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QUESTIONING AESTHETICS: Are archivists qualified to make appraisal or reappraisal decisions based on aesthetic judgments?

Kimberly J. Barata

During the appraisal or reappraisal process, an item may be either accessioned into or remain intact as part of a collection owing to its intrinsic value. Judgments regarding the intrinsic value of an item range from the purely subjective to the totally ambiguous. The concept of intrinsic value experienced growing interest from the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) as they began to embark on a large—scale reformatting project in 1979. Planning for this project raised the issue of whether certain documents should be retained in their original format or be destroyed following reformatting. In response to this issue, NARS established the Committee on Intrinsic Value. The committee was charged with the task of defining intrinsic value and then determining its qualities, characteristics, and

applications.¹ By 1982, the committee had published "Intrinsic Value in Archival Material." This report resulted in a very broad attempt to examine this issue with respect to the reappraisal and preservation of archival documents. The following is a synopsis of the results of their investigation.

The Committee on Intrinsic Value defined intrinsic value as:

...the archival term that is applied to permanently valuable records that have qualities and characteristics that make the records in the original physical form the only archivally acceptable form for preservation. Although all records in their physical form have qualities and characteristics that would not be preserved in copies, records with intrinsic value have them to such a significant degree that the originals must be saved.²

The paper then goes on to list, define, and give the applications of nine physical and/or intellectual characteristics that can be used to determine whether a document possesses intrinsic value: 1) physical form that may be the subject for study if the records provide meaningful documentation or significant examples of the

¹ National Archives and Records Service, "Intrinsic Value in Archival Material," *Staff Information Paper* 21 (1982): 1.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

form; 2) aesthetic or artistic quality; 3) unique or curious physical features; 4) age that provides a quality of uniqueness; 5) value for use in exhibits; 6) questionable authenticity, date, author, or other characteristic that is significant and ascertainable by physical examination; 7) general and substantial public interest because of direct association with famous or historically significant people, places, things, issues, or events; 8) significance as documentation of the establishment of continuing legal basis of an agency or institution; and 9) significance as documentation of the formulation of policy at the highest executive levels when the policy has significance and broad effect throughout or beyond the agency or institution.³ Whereas these categories may eventually lead to the acquisition or retention of an item on the grounds of its possessing intrinsic value, each of them warrants additional investigation and definition. It is important that these investigations should not just further examine the qualities and characteristics of intrinsic value, but also how these determinations are arrived at and by whom. Also, if an item is determined to possess intrinsic value, for what purpose, if any, should an archivist retain such an item in their collections?

This paper will attempt to examine one of the more ambiguous of these characteristics: aesthetic or artistic quality. The Report of the Committee on Intrinsic Value

³ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

defined archival materials possessing these characteristics as follows:

Records having aesthetic or artistic quality may include photographs; pencil, ink, or watercolor sketches; maps; architectural drawings; frakturs; and engraved and/or printed forms such as bounty—land warrants.⁴

This definition identifies some of the various forms relative to those documents that are assumed to possess aesthetic value. However, it does not define what aesthetics is or address the issues of how and by whom aesthetic judgments should be made. In addition, it does not address the issue of whether an aesthetically valuable item can or should be considered a document or what purpose aesthetic value has in archives? Consideration of these issues will provide the foundation for this paper.

Before addressing the question of how and by whom aesthetic judgments should be made, it is important to examine what is exactly meant by the term *aesthetics*. The origins of the word derive from the Greek root *aesthetikos*, meaning "pertaining to sense perception."⁵ From classical times to the thirteenth century, the notion of aesthetics evolved to a point where it referred to all "philosophical

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ Donald W. Crawford, "Aesthetics in Discipline-based Art Education," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21 (Summer 1987): 227.

reflections on the nature of beauty."⁶ Perhaps Saint Thomas Aquinas best expressed this notion by stating that "beauty relates to the cognitive faculty; for beautiful things are those which please when seen [*pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent*]." ⁷ Please note that during the period spanning from the sixth century BC through the eighteenth century, only the *notion* of aesthetics was understood; the actual term was not in use. The term *aesthetics* was not coined until the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten published his work entitled *Aesthetica* in 1750. This work prompted philosophers to speculate on the need to examine beauty's relationship to the nature and philosophy of art. Yet, whereas Baumgarten did make important contributions toward furthering the study of aesthetics, he failed to resolve the fundamental relationship between aesthetics and the philosophy of art.⁸ The connotation that aesthetics primarily refers to the philosophy of the beautiful, remained in effect until the turn of this past century. In the twentieth century, the notion of aesthetics broadened as a philosophical discipline to become:

...(an) attempt to understand our experiences of
and the concepts we use to talk about objects that

⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁷ Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to The Present. A Short History* (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1975), 101.

