

# Aesthetic Properties, History and Perception

Sonia Sedivy

*If artworks and their aesthetic properties stand in constitutive relationships to historical context and circumstances, so that some understanding of relevant facts is involved in responding to a work, what becomes of the intuitive view that we see artworks and at least some of their aesthetic properties? This question is raised by arguments in both aesthetics and art history for the historical nature of works of art. The paper argues that the answer needs to take philosophy of perception into account. The principal development that has shaped philosophy of perception in the last thirty years—explaining perceptual experience in terms of contents that represent that such-and-such is the case—is directly relevant to key arguments for the historical nature of art because contents can represent complex kinds and properties. Conceptual realism is especially well-suited for explaining perception of artworks and aesthetic properties because it emphasizes that forms of understanding—in the sense of capacities, abilities and techniques—are involved in perceptual engagement with individual objects and instances of properties. To make this case, the paper examines influential arguments for the historical nature of art and aesthetic properties by Arthur C. Danto and Kendall L. Walton; and examines art-historical discussions by Michael Baxandall, Linda Nochlin and T. J. Clark. The paper argues that the aesthetic properties of an artwork depend on human intentional uses of properties, colours and contours among them, and such uses may themselves be aesthetic. The Wittgensteinian notion of use is contextual and historical, and uses are perceptible.*

If artworks and their aesthetic properties stand in constitutive relationships to historical context and circumstances, so that some understanding of relevant facts is involved in responding to a work, what becomes of the intuitive view that we see artworks and at least some of their aesthetic properties?

This question is raised by arguments in both aesthetics and art history for the historical nature of works of art. But its answer needs to take philosophy of perception into account. In support of this claim, I will highlight how some key arguments for the historicity of art and aesthetic properties in both aesthetics and art history have presupposed or championed one approach to perception over others. I will argue that the principal development that has shaped philosophy of perception in the last thirty years—explaining perceptual experience in terms of contents that represent that such-and-such is the case—is directly relevant to key arguments for the historical nature of art because contents can represent complex kinds and properties. By arguing that perceptual experience represents complex kinds and properties, philosophy of perception offers resources to explain that experience of artworks and aesthetic properties can be both historically informed and perceptual. I will suggest that the relationship between arguments for the historical nature of art and philosophy of perception is mutual. To the extent that arguments and historical evidence for the historical nature of art are convincing, theories of perception need to show how

historical understanding can enter into perceptual experience—if we find it compelling that experience of art is perceptual and recent philosophy of perception has resources to support this intuitive view.

In part, this paper examines the historicity of artworks and aesthetic properties to draw out how all three fields of study—aesthetics, art history and philosophy of perception—intersect so that arguments and evidence in any one implicate the others. The traffic flow in this intersection is recently drawing explicit attention from both art historians and philosophers of perception, which adds to long-standing meta-level enquiry into the nature of art historical explanation and the models it uses.

But this is not the only juncture among these three fields. Here are others, which I will abstract away from in order to focus on the historicity and perceptibility of aesthetic properties. The nature of pictures or depictions is the other principal issue that connects all three areas. Experiential theories draw on theories of perception whereas theories of resemblance maintain that this is not necessary owing to the relationships among pictures and their objects, and conventional theories argue that the convention-laden nature of pictures is not a matter of perception. Theories of photography radiate out in one direction from this nexus, while growing interest in the nature of abstraction in both painting and photography radiates out in another. The long-standing notion that there is a distinctive way of paying attention to artworks that is key for their aesthetic properties is recently reinvigorated both in connection with the study of perception and independently of it. This brief mapping of the issues is oriented from a philosophical perspective, a different constellation of art-historical subjects would need to be super-posed for comprehensiveness with the proviso that art historians examine ever more kinds of evidence. Art history includes philosophical and scientific theories of visual perception in its purview, as well as the relationship between changing scientific understanding of visual phenomena and what painters undertake to show.

In this paper, the argument for the historicity and perceptibility of aesthetic properties will build in the following three steps that bridge the three disciplines.

In the first section, I argue against the view that aesthetic properties depend on basic non-aesthetic properties such as colours and contours from which they are distinct. Rather, the aesthetic properties of an artwork depend on human intentional *uses* of properties, colours and contours among them, and such *uses* may themselves be aesthetic. The notion of *use* is contextual and historical, and *uses* are perceptible. I focus on all-over monochromatic paintings to support this proposal in a well-known style of argument from indiscernibles, which appeals to highly similar or identical artworks as well as counterpart objects to ascertain the conditions for artworks, aesthetic properties, and their perceptibility.

The second and third sections examine arguments concerning historicity and aesthetic properties from aesthetics and art history respectively. Section two reconstructs Arthur C. Danto's and Kendall L. Walton's influential arguments from indiscernibles for the historical nature of artworks and aesthetic properties.<sup>1</sup> The division I highlight is that, while

---

1 Arthur C. Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 574–584; *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Kendall L. Walton, 'Categories of Art', *The Philosophical Review* 79 (1970), 334–367.

