Touch, Sensation and Art

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Abstract: The article targets to reveal the significant role of touch in understanding and experiencing art. A brief historical approach will be offered, mentioning several philosophers and their notions of beauty and art. However, the emphasis will be on Kant's idea of art as having a representational function. Sensations will be revealed as having this representational function, so they can represent external objects, not just internal ones. It could be argued that although sensations are surely not intentional mental states, they nevertheless perform a representational function in virtue of their role as the matter of intuition. Finally, some empirical examples will be presented, referring to the process of creating things in the context of art. It will be revealed that the main recent focus of studies in the anthropology of art has undoubtedly been on art as a system of meaning and communication. Therefore, touch will be introduced here as a way of recognizing, communicating and producing significance.

Key Words: art, awareness, perception, representation, sense, sensation, touch

I. Historical Approach.

The article targets the significance of the role of touch in understanding and experiencing art. Anthropologists may not wish to be bound by one particular definition of art, but it may not be helpful for them to use just one definition of art divorced from a current core meaning taken from their own culture. We begin by outlining some preliminary historical approaches. Plato holds in the "R*epublic"* and elsewhere that the arts are representational, or "*mimetic"* (or "imitative"). Artworks therefore are ontologically dependent on ordinary physical objects, insofar as they imitate them, and consequently appear to be inferior to them. Physical objects in turn are ontologically dependent on the non-physical unchanging Forms, their imitations, and hence are inferior to them. In this sense, artworks present only an appearance of an appearance of the

Forms, which are grasped by reason alone. Consequently, artistic experience cannot yield knowledge. Nor do the makers of artworks work from knowledge alone. Because artworks engage an unstable, lower part of the soul, art should be controlled by moral realities, which, along with truth, are more metaphysically fundamental and, properly understood, more humanly important than beauty, for example. Arts in this case are not, for Plato, the primary sphere in which beauty operates. The Platonic concept of beauty is extremely wide and metaphysical: here appears the Form of Beauty, which can only be known non-perceptually, but it is more closely related to the erotic than to the arts.[1]

Fine art for Kant is the art of genius and is "a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication."[2] When fully unpacked, the definition has representational, formalist and expressive elements, focusing as much on the creative activity of the artistic genius (who, according to Kant, possesses an "innate mental aptitude through which nature gives the rule to art") as on the artworks produced by that activity. Kant's aesthetic theory is not focused on art on its own. For him, art falls under the broader topic of aesthetic judgement, which covers judgements of the beautiful, the sublime and so on. So, Kant's definition of art is a relatively small part of his theory of aesthetic judgement, which in turn is situated in a hugely ambitious theoretical structure that aims to account for the interconnections between scientific knowledge, morality, and religious faith.[3]

Hegel's account of art incorporates his view of beauty. Hegel defines beauty as the sensuous/perceptual appearance or expression of absolute truth. The best artworks convey, by sensory/perceptual means, the deepest metaphysical truth, appearing to be the concrete realization of what is conceptual or rational. That is, what is conceptual or rational becomes real; it is the imminent force that animates and propels the self-consciously developing universe. This universe is the concrete realiza-

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[1] See the entry on Plato's aesthetics, and the entry on Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-rhetoric/

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), section 44, 46.

[3] See the entry on Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology and the general entry on Immanuel Kant. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics/

tion of what is conceptual or rational, being superior to the sensory. So, as the mind and its products alone are capable of truth, artistic beauty is metaphysically superior to natural beauty.[4] The central and defining feature of beautiful works of art is that, through the medium of sensation, each one presents the most fundamental values of its civilization. Art, therefore, as a cultural expression, operates in the same sphere as religion and philosophy, and expresses the same content as they do. But art here "reveals to consciousness the deepest interests of humanity" in a different manner compared to religion and philosophy, because art works by sensuous means. Hence, given the superiority of the conceptual to the non-conceptual, and the fact that art's medium for expressing/presenting culture's deepest values is the sensual or perceptual, art's medium is limited and inferior in comparison to the medium that religion uses to express the same content. Art and religion, in this respect, become inferior to philosophy, which employs a conceptual medium to present its content. Art initially predominates, in each civilization, as the supreme mode of cultural expression, followed, successively, by religion and philosophy. Similarly, because of the broad "logical" relations between art, religion and philosophy that determine their structure, and because of the cultural ideas about what is intrinsically valuable and developed from sensuous to non-sensuous concepts, history is divided into periods that reflect the teleological development from the sensuous to the conceptual. Generally speaking, art also develops synchronizing with the historical growth of non-sensuous or conceptual ideas from sensuous concepts, and each individual art-form develops historically in the same way. [5]

