the work. He advocates a view that he calls 'sentimentalist perceptualism', according to which our affective and conative states can

themselves be direct perceptions of the normative. For example, he claims that our affective and conative reactions to an artwork can give us direct access to the way in which the artwork is beautiful.

Whether or not Lord's view is compatible with aesthetic appreciation by description depends on whether or not we must be acquainted with the non-aesthetic properties on which an artwork's aesthetic properties depend to be acquainted with its aesthetic properties. As we have seen, those descriptions that enable us to aesthetically appreciate the artworks they describe do not always do so by acquainting us with the non-aesthetic properties on which their aesthetic properties depend. Although he describes his view as 'more ambitious' than the view that the aesthetic appreciation of an artwork requires acquaintance with the non-aesthetic properties on which its aesthetic properties depend (Lord 2018: 88), Lord does not explicitly address the issue of whether the more ambitious view entails the less ambitious view. He appears to take his view to be incompatible with the possibility of appreciation by description, writing that we 'cannot display the right sensitivities to the particular way the bust is beautiful just by hearing a description of the bust. However, we can display the relevant sensitivities when we have direct access to the features of the bust' (Lord 2018: 78).

One might deny that acquaintance with an artwork's aesthetic properties requires acquaintance with the non-aesthetic properties on which its aesthetic properties depend. I think that Shelley (2023) can be interpreted as defending such a view. If this is correct, Lord's sentimentalist perceptualism is compatible with appreciation by description. Our affective and conative reactions to a description of an artwork could give us direct access to its aesthetic properties even though the description itself gives us only indirect access to the non-aesthetic properties on which those aesthetic properties depend. Nevertheless, this does not help to solve the puzzle of appreciation by description. We still need an explanation of why there are some artworks descriptions of which cannot acquaint us with their aesthetic properties but other artworks descriptions of which can do so. A solution to the puzzle requires an account at a lower level of abstraction. That is, it requires an account that addresses the *mechanism* by which descriptions acquaint us with artworks' aesthetic properties.

David Davies provides an alternative epistemology of appreciation. He denies that art appreciation requires acquaintance with *proveniential instances* (P-instances) of artworks. P-instances are products of artists' creative activity, such as paintings produced by the artist's hand, sculptures cast from moulds the artist has made, performances of musical works produced by following scores the artist has written, and editions of literary works produced by copying original typescripts or manuscripts. Instead, Davies argues, appreciation requires only acquaintance with *epistemic instances* (E-instances) of artworks. To be an E-instance of an artwork, something 'must share the manifest [i.e. sensory] properties of a work's "correct" P-instances' (Davies 2010: 413). There are no constraints on the history of production of an E-instance. Like Livingston, therefore, he thinks that acquaintance with appropriate copies, recordings, and reproductions of artworks can enable us to appreciate those artworks.

Davies argues that this is consistent with facts about the causal genesis of the works' P-instances being relevant to appreciation. To appreciate a work by experiencing an E-instance of it, we may need to hear or see the manifest properties of that E-instance as having been generated in a particular way and as having a particular art-historical context, even when it was not generated in that way and does not

have that art-historical context (Davies 2010: 419). That is, we may need to recruit our knowledge of how and in what context the work's P-instances were produced to our experiential encounter with the E-instance.

Davies' account is incompatible with the very possibility of appreciation by description. He claims that 'we have defined an E-instance of a work in terms of its manifesting to receivers those experienceable properties required in any event or entity that is to enable proper appreciation of the work through our experiential engagement with it' (Davies 2010: 415). He is therefore committed to the claim that any event or entity that enables proper appreciation of a work through our experiential engagement with it must share the sensory properties of that work's correct P-instances. However, those descriptions experiential engagement with which enables proper appreciation of the artworks they describe are not E-instances of those artworks. They do not share the sensory properties of their correct P-instances. Descriptions that enable appreciation do so in virtue of their semantic, rather than their sensory properties.