Danto argues that the historical nature of artworks renders aesthetic properties interpretive rather than perceptible, Walton argues that artworks and some aesthetic properties are both historical and perceptually distinguishable. I extricate the parts played by aesthetic considerations and assumptions about perception, bringing contemporary developments to bear on the arguments. Section three highlights how socially oriented art historians Michael Baxandall, Linda Nochlin and T. J. Clark identify uses of properties to explain the integral connections between a work's contents and aesthetic properties.<sup>2</sup>

Both sections show how theories of perceptual content can accommodate arguments for the historical nature of artworks and aesthetic properties. This offers support to aesthetic or art historical theories that aim to argue that artworks and some aesthetic properties are both historical and perceptible. Insofar as perceptual experience is contentful, its representational content may be of artworks, their contents and their properties. Though it lies outside the scope of this paper to give a comprehensive overview of theories of perceptual content, we can focus on the idea that perceptual experience is contentful and that perceptual contents can represent complex kinds and properties. I also argue more specifically that one theory of perceptual content is especially well-suited to explaining art and aesthetic properties: conceptual realism. This is because conceptual realism emphasizes that forms of understanding—in the sense of capacities, abilities and techniques—are involved in perceptual engagement with individual objects and instances of properties.<sup>3</sup> This is exactly what the historical nature of artworks and aesthetic properties requires.

## 1. Monochromatic Paintings and Uses of Colour

One straightforward reason why aesthetic properties seem to be both perceptible yet also more complex or 'higher order' is that to get someone to see what we see and to experience the aesthetic impact we do we might point to the way a work's perceptible properties such as its colours or contours combine in more complex arrangements. In most cases, a work has several colours or contours so that we can point out how the individual colours or contours combine to yield an aesthetic property such as the work's dynamism or melancholy mood. To say this much is intuitive and ordinary. But it is also taken in a philosophical direction with the claim that aesthetic properties are distinct from basic visual non-aesthetic properties such as colours or contours, and that aesthetic properties depend on or are determined by such non-aesthetic properties.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 2nd edn, (Oxford: OUP, 1988); Linda Nochlin, 'Van Gogh, Renouard, and the Weavers' Crisis in Lyons', in her *The Politics of Vision, Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 95–119; T. J. Clark, 'We Field-Women', in his *Farewell to an Idea, Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 55–137.

<sup>3</sup> John McDowell, *Mind and World: With a New Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); John McDowell, 'Singular Thought and the Extent of "Inner Space"' in John McDowell and Philip Pettit (eds), *Subject, Thought and Context* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 137–168; John McDowell, 'Perceptual Experience: Both Relational and Contentful', *European Journal of Philosophy* 21 (2013), 144–157; Sonia Sedivy, *Beauty and the End of Art: Wittgenstein, Plurality and Perception* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Sonia Sedivy, 'Nonconceptual Epicycles', *European Review of Philosophy* 6 (2006), 33–66.

All-over monochromatic paintings put pressure on the philosophical distinction. Consider a monochromatic work that is an expanse of a single colour and has aesthetic effect, such as one of Gerhard Richter's all over grey paintings, *Grau* (1970), for example. There is only one colour and that colour is aesthetically present to us. A distinction in kind between aesthetic properties and basic visual properties would entail that the aesthetic impact of the single colour depends on the non-aesthetic property which is also that single colour. The one colour is both an aesthetic and a non-aesthetic property.

Moreover, the 'sheer' colour of the painting does not seem to be sufficient to determine its aesthetic impact since we can imagine that this same colour might not have the same aesthetic property if it figured in a different work or object. This is where contextual facts come in: if the aesthetic property of a monochromatic work is determined by other factors in addition to its colour, then we might have an explanation of how the one colour could play a determining role together with them.

But facts about a work's social or art-historical context do not connect with the colour as such or the colour as a target of basic visual processes. The relationship between the colour as such and the aesthetic property is not explanatory—beyond perhaps the metaphysical claim that the aesthetic property stands in a relationship of 'global supervenience' or dependence to the colour, but such global relations do not provide specific explanations relevant for explaining particular aesthetic properties.<sup>4</sup>

These considerations align with what seems intuitive: the colour of the monochrome has aesthetic impact—it is an aesthetic property. Consider two canvases with the same paint and colour, where one is a paint sample and the other an artwork. A large stretched canvas that is painted all over with a certain shade of grey colour would have one range of aesthetic properties if it is a decorative sample in a fancy paint shop—for example, drab, gloomy or elegant. But a canvas of the same size, painted all over with the same shade of grey colour would have a different range of aesthetic properties if it is a painting made by a specific artist at a particular time, such as Gerhard Richter. A work's aesthetic properties would be connected to 'what' it conveys or 'what' it is about—a feeling, a mood, a content. One might find the same grey colour gloomy, for example, but in the case of the artwork it would be gloominess intentionally conveyed, rather than the gloomy effect of a certain colour. Perhaps an all-over grey painting might seem to not convey anything—it might seem strangely neutral or ambiguous, lacking in a forceful effect or content. But then this would be precisely its content and aesthetic impact—ambivalence or absence, or a withholding of message. Richter's *Grau* might draw one to scrutinize it, precisely because it seems to withhold an effect or clear statement, and under more intensive scrutiny its texture might come to stand out and the minute variation in the grey tonality might turn out to be of interest.