Hegel's close association of art with beauty and freedom shows his clear relation to Kant and Schiller. Kant also maintained that our experience of beauty is an experience of freedom. He argued, however, that beauty is not itself an objective property of things. When we judge that a natural object or a work of art is beautiful, in Kant's view, we are indeed making a judgement about an object, but we are also asserting that the object has a certain effect on us and that it should have the same effect on all who view it. The effect produced by the "beautiful" object is to

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[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art* (Wicks, 1993).
[5] Ibid.

set our understanding and imagination in "free play" with one another, and it is the pleasure generated by this free play that leads us to judge the object to be beautiful. [6]

In contrast to Kant, Schiller understands beauty to be a property of the object itself. It is the property, possessed by both living beings and works of art, of appearing to be free when in fact they are not. As Schiller puts it, beauty is "freedom in appearance, autonomy in appearance"[7]. Schiller insists that freedom itself is something "noumenal" (in Kant's words) and so can never actually manifest itself in the realm of the senses. We can never see freedom at work in, or embodied, in the world of space and time. In the case of beautiful objects, therefore — whether they are the products of nature or human imagination — "it is all that matters […] that the object appears as free, not that it really is so". [8]

Hegel agrees with Schiller (against Kant) that beauty is an objective property of things. In his view, however, beauty is the direct sensuous manifestation of freedom, not merely the appearance or imitation of freedom. It shows us what freedom actually looks like and sounds like when it gives itself sensuous expression despite varying degrees of idealization. Since true beauty is the direct sensuous expression of the freedom of spirit, it must be produced by free spirit for free spirit, and so cannot be a mere product of nature. Nature in its turn is capable of a formal beauty, and life is capable of what Hegel calls "sensuous" beauty; but true beauty is found only in works of art that are freely created by human beings to bring before our minds what it is to be free spirit.

Beauty, for Hegel, has certain formal qualities: it is the unity or harmony of different elements in which these elements are not just arranged in a regular, symmetrical pattern but are unified organically. Beauty, however, is not just a matter of form; it is also a matter of content. This is one of Hegel's most controversial ideas, and it is one that sets him at odds with modern artists and art-theorists who insist that art can embrace any content we like and, indeed, can dispense with content

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6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, section 98, 102–3.

7 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Eduard Snell (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 151.

8 Ibid.

altogether. As already seen, the content that Hegel claims is central and indispensable to genuine beauty (and therefore genuine art) is the freedom and richness of spirit. To put it another way, that content is the Idea, or absolute reason, as self-knowing spirit. Since the Idea is pictured in religion as "God," the content of truly beautiful art is in one respect the divine. Yet, Hegel argues that the Idea (or "God") comes to consciousness of itself only in and through finite human beings. The content of beautiful art must thus be the divine in human form or the divine within humanity itself (as well as purely human freedom).

Hegel recognizes that art can portray animals, plants and inorganic nature, but he sees it as art's principal task to present divine and human freedom. In both cases, the focus of attention is on the human figure in particular. This is because, in Hegel's view, the most appropriate sensuous incarnation of reason and the clearest visible expression of spirit is the human form. Colors and sounds by themselves can certainly communicate a mood, but only the human form actually embodies spirit and reason. Truly beautiful art thus shows us sculpted, painted or poetic images of Greek gods or of Jesus Christ, i.e. the divine in human form, or it shows us images of free human life itself.

