

Art and Aesthetics of Ancient Coinage

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Definition

What is Art?

Art: the use of the imagination to make things of aesthetic significance (New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary, 1990, Lexicon Publications, N.Y.)

Aes-thet-ic(s): concerning appreciation of the beautiful, esp. in the arts...the part of philosophy which deals with the perception of the beautiful as distinguished from the moral or useful; the branch of psychology which deals with the sensations and emotions evoked by beauty [from the Greek **aisthetikos:** perceptible to the senses] (New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary, 1990, Lexicon Publications, N.Y.)

One question sometimes raised in evaluating a work of art is, "What does it mean?" Talking about art is like painting about science; the art object speaks for itself. Art does not have to *mean* something—it *is* something.

"Collecting ancient coins is the cheapest way to collect great art." (Elwood Rafn).

Art Versus Science

Any collector of ancient coins is faced with the issue of how, or by what standards to collect the coins. The universe of collectors can be roughly divided into two main camps: those who collect for broadly scientific purposes, and those who collect for aesthetic reasons. There is no reason to limit oneself to one or the other. These simply represent conceptually different approaches to collecting.

Artistic Versus Scientific Critique

Science asks:

"How old is this coin?"

"What is the metallic composition of the coin?"

"How was it manufactured?"

"How many exist?"

"How many different dies are there in this series, and how do they relate to each other chronologically?"

"What is the historical context and significance of the coin?"

"What mythology and symbols are portrayed on the coin?"

"Why have these been selected?"

“What ruler issued the coin?”
“Why did the ruler issue this type of coin?”
“What is the issuer trying to communicate?”
“What is the geographical context of the coin?”
“What is the monetary system in which the coin was issued?”
“How rare is the coin?”

Art asks:

“How does this coin affect me as a human being as I view, touch and experience it?”
“What emotions do I experience as I apprehend the coin?”
“How does the coin evoke these emotions in me as the viewer?”
“What sort of sensory experience do I have in reaction to the coin?”
“What emotional impact does the coin have on me as its viewer?”

An artistic critique, because it is more subjective, lends itself grammatically to first-person language (e.g., “I feel...,” “This makes me feel...,” “I perceive/experience this as...”) A scientific critique requires more objectivity, and is conducted in the more distant, objective, third person language, i.e., the person or object is spoken of, versus the person speaking or speaking *to* another (“it” versus “I”, “me” or “my”). Artistic critique gets at the *subjective* experience of the person in relation to the art object; scientific critique strives for an *objective* analysis of the scientific data.

The purpose of *artistic* critique is not necessarily to determine if the artistic merit is *good* or *bad*—but often simply to clarify the impact of the work of art on the viewer. The impact can be very different from one viewer to another, because each brings a different set of life experiences and predispositions to the viewing. What the viewer *knows* and *believes* affects what the viewer *sees*.

Artistic critique is mostly about the subjective relationship between the viewer and the art object. Scientific critique is focused primarily on the attempt to determine objective reality.

Despite the fact that art can be highly idiosyncratic and personal, those with more aesthetic training are likely to perceive artistic merit more similarly than those without.

Before spending my money on a new coin, I typically ask myself: “Will I ever want to upgrade this coin for a better one?” Why?” “If I cannot sell this coin, will I be happy owning it over the long-term?” “How does this coin make me feel? In retrospect, I know I have made the right aesthetic decision if I continue to enjoy the coin more with re-viewings over time.

Aspects of Aesthetics

Abstract Features

1. Style: the distinguishing character or way in which the artist crafts the work; the level of elegance or graceful refinement achieved in the art; the collective features of a body of work that allow the viewer to recognize the artist (e.g., Kimon or Eanitos dekadachms)

2. Beauty: a work of art delights the senses; it evokes an emotional connection with the viewer; it calls out to be viewed and touched; it creates a positive sensate experience in the viewer

3. Emotional Appeal: the global perception of the attractiveness of the composition; a combination of tangible and intangible factors that create a positive emotional experience in the viewer; the subjective appeal of the art object to the viewer

4. Truth and Naturalness: the freedom from self-consciousness; the art is organic and appears to grow out of nature—it is connected in some way to basic human instincts, or to the evolution of a distilled genetic experience of the human species (collective unconscious of the species)

5. Simplicity: the efficient reduction of the level of complexity of the artistic form that still captures the full meaning and emotional impact of the art; the reduction of unnecessary clutter in the design of the art object

Elements of Composition

1. Form: the boundaries of the art object; the outlines and organization of the devices and elements comprising the work of art

2. Color: the natural surface coloration variations that either enhance or detract from the beauty of the art object

3. Texture: the level of smoothness versus coarseness or granularity of the surface of the object; the consistency of the fabric of the art object; the smoothness versus irregularity of the surfaces

4. Unity: the extent to which all aspects of the art object contribute to a unified presentation; separate elements are all in balance to create the emotional impact of the art; the degree to which the individual elements serve the same unified purpose

5. Harmony: the extent to which the individual elements make the others more effective in creating a unified emotional impact on the viewer; the degree to which there is a pleasant sensory blend of the individual components of the work of art

6. Balance: the degree to which the individual elements remain in equilibrium with the others and do not overpower each other

7. Movement, Rhythm and Repetitive Motifs: the degree to which motion is created by the artist through the use of form, balance and other aspects of the design; the repeating design features or patterns that help unify the art object

8. Contrast: the juxtaposition of design elements in a way to enhance the major devices

Technique

Artistic Technique: the identifiable stylistic aspects of the individual artist or group of artists within a time frame or geographic area; the type of brushstrokes on the canvas or the manner in which the design elements are constructed