The difference between the paint sample and the artwork can be captured with an echo of Wittgenstein's notion of *use*: artworks involve *uses* of properties such as colour.<sup>5</sup> Since

4 The issues of aesthetic supervenience or emergence lie beyond the scope of this paper. The considerations I offer here undercut some of the motivations for the appeal of such relations but do not address specific approaches.

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, rev. 4<sup>th</sup> edn, eds P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

the colour and size of the painted canvas is the same in the artwork and the paint sample, yet the aesthetic properties differ, what stands in an explanatory relationship to the aesthetic properties is the *use* of the colour. On this view, a work's aesthetic properties are made possible by *uses* of colour and our response to the work needs to take the *use* of the colour into account. The use of a property may itself be aesthetic, or an aesthetic property may depend on the uses of several properties.

In part, Wittgenstein's point is that the meaningfulness of language resides in the *uses* of words in the larger context of activities to which language is integral or internal. When it comes to human responsiveness and activity, we need to stop supposing that there is always a layer of sheer uptake—of marks and noises in the case of language—to which interpretation is added to yield meaning. Rather, for a participant in an activity with the specificity for which language is requisite, what people say or write is immediately meaningful. In a somewhat more 'theoretical' vein we might say that meaning or expressiveness of language is a dimension of the uses of language within life activities. The notion of *use* is a contextual notion, it specifies that *uses* are integral to communicative life activities. This key relationship—between the meaningfulness of language use and activities—is one of mutual interdependence. Meaning is a dimension of what we do, a matter of the roles and functions that articulate language performs in our ways of living and in specific activities, which could not be what they are without the roles played by articulate language. This makes the notion of use historically specific.

In echoing Wittgenstein's notion, I am not suggesting that colours and shapes are analogous to words or parts of speech. The aim is to highlight that in responding to an artwork we are responding to properties that are integral parts or dimensions of a whole that conveys something—a content, mood or feeling. The colour or colours of a painting are applied or selected to realize 'what' the painting conveys—even if the application or selection is carried out randomly. In a work of found art, for example, the object and its properties have been selected. In the example of Richter's monochrome *Grau*, its aesthetic effect depends on the particular use of a shade and texture of grey paint on a surface of a specific large size. One might say that the properties of the work are intended and that uses are intentional, so long as this phrasing does not invoke the idea that there is an antecedent 'mental state' of intention whenever there is intentional use.

Insofar as the non-aesthetic properties of artworks such as colours and contours are uses of properties, to respond to the properties of an artwork is not to respond to material surface properties. This does not deny that our central nervous system processes colours or contours (or marks and noises), for example, or that a person's capacities and activities are made possible by such central nervous system processes. The point is that we should not identify the capacities of people with the workings of the nervous system, and that when it comes to the engagement of a person with an artwork, we should not look for a layer of sheer responsiveness to material properties in their experience to which interpretation is added.

In sum, the notion of use identifies the properties that stand in explanatory relationships to a work's content and aesthetic properties. Such properties can be perceived—they are the targets of immediate perceptual skills just as uses of language are targets of immediate understanding.

## 2. Aesthetics: Indiscernibility Arguments, Historicity and Philosophy of Perception

Arthur C. Danto and Kendall L. Walton offer arguments from indiscernibles to derive the historical nature of artworks and aesthetic properties. Danto uses this style of argument to deny that artworks and aesthetic properties are perceptible, whereas Walton uses it to argue that some historical categories of art and aesthetic properties are perceptually distinguishable. I will show how much or how little such arguments can accomplish independently of a specific theory of perception and I will argue that philosophy of perception offers theoretical resources that support the perceptibility of artworks and aesthetic properties.

### *Danto and the Category of Art*

Danto offers two main lines of argument using indiscernible works.<sup>6</sup> The first suggests that artworks may appear ‘just like’ counterpart objects that are not artworks—Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* (1964) may appear pretty much ‘just like’ shipping boxes produced by the Brillo company. What distinguishes the two is a broad context of understanding that makes it possible for viewers to identify artworks. The requisite understanding includes a grasp of the nature of art as embodiments of meanings and of the historical relationships in which artworks stand to one another. Relationships among works are internal; the specific content that a work conveys and the embodiment by which it does so both stand in constitutive relationships to other works. This means that artworks are historical in at least two ways: (i) certain contents or meanings can only be conveyed in certain historical contexts; and (ii) the historical relationships among individual works enter into both what a work conveys and the embodiment through which it does so. Putting these two together Danto argues that (1) because artworks may be ‘just like’ counterpart objects that are not artworks, the understanding of what makes something an artwork rather than its material counterpart needs to enter into our identification of any work; and (2) because such understanding is of historical facts, it cannot be a matter of recognitional perceptual skill but must be a deliverance of cognition. Danto emphasizes that what is at issue is the ontological category of art, and he argues that this category must be a matter of what he calls interpretation rather than recognitional perceptual skill—where interpretation is the understanding of the nature of the category of art that we bring to bear in identifying a work of art and appreciating it. As he put it: ‘Interpretation consists in determining the relationship between a work of art and its material counterpart. But since nothing like this is involved with mere objects, aesthetic response to works of art presupposes a cognitive process that response to those mere things does not ...’<sup>7</sup>

