

WELLESLEY COLLEGE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES.

AN ATTEMPTED EXPERIMENT IN PSYCHOLOGICAL ÆSTHETICS.

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The psychologist meets the gravest difficulties in his attempts to bring the genuinely æsthetic experience under experimental conditions, for æsthetic enjoyment cannot be secured by any fixed combination of stimuli, because it is notoriously fleeting, capricious and individual, now surprising one at unexpected turns, and again retreating coyly when most persistently wooed. The simple material, therefore, like straight and curved lines, which lends itself most readily to definite and measurable variation and has formed the material of most experiments of this sort, is peculiarly unlikely to waken the æsthetic thrill. On the other hand, the genuinely beautiful object cannot readily meet experimental requirements. For in spite of theories that there is no distinction between the merely 'pleasant' and the 'beautiful' and that æsthetic enjoyment is simply a peculiarly permanent or an unusually attentive state of pleasure, careful introspection seems clearly to support Kantian theories of æsthetics and to show that 'pleasant' and 'agreeable' differ radically and essentially from 'beautiful.' The truly æsthetic experience is indeed characterized by an almost indescribable merging of self and thing, of ego and alter, of subject and object. It follows that close introspection, the discriminating study of a momentary experience immediately upon its conclusion, is here almost impossible, since the absorption essential to the æsthetic consciousness, is not easily and promptly replaced by the scien-

tific mood. The observer is therefore in danger either of passing over the genuine æsthetic experience or else of accepting as 'æsthetic' the most lifeless and negative moments of pleasure.

For all these reasons, the investigation here described, though it has aimed to study the æsthetic consciousness by the experimental method, can not claim actually to have attained either end. It has tried to avoid the difficulty of the experiments on simple figures, by studying the enjoyment of pictures, but these pictures, though selected for their ability to arouse æsthetic feeling, may have failed of their purpose in many instances. It is indeed impossible to interpret even from their own account of it, the exact nature of the experience of the persons whom we have tested, so that plot or character-interest or some other form of un-æsthetic pleasure may have dominated their enjoyment. Moreover, the very richness and variety of the pictures, which form the material of the study, has diminished their value for strictly experimental purposes. But even when it has not sounded the depths of the genuine æsthetic experience the investigation has been of undoubted interest by bringing into prominence certain conditions of the enjoyment of pictures by young people of various ages.

The subjects of the experiment are three hundred children, equally divided among the kindergarten, the fourth primary and the highest grammar school grades of certain Massachusetts schools; and one hundred and fifty Wellesley College students, of whom one-half are freshmen and one-half seniors.

The immediate object of the experiment is a comparison of the liking of these children with that of the college students for certain typical pictures. The simple method employed is the following: Each person is tested, in a room by himself; three pictures are shown, two by two, in the same order; these two pairs are so arranged that the picture best liked, of the two which are first shown, is again compared with the third picture. Each picture represents a woman's half-figure: Picture I. is a delicately colored lithograph of Prang; it shows the head and shoulders of a pretty pink-cheeked girl who is looking downward. She wears a quaker-like cap and mantle, and the white neckerchief which is open to show her throat is fas-

tened with a bunch of violets. Picture II. is an uncolored photograph of Chantron's 'Souvenir,' shown in the Salon of 1896. The face is slightly turned away and a high light falls on the beautiful features, on the wistful upturned eyes, on the soft hair knotted in the neck, and on the delicate outlines of shoulder, arm and back, from which the garment has fallen away. The right hand, loosely folded over the left, holds a bunch of violets. These two pictures, similarly mounted, are shown side by side, with the question "which do you like better?" (To the older subjects it is explained that this question does not mean "which seems to you the better picture" or "which seems more artistic?") The picture preferred is then combined with Picture III., an *Alinari* photograph of one of Melozzo da Forlì's newly photographed frescoes from the *Capitolo dei Canonici* in St. Peter's, the buoyant figure of the winged, aureoled angel who plays the violin with so serious an expression in her wide-opened eyes.