6. General requirements for aesthetic appreciation

To solve the puzzle of appreciation by description, we need to identify some general requirements for the aesthetic appreciation of art. These requirements must apply equally to those artworks we can appreciate by description and to those artworks we cannot. My concern here is to set out requirements for the *full* aesthetic appreciation of art. In section 8, I will discuss their implications for what determines the degree to which a perceptual experience, surrogate, or description enables appreciation. What I have to say about the epistemic requirements for the aesthetic appreciation of art is, I hope, fairly modest and uncontroversial. Nevertheless, as I will argue, it has a range of important explanatory benefits.

Let us distinguish between the *direct* and the *indirect* determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties. The direct determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties include any property of the artwork or any fact about it that plays a role in determining its aesthetic properties that is independent of the role that some other property or fact plays in determining its aesthetic properties. The *indirect* determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties are those properties of the artwork or facts about it that play a role in determining its aesthetic properties only by helping to determine the role that some other property or fact plays in determining its aesthetic properties.

Davies assumes that facts are only ever indirect determinants of artworks' aesthetic properties. This is often the case. We saw this in our discussion of literary works in section 4. Facts about the language a novel's author intended to use when writing it and facts about the particular historical context in which the novel was produced often help to determine the novel's aesthetic properties only indirectly, by helping to determine the nature of its semantic properties and therefore the role that those semantic properties play in determining its aesthetic properties.

However, that discussion also showed that facts about an artwork's context of production can also be among the *direct* determinants of its aesthetic properties. The aesthetic properties of some artworks depend, not merely on their semantic properties, but also on the manner in which they convey those semantic properties. Facts about those artworks' histories of production and presentation and about their material constitution can help to determine the manner in which they convey their semantic

properties. Those facts play a role in determining their aesthetic properties that is independent of the role their semantic properties play in determining their aesthetic properties.

This raises the question of the nature of the relation in which we must stand to the direct determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties if we are aesthetically to appreciate that artwork. I propose that we must be consciously aware of the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties. Aesthetic appreciation requires us to be in a position for the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties to influence our experiential responses. Conscious awareness of the direct determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties is necessary for the aesthetic appreciation of that artwork because it enables the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties to have a direct, non-inferential effect on our experiential responses to the artwork. By contrast, we need not be consciously aware of the indirect determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties to appreciate that artwork aesthetically. Such awareness is redundant given conscious awareness of the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties.

Conscious awareness of a property or fact is distinct from acquaintance with a property or fact. Acquaintance, as we have been construing it, is a direct form of awareness that is not mediated by awareness of anything else. However, when we appreciate an artwork, our conscious awareness of the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties *is* frequently mediated by awareness of something else, for example, by a description of the artwork. Aesthetic appreciation requires conscious awareness of the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties, but it does not require acquaintance with them.

We can acquire conscious awareness of the direct determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties inferentially. This does not preclude the properties or facts of which we are consciously aware from being available to affect our experiential responses. What matters is not the means by which we become consciously aware of those properties or facts, but the role that awareness of them can play once acquired. While this subsequent role is non-inferential, the means by which conscious awareness is achieved need not be.

One can be consciously aware of some property of an artwork without knowing or being justified in believing that it has that property. Similarly, one can be consciously aware of a fact without knowing that fact. I will remain neutral regarding whether appreciating an artwork requires knowledge that the artwork has the non-aesthetic properties that directly determine its aesthetic properties as opposed to mere conscious awareness of those properties. I will also remain neutral regarding whether it requires knowledge of any facts that are among the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties as opposed to mere conscious awareness of those facts. Nothing in the rest of this article hangs on this issue. Nevertheless, we should note that *if* aesthetic appreciation requires such knowledge, this may impose additional constraints on the conditions under which descriptions of artworks can enable us to appreciate them aesthetically. For example, to do so, these descriptions may need to have reliable testimonial sources.

Although the notion of knowledge is stronger than that of conscious awareness in the sense just outlined, there is also a sense in which it is weaker. There is much I know of which I am not currently consciously aware. Whether or not knowledge of the

direct determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties is necessary for aesthetic appreciation, it is not sufficient.

7. Appreciation by description

The proposed account suggests that those descriptions that enable appreciation do so by making us consciously aware of the direct determinants of the aesthetic properties of the artworks they describe. It raises the question of what kinds of things descriptions can make us consciously aware of. They can make us consciously aware of both semantic properties of artworks and of facts about artworks. A description of a novel's plot could make me consciously aware of its plot, a description of a painting's subject could make me consciously aware of its subject, and a description of the materials from which an artwork is made could make me consciously aware of the facts about its material composition.