Danto offers a second example of indiscernibles to argue that the aesthetic properties of artworks are specific to the distinctive ontological category of art and that experience

6 Danto ‘The Artworld’ and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. See also his *After the End of Art, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

7 Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 113.

of aesthetic properties requires that one brings the category to bear in aesthetic appreciation. His example is a gallery of red monochrome paintings of the same size, shade and texture. These are distinct works, identified by different titles and specific artistic and historical provenance. In addition, the gallery contains a mere red canvas as well as a canvas that is a prepared ground for further work by a particular artist of historical consequence. Danto takes it as uncontroversial that in each case the material surface properties have the same perceptible appearance. He argues that the aesthetic properties of each work are distinct, bound up with the content indicated by the work's title and by the way that each red canvas embodies the specified content (where both the content and the embodiment stand in internal relations to other historical works). If the appearances are the same and the aesthetic properties differ, it follows that the aesthetic properties are not determined by the appearances, or the material surface properties that Danto takes to determine how something appears. Danto argues on this basis that the appreciation of aesthetic properties is interpretive rather than perceptual—it involves the understanding detailed above as well as additional cognitive understanding invoked by the title—whereas perceptual experience is limited to what the visual sense can deliver. That is, aesthetic appreciation draws on both our most general understanding of what distinguishes an artwork from a 'mere real thing' and on more specific historical understanding of what the work conveys and how it does so in relation to other works.

Neither argument can deliver Danto's conclusion concerning perceptibility—that our response to artworks and aesthetic properties is not perceptual. What the arguments show is that understanding is a necessary ingredient for identifying artworks and that identification is necessary for experiencing their aesthetic properties. To reach the conclusion about the nature of our response to artworks and aesthetic properties, a further premise about the nature of perception is needed. This is where philosophy of perception comes in. Danto employs a specific and highly restrictive theory of perception.<sup>8</sup>

At the time of writing, Danto took the best explanation to be the modular view of perception: this holds that visual processes are encapsulated; they cannot access other information. As Danto put it: 'modularity means a segregated default system, which functions in independence of other systems.'<sup>9</sup> This theory of perception fits with his view that there are no visible markers of artworks, so that identification of artworks relies on understanding that is historical and hence belongs to the domain of cognition.

But philosophy of perception offers at least two avenues that oppose Danto's view.

First, there is increasing evidence for 'cognitive penetration' and even a modular approach of the sort that Danto favours needs to allow that there are some 'top-down' effects from more complex processes involving learning or language on perception. Bence Nanay has argued that the sort of minimal cognitive penetration that would counter Danto's argument is uncontroversial—namely, 'top-down attentional influences'. What

8 Danto's argument may also be disputed on other grounds not specific to philosophy of perception. For example, Joseph Margolis argues that artworks must be a perceptually distinguishable category overall, though there may be artworks that are not: 'A Closer Look at Danto's Account of Art and Perception', *BJA* 40 (2000), 326–339. Here I focus only on the role played by theory of perception.

9 Arthur C. Danto, 'Seeing and Showing', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59 (2001), 1–9, at 8.

we take each monochrome painting to be about influences what we attend to, and differences in attention have been shown to influence phenomenology or how something appears to us.<sup>10</sup>

A second counter to Danto's position comes from theories of perception that are less restrictive than the strict modularity view. Particularly relevant are theories that posit that perceptual experience has 'high-level' or conceptual contents that implicate conceptual capacities. Among these, the conceptual realist approach to perception emphasizes the point that Danto denies: understanding of kinds of objects and properties enters into all perception. The difference between theories of perception that countenance cognitive penetration and conceptual realism is that the former countenance occasional input from cognition to perception, whereas the latter argues that understanding of the kinds to which individuals and property instances belong is part of the nature of perception.

On a conceptual realist approach, the possible 'indiscernibility' of Warhol's *Brillo Box* from a Brillo shipping carton does not show that we cannot identify an artwork perceptually. It shows that we may turn out to be wrong—one might seem to see an artwork where there is a shipping carton or, vice versa, a shipping carton where there is an artwork—so that our perception of aesthetic properties would change upon correction.

This point goes back at least to Kant who noted that the direct interest one takes in a beautiful birdsong would disappear if one finds that the song is produced deceptively by a youngster playing a reed or rush.<sup>11</sup>

To illustrate, let us return to our grey monochromes but in a Kantian scenario. I enter a fancy paint store and consider the grey colour of a large stretched canvas, displaying the latest 'in' shade. I find it too dark and gloomy to be surrounded by in a living space. Now, suppose I learn that I have actually entered a gallery done up like a paint store, so that I am in an immersive installation space that probes our differential responsiveness to artefacts and artworks, to a grey monochrome paint sample and a painting.