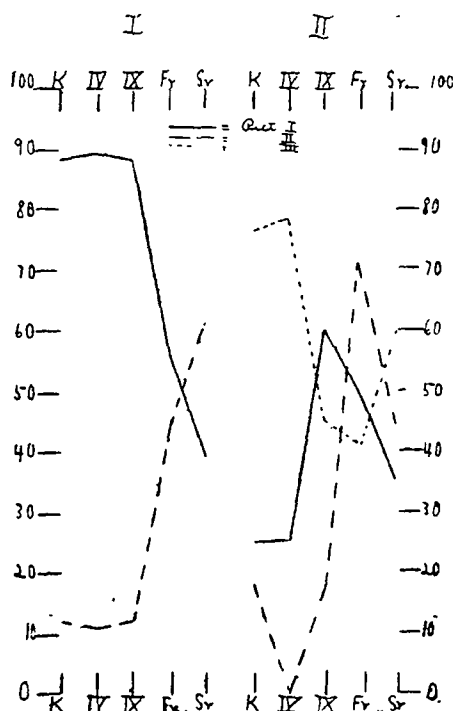
The pictures are, of course, intended to embody in a prominent way certain definite characteristics: the first is colored; the second has the beauty of form and outline, of light and shade; the third is obviously a very suggestive or associative picture, expressing distinct religious conceptions, and symbolizing spiritual experiences, besides inevitably suggesting European galleries and similar works of Italian art to some of those who were the subjects of the experiment. It is impossible, of course, to isolate any of these characteristics; all the pictures have a certain grace of outline and no one of them lacks suggestiveness. But a study of the reasons given for the choices shows that these motives predominate.

The pictures are shown when only the experimenter and the subject of the experiment are present, in order to guard as far as possible against distraction of the attention. When the three choices have been made and entered, the pictures are exhibited again in the same order and the subjects are asked to give reasons for their decisions. These choices furnish the first material for our study. The results are summarized in the table which follows, and are brought out very clearly in the accompanying charts:

TABLE I.—CHOICES.

Age of subjects.	Choice I		Choice II.		
	Picture I	II.	I.	II	III.
Kinderg. (90) ¹	% 87.8 (79) ¹	% 12.2 (11)	% 25.3 (20)	% 18.2 (2)	% 75.6 (68)
Grade IV. (99)	88.9 (88)	11.1 (11)	25. (22)	—	77.8 (77)
Grade IX. (95)	88.4 (84)	11.6 (11)	59.5 (50)	18.2 (2)	45.3 (43)
Freshmen (70)	55.7 (39)	44.3 (31)	48.7 (19)	71. (22)	41.4 (29)
Seniors (75)	38.7 (29)	61.3 (46)	34.5 (10)	43.5 (20)	60. (45)

The percentages are based on the number representing the *possible choices* of a given picture. In the first choices, Pictures I. and II. were both shown to each person and either might



have been chosen each time: the percentages are therefore calculated on the number of the persons tested. In the second choice Picture III. was shown to each person and is similarly

¹The parenthesized numerals refer, in the first column to the number of subjects; in the other columns to the number of choices.

treated, but Pictures I. and II. were repeated only when already chosen, and *either*, not *both*, compared with Picture III. The rate of preference for these pictures is based, therefore, on the number of times when they were actually shown in the second test. Picture I., for example, was 79 times preferred to Picture II., by the kindergarten children; in the second test, therefore, it was 79 times shown with Picture III. and 20 times preferred to it; and these 20 choices are 25 per cent. of the 79 possible choices.

In the first choice between the colored picture (I.) and the uncolored figure (II.) nearly nine-tenths of each class of the children, more than one-half the freshmen and nearly two-fifths of the seniors prefer the first, apparently influenced by the color. The children are evidently little affected by the charm of outline or the delicate suggestion of Chantren's picture. The result of this first choice seems therefore to emphasize the prevailing impression that children prefer bright color to any other quality in an object. The study of the second choices does not however substantiate this theory. Precisely the youngest children, those of the kindergarten and the fourth grade, least often choose the colored picture.¹ Children of fourteen, on the other hand, and college freshmen most often persist in their choice of the colored picture. The subtler charm of Picture II. has little effect except upon the college students.² On the other hand, da Forli's angel is, taking all in all, the greatest favorite. So far therefore, as these figures give scope for any conclusion, they point to suggestion as the most common factor of the enjoyment of pictures.