⁸ Christopher S. Nwodo, "Philosophy of Art Versus Aesthetics," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 24 (Summer 1984): 195-196.

we find *perceptually* interesting and attractive. ...[It became] essentially the philosophy of art, being concerned primarily with the nature of the work of art as the product of artistic creative activity and as the focal point of aesthetic appreciation and art criticism.⁹

However, there was still some debate about the need to distinguish between aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Some contemporary philosophers, such as Monroe C. Beardsley, feel that the difference stems from a matter of usage.¹⁰ While others, such as Matthew Lipman, believe that a clear distinction should be made. Unlike Beardsley, Lipman interprets aesthetics as dealing with the nature of art work. The philosophy of art is concerned with "the place of art in the entire panorama of human activities."¹¹ For the purposes of this paper, Beardsley's view will be adopted and, therefore, no formal distinction will be made between the two terms.

The answer to the question about who is qualified to make aesthetic judgments can best be approached through an examination of how these judgments are formed. Since

⁹ Crawford, 227-228.

¹⁰ "As to terminology, I have no quarrel with those who wish to preserve a distinction between 'aesthetics' and 'philosophy of art.' But I find the shorter term very convenient, and so I use it to include matters that some would place under the second." Beardsley, 14.

¹¹ Nwodo, 196; Matthew Lipman, *Contemporary Aesthetics* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1973) 7, quoted in Nwodo, 196.

the time of Plato, the difference between subjectivity and objectivity has been a major issue of debate.¹² Some philosophers claim that aesthetic judgments can only be arrived at through a mixture of the two. Most contemporary aestheticians and art critics feel that an objective approach supported by adequate justification is fundamental to making aesthetic judgments. On the other hand, the fact that aestheticians and critics often disagree with one another lends strong support to the view that aesthetic assertions are reflective of an individual's taste and are, therefore, always subjective.¹³ According to Immanuel Kant, and subsequently F.N. Sibley, we are endowed with certain natural sensitivities that allow us to perceive aesthetic qualities. Sibley regards this sensitivity as taste, and taste is triggered by aesthetic qualities, rather than visual perception.¹⁴

This leads the proponents of subjectivity to feel that you should approach the field of aesthetics with an open mind; follow your intuition — your sixth sense. They base their aesthetic judgments on value statements such as, "I like X" or "I do not like X." However, when asked to justify their reasoning behind these statements, they are unable to rigorously defend their position with statements of fact.

¹² Guy Sircello, "Subjectivity and Justification in Aesthetic Judgements," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27 (Fall 1968): 3.

¹³ Albert Tsugawa, "The Objectivity of Aesthetic Judgements," *The Philosophical Review* 70 (January 1961): 18.

¹⁴ David Novitz, "The Integrity of Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 (Winter 1990): 11-13.

Instead they describe the physical attributes of the object and the emotional responses they felt because of their encounter. Advocates of this subjective approach frequently argue that:

...if the correct application of aesthetic concepts depends only on someone else's say—so, we may wonder whether there are any grounds at all for the application of aesthetic concepts, whether the whole critical game is not perhaps a charade in which the king stands naked while all and sundry, taking their cue from those who "know best," comment on the magnificence of his robes.¹⁵

In response to this, proponents of an objective approach will argue that the way in which an artistic object appears relies heavily on the understanding each individual has of that object. In other words, "the visual arts are a compromise between what we see and what we know."¹⁶ This knowledge can only be obtained through critical reflection and education. If we base our aesthetic decisions on our personal perceptions, we run the risk of appearing arbitrary.¹⁷ However, if perception is substantiated by

¹⁵ Novitz, 13.

¹⁶ Hugh A. Taylor, "Documentary Art and the Role of the Archivist," *The American Archivist* 42 (1979): 424.

¹⁷ Graham McFee, "Criticism and Perception," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 26 (Winter 1986): 29.

critical reflection then it has a basis for justification and can be argued.