It is safe to say that my experience will change. I will probably attend to the painting differently. I may have a range of interpretive thoughts (in the ordinary sense): for example, I might wonder why the artist would choose grey for a monochromatic work. But I might not. In any case, *what* I am seeing, including its aesthetic impact, will change as a whole even though all of the material surface properties remain the same. The change would be a complete switch in much the same way as Wittgenstein describes that a different aspect such as a duck or a rabbit can 'dawn' as an immediate whole while one looks at one and the same drawing. In part, Wittgenstein's point about the duck-rabbit drawing is that the facts indicate that we can embrace the obvious—*what* I see changes—and we should resist getting into contortions to avoid the obvious.<sup>12</sup> Insofar as none of the material surface properties is different, and the deliverances of visual sensation track the material surface properties, the perceptual is not just the sensory. My point is two-fold: (i) the

10 Bence Nanay, 'Cognitive Penetration and the Gallery of Indiscernibles', *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2015), 1527. <doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01527>

11 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §42, 302.

12 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 'Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment', XI, especially 118–131.



experiential change in apprehending an installation in place of a paint store, and a paint sample in place of an artwork, is a change in perceptual experience; and (ii) some change in aesthetic properties would be integral to the whole in the immediate experiential shift from sample to work.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, Danto's arguments for the historical nature of artworks and aesthetic properties do not show that the relevant understanding is outside of perceptual experience of an artwork. This depends on the theory of perception that one brings to his examples. His arguments do show that we need to understand what we are seeing in order to respond appropriately, where this includes aesthetic responsiveness.

Yet, as a final note, consider that even though Danto did not change his position that experience of artworks and aesthetic properties is interpretive, he wanted to be able to espouse a theory of perception on which understanding informs experience of artworks but believed none was available. At the end of 'Description and Phenomenology of Perception', Danto suggests that although vision is not cognitively penetrable in the normal course of things, art 'has the power of thought'; the description of an artwork does penetrate the experience and 'perception itself is given the structure of thought'.<sup>14</sup> Because an artwork expresses a thought unlike the scene it depicts, the perception of art is different in kind from the perception of depiction, which on his view we share with animals through the workings of the eye and visual processing. To make this point he discusses Guercino's *Saint Luke Displaying a Painting of the Virgin* (1652–3).

The painting is then a sustained meditation on painting, *resemblance*, the power of art, the meaning of icons, the nature of representation. That is the thought it expresses, or something like that. It is a philosophical exercise. That is what makes it a great work by contrast with a stunning likeness. The thought it expresses is not one an animal could grasp. It makes reference to rather more abstract considerations like expression, embodiment, thought, grasping. *I know of no philosophical analysis of perception adequate to such things. My sense is that, as I point these features out, one after another, the work assumes a form it did not have before. My sense is that the experience of art description really does penetrate perception, but that is because perception itself is given the structure of thought.*<sup>15</sup>

13 Danto discusses the change that might come with learning that something one had taken to be an artefact is an artwork in Chapter 4 of *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

14 Arthur C. Danto, 'Description and the Phenomenology of Perception', in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (eds), *Visual Theory, Painting and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 201–215.

15 Danto, 'Description and the Phenomenology of Perception', 214, my emphasis. Danto continues as follows: 'What the painting says is totally different from what the scene itself contains, supposing for a moment, that we could be another member of the audience, stand like the angel, while Saint Luke showed us a picture of the Virgin and the Holy Child. If we were in the painting, we would have a very different experience from the one we have standing outside the painting. It therefore, as a painting, has a set of meanings its subject is incapable of expressing. Pictorial perception activates the same mechanisms that perception itself does. Artistic perception is of another order altogether. With artistic perception, we enter the domain of the Spirit, as Hegel said, and the visible is transformed into something of another order, as the Word is when made flesh.'

But what is it to give perception the structure of thought? What sets Danto at odds with high-level content theories of perception, and most pointedly conceptual realism, is that he believes it is only the contentful nature of great artworks that draws understanding into perception, whereas perception of objects and pictures is due to visual processes. This view would render perception of art *sui generis*. In contrast, high-level content theories of perception allow for a unified approach to a variety of ontological categories and their properties, including artworks and aesthetic properties, by countenancing that some individuating understanding informs perception.

### *Walton and Specific Categories of Art*

Walton focuses on more specific categories of art—such as painting, representational painting, Impressionist looking or Renoir-ian—to argue that such categories are both historical and perceptually distinguishable, and that such categories enter into determining some of a work's aesthetic properties. Walton's stated aim is to dispute a range of views such as formalism that discount historical context or provenance in the determination of aesthetic properties. In so doing, he explicitly addresses the issue posed in this paper—whether aesthetic properties are both historical and perceptual—and offers a perceptually oriented bypass to Danto's arguments that also depends on philosophy of perception at a key juncture.

First, according to Walton, what makes such more specific categories of art historical is that they are 'well established in and recognized by the society in which [the work] was produced' and the artist 'intended or expected' their work to be 'perceived' in the specific category or 'thought of it' as being in that category.<sup>16</sup> Though there may be numerous cases that are borderline or even undecidable on these criteria—such as innovative works that challenge existing categories and open new ones—his point is that typically at least one of the two historical conditions applies. Second, Walton argues that we can perceive individual works by virtue of trained perceptual skills whereby we immediately perceive the overall Gestalt or look of the category to which a work belongs. This is where theory of perception comes into Walton's account.