II. Kant and the Idea of Sensation and Representation.

Mostly, Kant considers beauty only in relation with nature rather than art. For him the pure judgement could be made only about free beauty in contrast to beauty that is fixed by the concept of the thing's purpose. All fine art involves the concept of the purpose for the artist has his purpose in creating it, though genius can animate fine art by creating second nature. Kant therefore prefers to focus on pure aesthetic judgements, but his focus on nature also fits his philosophical system, allowing him to argue that aesthetic judgement is universal because of its accordance with nature's formal or subjective purposiveness. Judgements of beauty also relate to nature's real or objective purposiveness, which should be properly the subject of teleological judgement. Therefore, we could state that nature's purposiveness is not its suitability for human cognition but its end in itself or final purpose, which is beyond theoretical understanding as it pertains to the suprasensible domain of freedom, not the sensible empirical domain. The end that we judge teleologically is the realization of freedom in the natural world, which presupposes that the world has a divine order that ultimately enables us to be free and autonomous.

Aesthetic judgement mediates between the formal purposiveness of nature and its objective purposiveness because beauty consists in aesthetic harmony or unity, which has no empirical purpose, and it is characterized by Kant as "purposiveness without a purpose"[9] If something does not have a purpose for anything else and yet seems to have been designed, it leads us to the idea that the object has an end in itself.

These ideas lead to the conclusion that nature and humans have a suprasensible purpose, which is an end in itself. We cannot know the transcendental design of nature, but aesthetic judgement intimates it by enabling us to feel it. This intimation is similar to the way in which practical reason does not give us knowledge of freedom as a final purpose, but our practice of morality enlarges this idea of reason that there is harmony between freedom and nature. In this sense, beauty symbolizes good because it leads us by analogy to the same idea. Harmony in aesthetic judgement leads to accordance between nature, freedom and beauty. The impossibility of knowing the purposive design of nature brings to mind the notion of the sublime. Our imagination acknowledges its limits in fulfilling the demand of reason to represent objects as wholes. It is not nature itself which is sublime but the power of mind to present the idea of a suprasensible purpose inaccessible to the imagination. The suprasensible purpose is freedom, the idea of reason, which is presupposed in our moral actions. Judgements of the sublime are universal because they are connected to awareness of the power of reason and a purpose for nature and man.

Kant argues that we need to use reason's idea of objective natural purpose in order to understand nature as an ordered, rule-governed system, which is different from understanding nature in terms of causal relations. Both understanding and reason have as their conditions of possibility something akin to an enormous yet unknowable hypothesis about the purpose of the sensible natural domain and the suprasensible domain of freedom. Therefore, we could conclude that the aesthetic and the teleological judgement mediates between nature and freedom by reflecting on the unity, wholeness and purposiveness of each domain, intimating that the moral purpose experienced in practical action is the unknown purpose that is felt aesthetically and presupposed theoretically.

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[9] Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

One of Kant's central concerns in Critique of Pure Reason[10] lies in explaining how it is possible for our mental states to come to possess the "dignity" (A197/B242) of referring to objects in empirical cognition. This is the problem of the representationality, or intentionality, or simply object-directedness of our mental states.[11] Kant asserts that any cognition's relation to its object requires an intuition (A19/B33), but he also claims that reference to an empirical object requires that the intuition relate to the object "through sensation" (A20/B34). While space and time are *a priori,* formal conditions on the representationality of cognition, sensations are *a posteriori* material conditions. Without sensations, we could represent the possible forms that objects in general could take, but we could not represent concrete, actual objects. Sensations, accordingly, are necessary but by no means sufficient conditions for the intentional relation between the mind and the world. All this naturally raises the question of how sensations contribute to securing this relation. Are sensations non-representational conditions of the possibility of the representationality of other mental states, or do they possess a representationality of their own? And if the latter, what sort of representationality can they be said to possess?[12] There are two dominant answers to this question. According to one position, sensations cannot represent anything because they are not cognitively sophisticated enough to meet the conditions that Kant places on representationality. In this view, sensations are merely the sensory effects of the impingements of objects on the senses; although they may be necessary for the representationality of other mental states (most importantly, empirical intuitions), they do not themselves represent. According to another view, sensations are representations, but

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[10] All quotations of Kant are from the Cambridge Editions of the works of Immanuel Kant under Paul Guyer and Allen Wood general edition. Citations of *Critique of Pure Reason* use standard A/B pagination.