But what is critical reflection and why is it so desirable? Critical reflection can be defined as:

"...the assessment of chains of reasoning (or "arguments," as they are called) in the attempt to gain insight into our beliefs and values. It aims at understanding our ideas, clarifying them for ourselves and others.¹⁸

Such reflection allows one to not just enjoy looking at an object, but to also arrive at some understanding of its meaning. It goes beyond physical interpretation and examines the artist's intentions, as well as the social, political, and cultural influences prevalent at the time the work was conceived. Critical reflection allows for the provision of reasons to support judgments. It is okay if these reasons can be disputed, as long as they are devoid of the personal feelings and preferences of the individual who is making these determinations. A clear distinction must be made between explaining why a person is partial to an object, as opposed to justifying why it is aesthetically pleasing using relevant facts.¹⁹ The more facts one is

¹⁸ Crawford, 228.

¹⁹ "It has frequently been held that a reason is relevant if a feature pointed out is a characteristic that defines the genre to which the work under consideration belongs." Tsugawa, 13.

willing to commit to, the more substantial their argument will become.

The basis for determining what is a relevant fact is best sought in the fields of art history and art criticism.²⁰ Knowledge of form, style, technique, and innovation can be derived from art history and criteria for critiquing and interpreting may be gleaned from art criticism. Aestheticians generally form their judgments from a more philosophical standpoint than those of the art historian or art critic. However, they justify their assertions on relevant facts obtained through the work being done in these fields. The boundaries between these fields are at times ill defined, but there are some clear distinctions:

...aestheticians see themselves seeking to understand the conceptual underpinnings of the claims of knowledge about art made by art critics and art historians. They recognize that art historians describe, analyze, compare, and interpret individual works, collections of works, and styles, but see themselves as inquiring into the categories used for these descriptions and comparisons. They see art critics engaged in uncovering specific meanings to be found in individual works and making evaluative judgments about those works, but view themselves as engaged in the attempt to understand the criteria employed in these interpretive and critical judgments...[T]he basic presupposition of

²⁰ Crawford, 229.

aesthetics...is the belief that our creating, appreciating, and criticizing art involve basic human values and, as such, are worthy of critical reflection.²¹

The ability to engage in critical reflection is what sets aestheticians, art historians, and art critics apart from the lay person. It is not that they necessarily possess a natural superior sensitivity to aesthetic objects, instead they have been conditioned through education to view objects differently. In other words, they just know what to look for. Trained viewers are more likely to identify various design principles and are more efficient in their examination of the relationship between pictorial elements. They are also more apt to distinguish the issues of form from those of content. Untrained viewers generally focus in on a centrally positioned pictorial element. These individuals are not as concerned about the relationships between elements, apart from relating them to the same subject matter. Instead, untrained viewers often skip from one independent element to another.²² The ability to know what to look for in an artistic object is a crucial element for critical reflection.

Much information about the era in which the object was created can be derived from a thorough analysis of the elements that comprise the object. For example,

²¹ Crawford, 237-238.

²² C.F. Nodine, P.J. Locher, and E.A. Krupinski, "The Role of Formal Art Training on Perception and Aesthetic Judgement of Art Compositions," *Leonardo* 26 (1993): 224-227.

information linking the object in question to a particular artistic movement, historical period, economic strata, etc. can be attained through an examination of: 1) the elements prevalent in the object, such as color, form, texture, and medium; 2) the artistic canons that were selected for inspiration; 3) the physical and intellectual relationship between the elements; and 4) the artist's selection of an element and its relationship to the subject matter. Except for the later, formal artistic training is necessary to really conceptualize these elements.

Besides artistic elements, critical reflection also examines the *Zeitgeist*²³ of the object in question. Any artistic object, despite its reason for being, is inevitably a reflection of the cultural values prevalent at the time of its conception. Items need to be ascribed a clear place within the universe of objects. This requires:

...a recognition of the object's place in its own cultural and artistic tradition, as well as its place within the oeuvre of the artist. That placement will require an objective knowledge of the 'geography' of cultural traditions, a view of what has been....²⁴

²³ Hegel claims that "art expresses the spirit of a historical people." Quoted in "Kenneth Dorter, "Conceptual Truth and Aesthetic Truth," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 (Winter 1990): 38.

²⁴ Fred Martin, "Art and History—An Outline for the Serious Criticism of Art," *ARTWEEK* 16 (23 November 1985): 2.