Walton's point is that aesthetic properties are not determined by non-aesthetic properties, but by the normatively governed non-aesthetic properties that are standard, contra-standard and variable for each historical category. It is implicit to the account that normative conditions are specific to societal contexts and practices, though Walton does not argue this. He does argue that art categories involve historically specific understanding. And he argues that such understanding is a matter of perceptual skills. We do not

---

16 Walton, 'Categories of Art': 'A category is well established in and recognized by a society if the members of the society are familiar with works in that category, exhibit works of that category together, and so forth—that is, roughly if that category figures importantly in their way of classifying works of art' (357–358); 'The categories in which a work is correctly perceived, according to this condition, are generally the ones in which the artist's contemporaries did perceive or would have perceived it' (358). Part of Walton's stated aim is to show that the 'intentional fallacy' is not a fallacy in the sense that the category in which an artist intends their work is an important historical fact that helps determine the aesthetic properties of a work, but his view does not argue that an artists' intentions about the aesthetic properties of their work are relevant.

identify these normative properties as grounds for inferring the aesthetic properties. We also cannot set out to see a work in a certain category. We can only perceive works in their categories through skill that results from perceptual training with members of those specific categories. Consider each part of this position in turn.

First, to argue that some of a work's aesthetic properties are determined in relation to the normative conditions of its specific category Walton offers a range of examples. The most well-known is an indiscernibility argument that places Picasso's *Guernica* in two different societal contexts that have different art categories. In our context, Picasso's *Guernica* is a painting, a category for which flatness is a standard condition. The contrast posed by the other society is that they have no paintings, only *guernicas* which are bas-relief type works whose surfaces have the colours and shapes of *Guernica* but in different moldings, so that different parts of their 'surfaces are molded to protrude from the wall like relief maps of different kinds of terrain'.<sup>17</sup> The point of the example is that it switches the properties which are standard and variable for *Guernica* by switching different societal contexts and norms. In our context, the flatness that is standard for paintings makes the marking of the surface which are variable for painting—its sharp angles, edges and colours—stand out. In the hypothetical context, bas-relief molding and figures or markings are standard, so that the flatness of *Guernica* would stand out. Walton argues that switching which properties are standard and variable 'would make a profound difference between our aesthetic reaction to *Guernica* and theirs'.<sup>18</sup>

We do not pay attention to or take note of *Guernica*'s flatness; this is a feature we take for granted for paintings, as it were. But for the other society this is *Guernica*'s most striking and noteworthy characteristic—what is *expressive* about it. Conversely, *Guernica*'s color patches, which we find noteworthy and expressive, are insignificant to them.

It seems violent, dynamic, vital, disturbing to us. But I imagine it would strike them as cold, stark, lifeless, or serene and restful, or perhaps bland, dull, boring—but in any case *not* violent, dynamic, and vital.<sup>19</sup>

Walton's point is that because only the social context changes, it is not the work's colours or contours that determine aesthetic impact but rather the norm governed nature—or uses—of those colours and contours. The point I argued in the last section is similar to Walton's in that *use* of properties of visual artworks involves norms of usage—though I did not specify that norms of usage delimit properties that are standard, contra-standard and variable.

Second, to argue that the ability to recognize categories of art is a perceptual skill, Walton appeals to the idea of a Gestalt. We perceive the Gestalt of a work through trained skills much as we identify the sex of baby chicks through an acquired perceptual skill that does not involve explicit or interpretive grasp of the requisite features. Yet the idea that the range of specific historical categories of art each share a Gestalt is not plausible,

17 Walton, 'Categories of Art', 347.

18 Ibid., 347.

19 Ibid., 347. Order of quotations is reversed.

especially as we pass from the more specific to the more general: from Renoir-ian to impressionist to painting. This is the juncture at which Walton's argument requires support from theory of perception. At the time of writing, in 1970, philosophy of perception did not offer a way to argue that the ability to recognize categories can be perceptual skill.

But appeal to Gestalt theory is no longer necessary, given the turn in philosophy of perception to explaining perception as a capacity for contentful experience. Here are two examples of recent approaches that deliver resources to explain Walton's key contention that perceiving a work of art and at least some of its aesthetic properties can be a matter of trained perceptual skills.

The first is Susanna Siegel's 'rich content' view. Siegel argues for rich perceptual content by arguing that the content of perceptual experience represents that an individual is *F*, a pine tree for example, *if* training with a category results in a phenomenological change. If experience is phenomenologically different before and after one can recognize individuals of the kind, pine tree, then the change is one of rich perceptual content—the experience can be said to represent the property of being a pine tree.<sup>20</sup>

Her argument is similar to Walton's and fits the historical kinds that are his target. If I see many impressionist paintings (perhaps on a summer of travels with much time spent in galleries) so that I come to recognize paintings that look impressionist or Renoir-ian, there will be some phenomenological change in my experience along the lines she argues: I 'can spot' the impressionist paintings 'immediately', 'they become visually salient' to me, and this change can emerge gradually.<sup>21</sup>

Her argument might also work for the broader category of painting which is problematic for Gestalt theory. Suppose that I have never seen a painting. If I am hired to map all the paintings in town by being shown a few paintings in a gallery of contemporary art where my job begins, they might become visually salient for me and I can spot them immediately. The difference between Gestalt and rich content theories is that the former hold that there are objectively shared properties of just the right specificity between the represented Gestalt and its instances without involving beliefs or other capacities on the part of perceiving subjects. But it is precisely such objective properties that do not seem to be sufficient for a Gestalt of a painting rather than a pine tree. In contrast, Siegel's rich content theory is only committed to phenomenological change as warrant for attribution of representational content of a kind.<sup>22</sup>