Detractions to Coin Aesthetics

Abstract Features

1. poor style or craftsmanship of celator
2. does not evoke an emotional connection or is not pleasing to the senses of sight and touch
3. fails to evoke a positive emotional response or causes a negative reaction
4. unnatural design or form, does not feel organic, not connected to basic human instincts or experience
5. gratuitous or unneeded complexity, or overly cluttered design

Elements of Composition

1. form does not serve to increase aesthetic appeal
2. detracting color or irregular shading of surfaces
3. coarse or irregular texture or fabric
4. disunity of elements of design or features lack unitary purpose
5. lack of harmony; failure to achieve a pleasant sensory blend of design components
6. elements out of balance or out of equilibrium with each other
7. lack of effective use of movement; lack of effective rhythm or patterning of motifs
8. failure to use contrast to highlight important design elements

Technique

sloppy or crude artistic technique

Aspects of Aesthetics

Abstract Features

1. Style: the distinguishing character or way in which the artist crafts the work; the level of elegance or graceful refinement achieved in the art; the collective features of a body of work that allow the viewer to recognize the artist (e.g., Kimon or Euainetos dekadrachms)



Egypt, Ptolemy IV



Egypt, Alexandria Ptolemy XII



Boeotia, Federal Coinage, Thebes, Poseidon/Nike

2. Beauty: a work of art delights the senses; it evokes an emotional connection with the viewer; it calls out to be viewed and touched; it creates a positive sensate experience in the viewer



Egypt, Alexandria, Ptolemy I

3. Emotional Appeal: the global perception of the attractiveness of the composition; a combination of tangible and intangible factors that create a positive emotional experience in the viewer; the subjective appeal of the art object to the viewer



Macedonian Kingdom, Macedonia, Alexander III

4. Truth and Naturalness: the freedom from self-consciousness; the art is organic and appears to grow out of nature—it is connected in some way to basic human instincts, or to the evolution of a distilled genetic experience of the human species (collective unconscious of the species)



Egypt, Alexandria, Cleopatra VII

5. Simplicity: the efficient reduction of the level of complexity of the artistic form that still captures the full meaning and emotional impact of the art; the reduction of unnecessary clutter in the design of the art object



Corinthia, Corinth, Pegasus/Athena Macedon, Neapolis, Gorgon/Incuse Mill-sail



Numidia, Miciplsa/Horse

Elements of Composition

1. Form: the boundaries of the art object; the outlines and organization of the devices and elements comprising the work of art



Zeugitana, Carthage, Tanit/Horse



Zeugitana, Carthage, Tanit/Pegasus



2. Color: the natural surface coloration variations that either enhance or detract from the beauty of the art object



Radiate Helios/Rose



Warrier/Horse over Corinthian helmet



Brutus (Roman Republican), Libertas/M. Iunius Brutus between Lictors following Accensus



3. Texture: the level of smoothness versus coarseness or granularity of the surface of the object; the consistency of the fabric of the art object; the smoothness versus irregularity of the surfaces



Egypt, Alexandria, Ptolemy III/Eagle



Bactria, Demetrios I/Artemis

4. Unity: the extent to which all aspects of the art object contribute to a unified presentation; separate elements are all in balance to create the emotional impact of the art; the degree to which the individual elements serve the same unified purpose



Lokris, Lokris Opuntii, Persephone (imitates Syracusean coinage of Euainetos)/Ajax ("the Greater", king of Salamis, greatest Greek warrior after Achilles in Trojan war), with Sword, Shield with Serpent, Corinthian Helmet Between Legs, Broken Spear on Ground

5. Harmony: the extent to which the individual elements make the others more effective in creating a unified emotional impact on the viewer; the degree to which there is a pleasant sensory blend of the individual components of the work of art



Sicily, Syracuse, 2nd Democracy, Charioteer Driving Biga, Nike above/Arethusa, FourDolphins

6. Balance: the degree to which the individual elements remain in equilibrium with the others and do not overpower each other



Cilicia, Tarsus, Satrap Tarkumuwa (Datames),
Female Head (derived from Kimon's Arethusa)/
Bearded Head (Ares?)



Thrace, Cherronesos, Lion/Quadripartite
Incuse, Two with Pellets



Paeonian Kingdom, Lykkeios, Zeus/Herakles
Strangling the Nemean Lion



Sicily, Syracuse, Heiron II, Queen Philistis/
Winged Nike Driving Quadriga

7. Movement, Rhythm and Repetitive Motifs: the degree to which motion is created by the artist through the use of form, balance and other aspects of the design; the repeating design features or patterns that help unify the art object



Sicily, Syracuse, Tyranny of Gelon, Charioteer of
Quadriga, Nike above/Arethusa, Four Dolphins



Corinthia, Corinth, Pegasus/Athena, Nike
Flying Behind



Caria, Kaunos, Iris, Winged Goddess of the Rainbow and Messenger/Triangular Baetyl

8. Contrast: the juxtaposition of design elements in a way to enhance the major devices



Bruttium, Terina, Head of Nymph Terina/Nike on Cippus

Technique

Artistic Technique: the identifiable stylistic aspects of the individual artist or group of artists within a time frame or geographic area; the type of brushstrokes on the canvas or the manner in which the design elements are constructed



Parthian Empire, Gotarzes II/King Enthroned, Receiving Diadem from Tyche



Macedonian Kingdom, Demetrios Poliorcetes/Poseidon



Cilicia, Tarsus, Mazaios, Ba'altars/Lion on Bull



Seleukid Kingdom, Seleukos I, Athena/Nike