[11] "Intentionality" and "object-directedness" carry connotations that could be vague. Ibid.

[12] It will be important to keep this semantic question regarding sensation's role in securing intentional relations distinct from any epistemic role that sensation might perform. For the question of whether and to what extent (if at all) sensations might determine or justify our objectively valid judgements of objects is a different one than the question of how sensations make a pre-epistemic object-directedness possible. Ibid.

they are representations only of the subject's sensorily modified state. In this view, rather than simply being identified with the effects of objects on the senses, sensations also involve an awareness of these effects. Neither of these interpretations can be reconciled with the full range of Kant's claims about the cognitive function of sensation. If "representation" is taken strictly to mean mental state with intentional object-directedness, then the first interpretation is surely correct to deny such a function to sensation. But in denying any representational function to sensation, this interpretation cannot account for the many instances where Kant explicitly characterizes *Empfindung* as a type of *Vorstellung.* And although the second interpretation is sensitive to these passages, in restricting the representational function of sensation to the representation of only the internal state of the subject; it is unable to account for the many places where Kant indicates that sensations can represent the matter of external objects (the "real" in them).

Against these views, we could claim that sensations have a representational function, and that they can represent *external* objects, not just internal ones. It could be argued that although sensations are surely not intentional mental states, they nevertheless perform a representational function in virtue of their role as the matter of intuition. Therefore, sensations constitute the "undetermined" appearance presented in empirical intuition, and thereby stand in for the matter of an empirical, physical object in space. In this interpretation, sensations are the medium out of which empirical representations of external objects are constituted. In the same way that we can make sense of colored paint on a canvas representing things without presuming that the paint itself possesses intentionality or is referential in any way; collections of sensations given spatial organization can likewise represent the matter of empirical objects despite the fact that sensations are not intentionally directed to these objects.

In order to find a satisfying interpretation of everything Kant says about sensation, two important puzzles must be resolved. 1) It must be shown how sensations can be "merely subjective representations" by which we can only be aware that the subject is affected yet still be "objective representations" that "designate" actualities in space and have the "real" in appearance as their objects. And 2) it must be shown how sensations can be representational at all, given the conditions on representational object-directedness that Kant describes throughout the Tran-

scendental Analytic. The first problem should be resolved by distinguishing two very different senses in which sensations can be ”subjective”. And the second problem could be presented by showing that sensations can have a representational function without being intentional representations. The interpretation that results is both philosophically and textually satisfying because it is consistent with important systematic considerations regarding Kant's account of the representation of empirical objects, and it can account for the full range of Kant's remarks about sensation. Coming away with a consistent interpretation of Kant's theory of sensory consciousness, two distinct issues will need to be resolved. First, it must be explained how Kant can assert both that there are “objective” sensations which “designate” external objects, while at the same time sensations are all “subjective representations”. Second, it must be explained how Kant can describe sensations as representational at all, given that he places conditions on representational object-directedness that sensations do not satisfy. However, it could be a matter of subsequent investigations on the topic. Sometimes, Kant uses the term “subjective” to refer to representational contents of this latter sort. On the other hand, a representation can be called “subjective” when what it represents, its object, is the sensing subject's own internal state. This notion of subjectivity pertains to the representational function of a mental state because it describes the mental state in terms of what it is a representation of. By contrast, “objective” can be used to characterize a representation of an external object. The distinction between subjective and objective is cashed out in terms of the distinction between “aesthetic property” and “logical validity”. A representation's aesthetic properties reflect the way in which the representation's content depends on the constitution of the sensing subject and the way in which the subject is affected by the object in its passive reception of impressions. The distinction between aesthetic property and logical validity parallels the distinction between sensibility and understanding. Where sensibility allows empirical objects to be given through passive affection, understanding allows objects to be actively determined in thought. Representations of objects reflect the way the subject is affected while representations of thought reflect how the object is determined independently of its relation