The second view is the conceptual realist approach for which this paper is arguing. As we have seen, conceptual realism emphasizes that perceptual content is 'rich' in the sense that it engages with individual members of kinds. But it is stronger in its commitments: unlike the rich content view it undertakes to explain the factors that determine perceptual contents. By arguing that conceptual capacities individuate what we can see, conceptual realism can explain our ability to see paintings. This difference in commitment

20 Susanna Siegel, 'Which Properties are Represented in Perception?', in Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne (eds), *Perceptual Experience* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 481–503; *The Contents of Visual Experience* (Oxford: OUP, 2011).

21 Siegel, 'Which Properties are Represented in Perception?', 491.

22 See Siegel's discussion of Gestalts in 'Which Properties are Represented in Perception?', 498–500.

distinguishes it from the rich content view in another important respect. Conceptual realism argues that perceptual experience is not just contentful but relational as well: perceptual contents involve individuals and their properties through relations that are a two-way street, dependent on the perceived objects and properties and on understanding and other relevant conceptual abilities of perceivers to secure engagement. This argumentation makes the account both a form of conceptualism and a form of realism. It is also important in the context of debate in recent philosophy of perception whereby conceptual realism ‘comes up the middle’ in the recent split between content and purely relational views.<sup>23</sup>

The split between content and purely relational theories is a recent development that I raise here to give a sense of the range of options in philosophy of perception that not only touch on aesthetics but need to be informed by work in aesthetics. Relational theories argue that we have the primitive capacity to pick-out or lock-onto objects (perhaps just by means of subpersonal processes) which are only then a subject matter for conceptual capacities. From a perspective that takes aesthetics into account, it is clear that the approach denies the outcome of argumentation such as Danto’s and Walton’s that some historical understanding is required to identify artworks and some of their aesthetic properties. I suggest that aesthetics helps show that purely relational views cannot accommodate the ability to ‘pick-out’ artworks, since works of art need not be spatially contiguous (so that ‘binding’ basic properties at a spatial location is not sufficient without understanding to pick-out the entities that are artworks).<sup>24</sup> (Perhaps this is an apt juncture to clarify that I have not introduced proposals that perceptual experience includes non-conceptual contents for the following reasons.<sup>25</sup> The extensive detail among these theories lies beyond the scope here; and, if artworks and their properties are historical as this paper examines, non-conceptual contents are explanatorily otiose.)

To summarize, juxtaposing Danto’s and Walton’s theories shows that Walton bypasses the broadest category ‘artwork’ to focus on categories that are more specific and so arguably both historical and perceptually distinguishable. Because content theories can accommodate that we perceive individual members of categories, such theories can explain that artworks are perceived, as are the aesthetic properties that depend on identifying the kind to which the object belongs. On balance, I suggest that theories of perceptual content tell against Danto’s insistence that the historical understanding requisite for identifying artworks is not perceptual.

23 For example, see John Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002).

24 For an illustration, imagine walking into a gallery that has a large grey monochrome on the principal wall, with an array of smaller paintings on the other walls. The room also contains a large convex mirror located so that wherever one walks, one is reflected along with the monochrome. Suppose that the monochrome and mirror are an artwork. One can pick this work out immediately upon reading the title ‘Mirror and Monochrome’ as one walks into the room, but this is not a work whose apprehension purely relational theories can explain. Insofar as artworks are a large and important category, this is not a small exception. It also makes the more general point that not all categories of entity have the spatial contiguity of objects.

25 For example, see York H. Gunther (ed.), *Essays on Nonconceptual Content* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

The constraint is mutual; aesthetics also places constraints on theory of perception. Insofar as artworks and their properties are subject to historically specific norms or stand in constitutive historical relationships to other works, as Walton and Danto argue, historical understanding is integral to our appreciation of aesthetic properties. This entails either that aesthetic properties are not perceived—which even Danto finds hard to espouse, gravitating to the view that great works of art allow thought to penetrate perception—or that they are, in which case an adequate theory of perception needs to be able to explain perception of aesthetic properties that is historically informed. Conceptual realism, in particular, stands out for its capacity to explain perception of aesthetic properties by arguing that perceptual content is informed by individuating understanding of objects and their properties, which is precisely the point of contention in coming to terms with the historicity of art. But a content theory that espouses perception of kinds while maintaining weaker commitments, such as the rich content view, might do as well.

### 3. Art History: Aesthetic Properties, Historical Context and Perception

Michael Baxandall, Linda Nochlin and T. J. Clark detail the social and art-historical context of a work to explain what artists do to create aesthetic effects. When it comes to aesthetic properties, what we may think of as their context has at least three dimensions: (i) the context supplied by the work as a whole, including its content; (ii) the specifically art-historical context of the property or the work; or (iii) the broader societal context of the property or work.

Taking a specific discussion from each historian, I will highlight that they explain *uses* of properties on which aesthetic properties depend or which are themselves aesthetic. I will argue that their explanations integrate content and aesthetic properties: they show how aesthetic properties help convey a work's content and how a work's content provides the context in which aesthetic properties function holistically.