Up to this point, the material for our study, the actual choices of children and of college students, has been of a definite and

¹ The evident interest of the little children in the more novel picture must be taken into account.

² The apparent increase, in the second choice, of the preference of the children for Picture II., is based upon so small a number of cases that it may fairly be disregarded. The most curious feature of the Table is its indication that the liking of the Freshmen for Picture II. is more persistent than that of the Seniors. The number of these choices is not large enough to warrant any dogmatic conclusion, else we should be inclined to interpret the figures as a suggestion that the allegorizing period of the reflective young person's development is the Senior rather than the Freshmen age.

objective sort. In turning now to a consideration of the reasons assigned for these different choices it is necessary to admit at the outset the disadvantages, already mentioned, of the method. The shyness of little children often, undoubtedly, prevented any expression of reasons for their choices, and some of the older children may have hesitated to commit themselves, through a morbid sort of conscientiousness. On the other hand, it is quite likely that college students, and perhaps the older children, occasionally invented very forced reasons from a mistaken sense of scientific duty. Every effort was made to overcome these difficulties; an easy relation with the little children was established, whenever it was possible, before the pictures were shown, and the older subjects of the experiment were carefully told to record only their immediate consciousness. It is nevertheless impossible to assume that our records adequately represent the experience of the persons whom we tested.

The average number of reasons assigned (including those advanced for a third choice) is for the kindergarten children a fraction over three, for children of nine and of fourteen a number between four and five, for college freshmen and seniors five and five and one-half. An interesting general characteristic of the replies is the increase, with advancing years, of the tendency toward the negative reason, that is, the explanation of preference for one picture by dislike of another, as when the colored picture is chosen through distaste for the undraped shoulder and back of Chantron's figure. This class of negative reasons, comprising only one-fiftieth of the explanations given by the very little children, includes one-sixth of the answers of children of fourteen and more than one-fifth of the college reasons—a suggestive commentary on the growth of negative criticism.

The classification of answers to the question, 'Why do you like it?' at first takes account of cases in which the question is met by a 'Don't know' or a 'Can't tell.' Among the little children who could give no reason, the word 'Cause' played a leading rôle in such replies as 'Cause it's prettier' or 'Prettiest, 'cause I like it.' Half the kindergarten children, more than one-fourth of the nine-year-olds, and nearly one-third of the children of fourteen years give no explanation of their

choices, whereas only one-tenth of the college freshmen and an even smaller number of seniors are without this resource. This failure to offer reasons does not, of course, argue against the sincerity of the enjoyment. On the contrary, it is the very nature of the emotional, and especially of the æsthetic, consciousness not to render up an account of itself, for it is an immediate experience, which is followed, not constituted, by the reflective enumeration of its causes. The inability of children to assign reasons for their choices is no indication, therefore, of their inability to feel æsthetic pleasure.

The table which follows offers a classification of the explanations offered, excluding the non-committal answers.

TABLE II.
EXPLANATIONS.¹

Explanation	Age of Subjects.				
	Kind	IV.	IX.	Freshmen.	Seniors.
Face.	1.3	8.2	8.7	13.8	10.8
Form.	1.3	6	5.9	16.1	11.1
Detail.	75.1	42.5	10.4	4.1	7
Color.	11.7	19.3	25.5	9	9.3
Expression.	.6	5.7	11.5	21.2	17.1
Suggestion.		.6	5.9	13.8	14.4
Relig. Sug'n.	7.5	4.7	4.8	.6	1.2
'Realness'		2.2	6.3	5.1	10.6
Unclassified.	2.	10.4	21.1	16.	18.