to the subject. On this description, sensations (and intuitions as well[13]) are necessarily subjective, for the particular sensory qualities displayed by sensations are determined by the way human sensibility is affected by objects. In claiming that sensations are represented in space, Kant cannot mean that sensations are represented as sensations in space. If something is represented as a sensation, then it should be as something in my mind or perhaps as something somewhere on my body; this is not consistent with it being represented "in another place in space from that in which I find myself". Rather, what Kant must mean is that sensations are projected into organized spatial arrays and thereby appear as the object of intuition, presenting the subject with a non-conceptual awareness of the *qualities* of sensations, their intrinsic phenomenal characters. In intuiting an appearance, one is aware of spatially organized sensations (specifically, their qualities), but one is not aware of them (conceptually) as sensations. When sensations are combined into intuitions[14] and projected into spatial arrays, their qualities stand in for the matter of the intuited object (the "real" in the appearance). Sensations thereby make up the appearance in sensory consciousness, and in that way can be said to represent the real in it.[15]

III. Touch and Creating Things.

Having given some theoretical information about sensation, art and how they were presented in the long run, some more empirical issues could be added here. In order to refer to tactility, we could state that every other sense has a corresponding art: the eyes have visual art, the ears have music, even the nose and the tongue have perfume and gastron-

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[13] There are different senses in which sensations and intuitions are both subjective. Ibid.

[14] One might worry that appeal to the combination of sensations into an intuition is illegitimate because combination (or "synthesis") is the work of understanding, not sensibility. So, the understanding (in the guise of the imagination) does play in a role in the creation of intuition. Ibid.

[15] Sensations are the matter both of the intuition and the appearance. Of the former, because the intuiting of an object just is the organizing of sensations into spatial arrays and bringing these arrays to intentional consciousness. And of the latter, because what the subject is aware of in the intuition, what Kant labels appearance, just is the sensations so arrayed. Ibid. A42/B59, B207.

omy. But we do not train our hands to touch as we train our eyes to look or our ears to listen. Stating that, we point to a very real perception about the role of the arts in the larger discourse of sensory research. Those who practice in the arts, particularly in areas of music and dance, recognize that the observer's third person perception of a performance is very different than that of the performer. Music is an auditory experience, and a physical practice. Dance is a visual art form, but a practice predominantly understood through our many senses of touch. The feel of a thing in the hand is crucial for our senses. It is not accidental that our times have seen the birth of a new kind of art that addresses the sense of touch. The works of this art are specially made to be enjoyed by touch alone, in darkness and silence; for the "toucher" (cf. spectator, listener), the surface of a thing is connected with the most subtle experiences, the arena of an artistic quest. Whereas the spectator and the listener are dealing with projections or symbols of things, the toucher is dealing with the thing itself, a continuation, as it were, of his own hand and body. The visual and auditory senses are overly concerned with signs; they are too intellectual and ideological, always looking for truth somewhere beyond the things, rather than in the things themselves. Sight and hearing are subjects to illusionist's common enough to "have visions" or "hear voices" but the tactile sense does not lie; it touches the very reality of things. After all, touch is not the perception of a conventional signal far from its source, like light rays or sound waves; touch is "direct access" and even assimilation: flesh with flesh. This is why we are learning to sense things in the dark, like blind men developing their capacity for spiritual sight. We can even say that a thing submerged in darkness begins emitting a spiritual light that can be sensed by touch.

We have visual and auditory arts, as well as applied arts of taste and smell (gastronomy, perfumery). But the foundations of the tactile arts have not yet been laid. In some cases we can assume that our intimate physical connection is the epiphany of touch. But why does touch have to be connected only with lust, with passion? It could be an instrument of sensing the pure form of things. Being aware of the perception of a boundary, the capacity of distinguishing one thing from another is necessary. The mind gets drunk when it is trying to see in the darkness; senses and objects become deceptive. However, touch sobers up everything by adhering strictly to the surface, probing the boundaries of things, their separateness or wholeness. But human beings are too weak

to touch someone else's body without falling into the temptation of sinful thoughts. Such contact evokes disgust or trigger temptation, attraction and lust. This is why people who are not yet spiritually tempered must cultivate the art of sobriety.

After long practice in perfecting the sense of touch, one begins to feel on the surface of things everything that is inside them. Eventually, one comes to feel completely intangible things, and it does not matter if this occurs in darkness or in bright light. An immaterial light begins to glimmer through the sense of touch, the most sensitive of the senses; and through things/objects, the most corporeal of phenomena. Therefore, we could conclude that awareness and sobriety can be achieved only through touch.