Descriptions can also make appropriately informed appreciators consciously aware of some sensory properties of artworks. For example, a description of a sculpture as perfectly spherical or of a line drawing as equilaterally triangular could make appropriately informed appreciators consciously aware of the shape properties of the artworks in question. Similarly, a description of a painting as being uniformly International Klein Blue in colour could make someone familiar with the colour International Klein Blue consciously aware of the painting's colour. A description of a poem as being in iambic pentameter could make someone with the right background knowledge consciously aware of the poem's rhythm. Although perceptual experience of the artworks could also make us consciously aware of these properties, it is not necessary for conscious awareness of these properties.

An important consequence of this is that the distinction between those artworks that are potentially appreciable by description and those that are not does not coincide with the distinction between artworks the direct determinants of whose aesthetic properties exclude sensory properties and artworks the direct determinants of whose aesthetic properties include such properties. Consider the description of *Vertical Earth Kilometer*. The direct determinants of its aesthetic properties plausibly include aspects of its sensory appearance. Nevertheless, the description can put those with the requisite background knowledge (such as knowledge of how brass looks and how red sandstone looks) in a position to appreciate the work because it can make them consciously aware of the relevant aspects of its sensory appearance.

There are clear limits to the sensory properties of which descriptions can make us consciously aware. Descriptions are ill equipped to make us consciously aware of many sensory properties, including many complex shape properties and highly determinate colour and sound properties. When sensory properties such as these are among the direct determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties, we may need to perceive the artwork, an instance of it, or an adequate perceptual substitute for it if we are to appreciate it.

Whether a description of an artwork enables conscious awareness of the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties and therefore enables the aesthetic appreciation of that artwork depends, not solely on the qualities of the description, but also on the background knowledge and cognitive capacities of the individual seeking to appreciate the artwork on the basis of that description. If I do not know French, or do not have a French–English dictionary to hand, no description in French will enable me to appreciate an artwork.

Similarly, whether the description of *Vertical Earth Kilometer* can make an appreciator consciously aware of the artwork's appearance depends on whether they know what red sandstone looks like. The question of how descriptions of artworks enable appreciation does not concern the nature of the two-place relation between artwork and description, but of the three-place relation between artwork, description, and appreciator.

There may be some sensory properties of which no description could make anyone consciously aware, due to facts about general limits to natural languages and to human cognitive capacities. Moreover, such sensory properties are among the direct determinants of the aesthetic properties of some artworks. However, it is a contingent fact that descriptions cannot make us consciously aware of these properties. Perceptual experience of those properties is necessary for the aesthetic appreciation of such artworks only because it is the sole route to conscious awareness of the direct determinants of their aesthetic properties. Conscious awareness is essential to aesthetic appreciation, not perceptual experience.

8. Explanatory advantages of the account

While modest, the claim that the aesthetic appreciation of an artwork requires conscious awareness of the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties has a variety of explanatory advantages. It solves the puzzle of appreciation by description by explaining how descriptions can enable aesthetic appreciation and illuminating the conditions under which they can do so. For a description of an artwork to enable a given appreciator to appreciate that artwork, it must be capable of making that appreciator consciously aware of the direct determinants of that artwork's aesthetic properties. It is possible to appreciate some artworks but not others by reading descriptions of them because the direct determinants of the aesthetic properties of some artworks are such that descriptions could make at least some appreciators consciously aware of them, while the direct determinants of the aesthetic properties of others are such that no description could make any appreciator consciously aware of them.

It also addresses several issues identified in section 2. It explains both what kinds of perceptual experiences of artworks can enable aesthetic appreciation and what makes a copy, recording, or reproduction of an artwork an adequate perceptual substitute for it. A perceptual experience of an artwork enables the perceiver to fully aesthetically appreciate that artwork only if it makes them consciously aware of all the direct determinants of all the artwork's aesthetic properties. Not every face-to-face perceptual experience of an artwork meets this requirement, so not every face-to-face experience enables full appreciation. Similarly, copies, recordings, or reproductions of artworks are wholly adequate perceptual surrogates for an appreciator only if they can make that appreciator consciously aware of all the direct determinants of all the aesthetic properties of the artworks in question.