The little children most commonly make their choices because of some prominent detail of dress or of background which strikes their fancy. Three-fourths of the positive explanations of the kindergarten children and nearly one-half of those of the nine-year-olds are such as these: 'Pretty suit on and violets'; 'she has curly hair'; 'fiddle'; 'rag on her head'; 'that one has posies'; 'wings on, and playing banjo.' The flowers, sometimes distinguished as 'violets' or 'rosies,' are objects of most eager attention especially on the part of the little children; articles of dress are often named, but now more often by the sophisticated nine-year-olds; the violin and the wings win the attention of the older children chiefly; the hair

¹ This classification of 'reasons' was not pre-arranged, but suggested by the records.

is absorbing, notably to a child who supplies the personal element, and prefers the angel because it has 'curly hair like myself'; the halo is noticed and described as a 'nice head with dots.' What is observable in all this is the narrowness of the child's observation, his frequent inability to appreciate a picture as a whole.

Besides these explanations of preference by singling out some detail of the picture, the kindergarten children have practically only two other reasons for their choices. The most important of these is the liking for color, and the numerical results probably underestimate the importance of this factor, for the admired features of Picture I. were presumably often chosen for their color. Distinctly religious suggestiveness is the remaining expressed explanation of the choice of the youngest children, and is frequently named by older children, while it has no place in the college records. 'Because it's an angel,' 'it's in our church'; 'it's the Christ child's mother'; 'it's a divine picture' are examples of these reasons; and one child says of the angel: 'it's God almighty.'

The nine-year-old children, while still preëminently interested in separate details, name a greater variety of reasons for decision, noticing, for example, face and 'expression' and pose. Children of fourteen, whose fondness for Picture I. has already been remarked, realize their liking for color as the ground of one-fourth of their choices. The pleasure in 'expression' first noticed in the nine-year-olds is more often given as explanation; and under this name are grouped epithets like 'sweet,' 'joyful,' 'thoughtful,' as well as cases of the more specific statement "I like the expression." Still another reason given by these older children for liking a picture is the fact that it is 'real,' or 'human,' or 'alive,' or, as one child puts it, 'natural.' It is interesting to observe that this explanation is never given by the youngest children, who are too inexperienced to make a distinction between real and unreal, but that it is occasionally offered by the nine-year-olds and is most prominent in the records of the college seniors.

College students, as a whole, less often call attention to detail or to color, but more often notice the face and especially

the outline and pose of a figure; in a large number of their choices, they definitely name the expression of the face as its justification; and, finally, they show themselves distinctly susceptible to what has been called the suggestiveness of the pictures. Their records are full of such statements as 'means more,' 'more to it,' 'more soul,' "I like the conception," "it has the right feeling"; and they often name definite associations with pilgrim or puritan, or with 'something of Raphael's that I like very much.' In the same category, but among the negative reasons already discussed, may be included ten instances of objection to a picture for its incongruity with an ideal representation. Thus da Forli's angel is disliked because 'gross for the thing it is meant to represent; not a face for an angel,' while one young person goes into irreverent particulars: "the angel is fat and has a wig, and his halo looks like a door mat." Along with this increase in the influence of general suggestiveness there is a significant reduction in the number of the definitely religious suggestions, which were noticed in the experience of the little children, and this indicates the lessening importance of the religious experience with advancing years and with the multiplication of interests.

Taken together, the explanations of liking for a picture, because of its suggested characteristics, increase with years. Yet it would be unsafe to conclude that little children are unable to appreciate any save the habitual 'religious' suggestions of a picture. Judging from the actual choices, which were unhampered by timidity, by defective introspection and by awkward expression, children are very sensitive to the charm of a pre-eminently suggestive picture. The sweetness of the expression, or the suggestion of victory or peace which a little child finds in a picture is an experience beyond his powers of description, and he is reduced to the reply of the child who said 'I know but I can't tell'; or else, if impressed with the demands of the situation, he selects some easily named detail—like flowers, or wings, or violin—as his 'explanation,' while yet the deeper reason lurks in the fastnesses of his child soul. It would be difficult, indeed, to describe a suggestive picture in more adequate terms than those of one of the older children, a girl of thir-

teen, who said of the angel: "You can think more about it." One should, of course, guard one's self against the common assumption that this avidity for association and suggestion is a mark of æsthetic development. More often interest in the suggestiveness of a picture means the diversion of the attention from the picture itself and the breaking up of that state of absorption which is the condition of purely æsthetic pleasure. Such a comment as the following, by a college senior, shows no trace of æsthetic appreciation: "There is something symbolic, something which goes beyond the mere picture. The wings in the background—express so much." This is a good example of what William James calls 'a glow of spurious sentiment that would have fairly made old Titian sick.'