When we produce or re-produce in art, we make things with our own hands. This appears to be one of the paths to holiness, to knowledge of God. Such activity could lead to the experience of uniting "I" with the divine "Thou". This is the clearest way of grasping the mystery of the unity of the creator and the creation. Without the thing/object, we would be missing the essential third link, equidistant from God and man.

A thing into which I have put my labor and creative intentions becomes my future "I". Thing-making in this case is a way to reach eternity. I, myself, as a creator enter into this object and become lost in it until I complete it. Then I find myself in it again, but transformed. My creation becomes meaningful and my design is now within it, revealing the unity between a man and an object through creation. Touch appears to be the way of creating this unity.

As a matter of fact, things as material objects are studied in the natural sciences like physics, chemistry, etc. Because things as signs or symbols can be bearers of conventional meanings, they also are studied in semiotics and aesthetics. Eventually, things as beings valued for themselves, as singularities that cannot be reduced either to matter or to ideas; things that transcend their abstract definition are determined to reach their concrete being. Creating things/objects while touching and interacting with the matter is by no means the same as artistic creation. However, a thing that is made is intended not for contemplation but for use. Thing-makers use the things they make. The owners of such things do not treat them as something impersonal. When a person touches such a thing/object, it is like touching the warm hand of its creator. This act reveals the interconnection between the producer and the user through

the object created. Such objects are not artifacts but they are not "produced" just for sale. They could be gifted, and this simple act shows the "touch" itself can "bring distant objects and people into proximity" in terms of communication. In this way, touch shares many properties with sound in that both are necessary for communication across social boundaries and also physical distances.

IV. Conclusion.

To conclude, there should be some mention of some more theoretical and empirical examples. Hegel's aesthetics, for instance, has been the focus of — often highly critical — attention from philosophers such as Heidegger, Adorno and Gadamer. Much of this attention has been devoted to his supposed theory of the "end" of art. Perhaps Hegel's most important legacy, however, lies in the claims that art's task is the presentation of beauty and that beauty is a matter of content as well as form. Beauty, for Hegel, is not just a matter of formal harmony or elegance; it is the sensuous manifestation in stone, color, sound or words of spiritual freedom and life. Such beauty takes a subtly different form in the classical and romantic periods and also in the different individual arts. In one form or another, however, it remains the purpose of art, even in modernity.

These claims by Hegel are normative, not just descriptive, and impose certain restrictions on what can count as genuine art in the modern age. They are not, however, claims made out of simple conservatism. Hegel is well aware that art can be decorative, can promote moral and political goals, can explore the depths of human alienation or simply record the prosaic details of everyday life. The definition of Anderson about art on the other hand refers to the idea that things/objects considered to be art are made by human beings in any visual medium, when production requires a relatively high level of skill on the part of their maker.

The recent focus of studies in the anthropology of art has undoubtedly been on art as a system of meaning and communication. Touch in this case should be introduced as a way of recognizing and communicating. For this reason, the study of representational systems, or of how art encodes meaning, is of crucial importance. The concept of a representational system is central because there is an interrelation between meaning and the way it is encoded or represented; in other words, how something is encoded may influence its meaning as well as affect how that meaning can be communicated to others. The art concerned is represen-

tational, in the sense that it can be interpreted to mean something that is, or becomes, external to itself; so it may represent an object of the external world. Many of the theoretical controversies in the analysis of art have resulted from a failure to recognize the multidimensional nature of objects and the immense variety of ways in which meanings can be represented. To assert that art is representational says very little about the kind of system it is and the particular way in which form relates to function in context. The perspective is one that directs the analysis rather than determines the outcome. Understanding the aesthetic response of a member of another culture to an object requires suspending one's own response to it, and learning how this object and its attributes are incorporated into systems of value and meaning. If one can teach people to interpret and value the properties of the objects of another culture according to the aesthetics of that culture, then one may provide a powerful insight into that world, and into what it feels like to be a member of it. In this sense, touch appears to be a means of experiencing, understanding, decoding and expressing oneself.