Different cultures value different objects in very diverse ways. Each culture's perception of what is aesthetically valuable, and therefore worthy of critical reflection, is dependent upon the cultural, social, economic, and even technological conditions existing within that culture.²⁵ Aestheticians, art historians, and art critics recognize this and take measures to judge objects in the context of their cultural milieu — bearing in mind that a culture may consist of a grouping as large as the United States of America or as small as a group of friends.

Now that the term *aesthetics* has been defined and the means by which aesthetic judgments are formed and by whom has been clarified, we can address the issue of whether an aesthetically valuable item can or should be considered a document. Because an aesthetically valuable object is often only a single item, elements from the science of diplomatics will be employed to decide whether such objects are documents. In contemporary archival practice, diplomatics are used in reference to individual administrative and/or juridical documents. However, there are elements that can be applicable to aesthetic objects. Before proceeding, a definition of what is meant by diplomatics is needed. Perhaps the best explanation of the science of diplomatics is offered by Cencetti. His definition, as translated by Luciana Duranti, is as follows:

²⁵ Marcia Muelder Eaton, "Where's the Spear? The Question of Aesthetic Relevance," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (January 1992): 2-3; Anita Silvers, "The Story of Art is the Test of Time," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49 (Summer 1991): 214.

Diplomatics is the discipline which studies the genesis, forms, and transmission of archival documents, and their relationship with the facts represented in them and with their creator, in order to identify, evaluate, and communicate their true nature.²⁶

Modern diplomatics are only concerned with archival documents, meaning those documents created by or received into an administrative or juridical environment. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will be extending the rules to encompass aesthetically valued documents created by private individuals.

When an individual creates an object that is considered to possess aesthetic value, is this process of creation comparable to the production of a written archival document? If we refer to the following definition, it seems that the creative process for both is quite similar:

[A written document]...is produced on a medium (paper, magnetic tape, disc, plate, etc.) by means of a writing instrument (pen, pencil, typing machine, printer, etc.).... The attribute 'written' is not used in diplomatics in its meaning of an act *per se* (drawn, scored, traced, or inscribed), but rather in the

²⁶ Giorgio Cencetti, "La Preparazione dell'Archivista," in *Antologia di Scritti Archivistici*, ed. Romualdo Giuffrida (Roma: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali. Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato, 1985), 285, quoted in Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," *Archivaria* 28 (1989): 17.

meaning that refers to the purpose and intellectual result of the action of writing; that is, to the expression of ideas in a form which is both objectified (documentary) and syntactic (governed by rules of arrangement).²⁷

There should be no question that the creation of artistic objects involves a medium and an instrument coming together to express ideas in a form governed by the rules of arrangement imposed upon the creator either by himself, his contemporaries, or by any prevalent artistic canons. In addition, the product of this act of creation results in an intellectual pursuit, namely critical reflection. Critical reflection often reveals insights into the historical and sociological, as well as artistic, nature of the object in question.

Like written documents, aesthetic objects have form. Critical reflection is primarily involved with the contemplation of the relationships between elements assuming both physical forms (shape, medium, etc.) and intellectual form (interpreting, evaluating, etc.). In addition, form, as it relates to both written documents and aesthetic objects, is reflective of political structures, culture, economics, etc. Form is *what* helps the viewer to determine an object's or a document's meaning. Diplomats, as it relates to the written document, strives to ascertain the full meaning of the document, as well

²⁷ Duranti, 15.

as determining its authenticity and authority.²⁸ Aesthetics also involves striving to interpret the full meaning of an object through critical reflection. However, it should be noted that an artistic object does not necessarily have to be an original to be aesthetically pleasing. On the other hand, unlike aestheticians, art historians and art critics concern themselves with the origins and authenticity of an aesthetic object. They would likely discredit copies or forgeries.

Finally, the science of diplomatics suggests that a document must have a purpose. Although a written archival document would likely be created to fulfill an administrative or juridical purpose, aesthetic objects, such as some cartographic materials, may also, at one time, fulfill an administrative or juridical purpose. Most aesthetic objects, such as cartographic materials or architectural drawings, no longer fulfill an evidential role. However, they can still be used for their informational value. Other types of aesthetic objects are also created to serve a purpose. Their purpose is to convey the creator's message, whether it is serving a contemplative, moral, or instrumental function.²⁹ In conclusion, all these elements do come together with the

²⁸ Duranti, 16.