Among the 'unclassified' answers are a few which deserve a final word of comment. These are, in the first instance, cases of reference to what may be called the technical merit of the picture, to 'clear cut lines,' 'better finish,' 'execution' or 'drawing.' Most of these occur among the older children and the college students, but a few nine-year-olds seem to have been trained to observe these characteristics, and some of their comments, like "stands out more" (of picture II.) and 'not finished in appearance' (of Picture III.) show a genuine observation which far surpasses the vague indefiniteness of such replies as 'more artistic' or 'better art' which are found among the records of the older subjects of the experiment.

The distinctions between the freshman and the senior records are apparent in the table. The differences are too unimportant and the figures too few to demand comment: the greater sensitiveness of the seniors to the suggestion of a picture and their livelier pleasure in its naturalness or realness are the only noticeable distinctions. A very careful comparison of the girls' reasons with those of the boys' gives no support to the theory of a fundamental psychic difference between masculine and feminine point of view. Only two differences are characteristic of all three ages: the girls more often notice the face and the expression in the picture. This distinction seems to be most simply explained by the fact that the less active life of the girl, even in her earliest years, has fostered her interest in dolls and

indoor-plays and picture books, and so has trained her to observe faces and expressions.

The comparison of reasons no longer on the basis of the different ages, but on that of the different pictures, justifies the selection of these particular pictures for the study, since it shows that Picture I. is most often chosen through liking for the color, that Picture II., more frequently than the rest, is preferred for the attitude and outline, the expression and the face; and that Picture III., setting aside the reasons of 'detail' which are given by the children in their frequent selection of it, is most often chosen for its suggestiveness.

The table follows:

TABLE III.
EXPLANATIONS.¹

Explanation.	With Pictures.			Explanation.	With Pictures.		
	I.	II.	III.		I.	II.	III.
Face.	8.3	14.3	9.7	Suggestion.	4.6	7.9	13.7
Form.	7.8	11.1	7.9	Relig. Sug.	—	.3	7.7
Detail.	24	3.6	27.2	'Realness.'	5	10.4	5.1
Color.	28	11.1	2.8	Miscel.	11.1	19.4	14.8
Expression.	10.8	21.5	10.6				

The more general results may be summarized, even at some risk of repetition, lest they disappear in the thicket of percentages. Chief among them is the conclusion that it is impossible to draw absolute distinctions between child and adult, so as to say definitely of this or that picture, "no child will like it," and of this or that motive "no child will be susceptible to it." On the other hand, leaving out of account the preferences of the kindergarten children, there is no type of choice which is not represented among children as among adults; and the common opinion that children, especially little children, are sure to prefer a colored to an uncolored picture is sharply contradicted by our records which show that children are far more impressed by what is called the 'suggestion' of a picture, when this is

¹ The figures suggest a comment on the fact that Picture I. is chosen nearly as often for some detail as for color. As has already been suggested, this special feature of the picture may have been liked for its color; and furthermore, the little children who so often chose Picture I. were frequently too shy to give a reason, although they were very likely influenced by the color.

not of the very subtle sort. What distinguishes the æsthetic judgment of children from that of adults is rather the habit of dwelling on the parts to the neglect of the whole of a composition, and the tendency to fix the attention on the details of figure or of background, and to enjoy a picture through interest in its unessential features. One practical outcome of this study is therefore the suggestion that training in art should aim directly to widen the scope of attention and to stimulate the capacity, never attained by the uncultured person, of seeing parts in relation to each other and in subordination to the whole.