The account also illuminates *the degree to which* a perceptual experience, surrogate, or description enables an appreciator to aesthetically appreciate an artwork. Some perceptual experiences of artworks and some perceptual surrogates for them enable only partial appreciation. They enable appreciators to appreciate some, but not all of an artwork's aesthetic properties. This is equally true of some descriptions of artworks. These experiences, surrogates, and descriptions do not enable appreciators fully to aesthetically appreciate the relevant artworks because they cannot make those appreciators consciously aware of all the direct determinants of all the aesthetic properties of those artworks. An experience, surrogate, or description enables an appreciator partial

appreciation so long as it can make them consciously aware of the direct determinants of at least some of the artwork's aesthetic properties. The extent to which it enables appreciation is a measure of the proportion of the artwork's aesthetic properties of the direct determinants of which it makes them consciously aware.

Furthermore, the account has two explanatory advantages over those accounts that take acquaintance to be necessary for appreciation. Firstly, it explains the variability in both the kind of perceptual experience required to appreciate artworks in different art forms and, correspondingly, the kinds of things that serve as adequate perceptual surrogates for artworks in different art forms. To appreciate a sculpture, an appreciator must view it from all sides. By contrast, to appreciate a painting, it may suffice for an appreciator to view it from a static position. While an adequate perceptual surrogate for a sculpture must show how it looks from all sides, therefore, an adequate perceptual surrogate for a painting need not do so. The proposed account explains these differences as resulting from differences in the direct determinants of the aesthetic properties of paintings and sculptures. The sensory properties on which the aesthetic properties of paintings directly depend are limited to properties of their two-dimensional surfaces, while the sensory properties on which the aesthetic properties of sculptures directly depend include their three-dimensional shapes. Accounts that construe acquaintance as necessary for appreciation cannot explain these differences. Every perceptual experience of an artwork acquaints the perceiver with it.


Secondly, it explains the possibility of a poet aesthetically appreciating a poem they have composed in their head but never written down or vocalized (Hopkins 2006: 90), of a reader appreciating a remembered passage, and of a painter aesthetically appreciating in imagination a painting they have conceived but not yet executed. Accounts that construe acquaintance as necessary for appreciation cannot accommodate any of these possibilities because neither imagery, memory, nor imagination acquaints us with its objects. By contrast, the proposed account explains the possibility of appreciating artworks in these ways. Someone can appreciate a poem they have composed in their head because composing a poem in one's head can make one consciously aware of the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties. Likewise, one can appreciate a remembered or imagined artwork because both memory and imagination can make one consciously aware of the direct determinants of an artwork's aesthetic properties.

9. Conclusion

The phenomenon of appreciation by description does not require us to deny that there is any necessary connection between art and the aesthetic. It is therefore compatible with the possibility of an aesthetic account of art. The aesthetic appreciation of an artwork requires conscious awareness of the direct determinants of its aesthetic properties. Some descriptions enable us aesthetically to appreciate the artworks they describe because they make us consciously aware of the direct determinants of the aesthetic properties of those artworks. Neither direct perceptual experiences of artworks nor perceptual surrogates for them enjoy any automatic advantage over descriptions of them as a means to aesthetic appreciation. There are some sensory properties of which descriptions are ill equipped to make appreciators consciously aware, but there are equally some facts of which face-to-face experiences of artworks and perceptual surrogates for them are ill equipped to make appreciators consciously aware.

These include facts about artworks' histories and contexts of production. The question of which artworks are potentially appreciable by description ultimately concerns what the direct determinants of their aesthetic properties are.

Acquaintance with some artworks is one route to conscious awareness of the direct determinants of their aesthetic properties. In some cases, it may even be the only route. Nevertheless, conscious awareness is essential for appreciation, not acquaintance. The notion of acquaintance emphasizes the non-inferentiality of our access to artworks. By contrast, the account I have developed here shows that what matters is not the non-inferentiality of our access to the direct determinants of artworks' aesthetic properties, but the non-inferentiality of our experiential responses to them.³

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