²⁹ "First, there are the immediate aesthetic effects upon the audience which contemplates a work of art. This is the contemplative function of art. Second, it might be said that art arouses moral awareness, spotlights moral problems, or, in Tolstoy's claim, further infectious feelings of brotherhood. This would be a moral function of art. Then, for brevity, let us group together a wide variety of other uses of art and call them collectively the instrumental function of art." Donald Walthout, "The Nature and Function of Art," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 26 (Winter 1986): 18.

intent of conveying information, albeit in visual form as opposed to written, but still conveying relevant information.³⁰ I suggest that on this basis, aesthetic objects are potentially documents, just in another form.

Once an object is determined, through the proper channels, to have aesthetic value, and, based on our discussion of diplomatics, fulfills the criteria necessary to be called a document, what application does it have in archives? Before this question can be addressed, we need to reexamine what types of objects we are referring to as potentially having aesthetic value. The Committee on Intrinsic Value listed the following items as possessing aesthetic value: pencil, ink, or watercolor sketches; maps; architectural drawings; frakturs; and engraved and/or printed forms such as bounty—land warrants. I would like to add to this: documentary art,³¹ documents and manuscripts that are retained for their symbolic value,³² and other forms of iconography.

³⁰ Estelle Jussim, "The Research Uses of Visual Information," *Library Trends* 25 (April 1977): 763.

³¹ For clarification, documentary art is representative of the art produced by craftsman who have "learnt the business as professional or amateur painter," as opposed to masterpieces in the 19th century sense. Taylor, 421.

³² Documents which "...are put to religious and ceremonial uses, the records are revered as objects in themselves more than they are valued for their contents...the Domesday Book offers a good example." James M. O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *The American Archivist* 56 (1993): 249.

Although these objects possess some research value as visual documentary information, their primary role is for use in exhibitions. They are generally used for their visual appeal as a means of drawing in viewers.³³ Unlike written information contained in typed or handwritten documents, visual information, particularly if it is aesthetically pleasing, is more likely to be absorbed.³⁴ These objects can be used for livening up a potentially dull subject and also serve to break the monotony of exhibiting ordinary documents. If aesthetic objects are used well, and in context, they will enhance the exhibit by providing visual evidence to substantiate the information found in the other documents. They should be used as a vehicle for showing what is available in the collections.³⁵ Not necessarily in the random format of a "Treasures of the Archives" exhibit, but as an eye-catching, thematic supplement that draws attention to other documents that patrons may not be aware of. Unlike museums, which use exhibits as the primary means for attaining their educational objectives, archives should create exhibits to encourage patrons to use their

³³ James Gregory Bradsher and Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, "Archival Exhibits," *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, ed. James Gregory Bradsher (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 232-233; Gail Farr Casterline, *Archives & Manuscripts: Exhibits* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980), 10-11, 14, 17.

³⁴ Nancy Allyn, Shawn Aubitz, and Gail F. Stern, "Using Archival Materials Effectively in Museum Exhibitions," *The American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 403.

³⁵ Diantha Dow Schull, "Shhh...owtime at the Library: Exhibits Lend New Life to Old Institutions," *MUSEUMNews* 63 (April 1985): 38, 40.

materials. It is through the patron's use of these documents that an archive's education goals are met.³⁶

In conclusion, to answer the question posed in the title, *Are archivists qualified to make appraisal or reappraisal decisions based on aesthetic judgments?*, my general answer is no. Although there are exceptions, a great deal of educational preparation is needed to adequately support an aesthetic judgment. This does not mean that aesthetically pleasing documents should not be accessioned. However, an expert should be consulted to assess the true aesthetic value of the item.

Many concepts relevant to making aesthetic judgments have been discussed throughout this paper. Nevertheless, other concepts, perhaps not quite as important for our immediate needs, were not explored — yet they warrant a mention. For example, the issues of taste and beauty, as well as the subjects of iconography, symbolism, and antiquarianism, were not addressed. I am mentioning these in an attempt to impress upon archivists the complexity of this subject, and impart further the need to make informed decisions. Although an item may seem pretty, or eye-catching, that perception does not sufficiently warrant accessioning it into a collection.

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³⁶ Leslie A. Morris, "Beyond the Books: Programs for Exhibitions," *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* 6 (1991): 89.

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