#### *Baxandall: The Skilled Period Eye and Aesthetic Properties*

Baxandall stands apart by arguing for historically specific perceptual skills as a premise of his account. In *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, he argues that the understanding implicated in historically specific life activities—in mercantile, social and religious practices—enters into correlatively historically specific perceptual skills that artists rely on to bring about discernible aesthetic properties. In his terms, the eye is always a skillful 'period eye' informed by the 'cognitive style' appropriate to our life activities in specific social contexts.<sup>26</sup> This means that aesthetic properties depend on the properties that can be discriminated by perceivers with the period perceptual skills that painters share and reasonably expect in their viewers.

---

26 Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 34.

If we observe that Piero della Francesca tends to a gauged sort of painting, Fra Angelico to a preached sort of painting and Botticelli to a danced sort of painting, we are observing something not only about them but about their society.<sup>27</sup>

In support, Baxandall argues that fifteenth-century mercantile practices required skills for immediately registering proportions and gauging volumes. Religious practices involved highly practiced understanding which, for example, distinguished Mary's five emotional stages during the Annunciation and rendered those stages readily recognizable. Social life held to a 'sense of close relation between movement of the body and movement of the soul and mind' that was committed to the important role of gesture in disclosing mind or character.<sup>28</sup>

His point is that these practices require that understanding informs perceptual skills that are not specific to pictures though they can be used with respect to them. Since these perceptual skills are not required by twenty-first-century life practices, they are not shared by twenty-first-century beholders. Recognizing such historically specific perceptual skills helps us understand pictures as intentionally designed in a specific context in which artists could count on certain perceptual skills on the part of beholders, skills which they themselves shared, and which they could develop further through their use of specific pictorial techniques.

For example, Baxandall explains the aesthetic property of Botticelli's *Primavera* (ca. 1477) with detailed evidence of the fifteenth-century belief in the meaningfulness of physical movement, the significant role played by figurative dance in social life and the perceptual skill for seeing the complex patterns and tableaux that such dancing enacted. He details how contemporary treatises on both dancing and painting 'model figure patterns quite transparently expressive of psychological relationships'.<sup>29</sup> This helps us appreciate why a fifteenth-century art agent would describe the painting as having a 'virile air' or more simply as being danced, in our terms.<sup>30</sup>

To the extent that Baxandall's detailed reconstruction of the perceptual skills for which fifteenth-century Italian paintings were designed is convincing, it makes at least the following three points. First, whether specific understanding is 'external' or 'internal' to perception depends in part on the life activities for which perceptual skills are required, which in turn depend on specific historical practices. Though the aesthetic properties of fifteenth-century Italian painting might require explicit historical understanding on our part that would only become immediately perceptual with practice, such properties would be the targets of the immediate perceptual skills of beholders for whom they were made. Second, from a contemporary perspective offered by philosophy of perception, Baxandall argues for perceptual contents that are informed by conceptual understanding and emphasizes that such contents can be a function of skills. Third, aesthetic properties

27 Ibid., 152.

28 Ibid., 60.

29 Ibid., 78: 'Alberti's treatise on painting and Guglielmo Ebreo's treatise on dancing shared a preoccupation with physical movements as a reflex of mental movements. The dancing manual was the more grandiloquent about it, since this was the whole point of dancing, at least from an intellectual point of view. ... But as well as principles the treatises offer, in the form of the dances they describe, *model figure patterns quite transparently expressive of psychological relationships*. The dances were semi-dramatic ...' [my italics].

30 Ibid., 26.

such as danced or ‘virile air’ are not dependent on simple visual non-aesthetic properties but on properties that are the targets of historically specific perceptual skills.

### *Nochlin and Clark: The Use of Properties and Perceptible Content*

Nochlin and Clark’s discussions offer extensive reconstruction of historical context to explain the social and artistic issues that artists address through contents that are internally related to aesthetic properties. One feature that stands out in these discussions is that they identify far more complex aesthetic properties from those debated in philosophical arguments, for which one-word tags suffice, such as elegant, dynamic, dainty or dumpy.

Nochlin’s discussion of *La Crise Industrielle a Lyon: Sans Travail* (1884) by Paul Renouard makes especially clear that what is at issue is the use of properties such as pencil strokes, often identifying such properties aesthetically to explain the interrelationship between the work’s content and aesthetic properties.<sup>31</sup> That content is the predicament of a family of weavers trapped in a specific factual social context, a strike that leaves them without work or livelihood in a broader context where weaving was disappearing as an industry carried out in large numbers of small independent studios.

[T]he larger authenticity of the image is generated precisely by its concreteness and the modesty of its goals: the very sense that this much, this kind of detail is determined not by the author’s will, or his aesthetic ambition, but by internal necessity.

The result is *a moving additiveness of effect*, in which *the very stiffness and angularity of the pencil strokes*, the odd, off-beat symmetry of the composition, and the awkward, lumpy figure style are precisely what make the image so eloquent; virtuosity would have made it rhetorical; simplification; banal. . . .

Throughout Renouard’s drawing, *this difficult reality is recorded with a line as caringly unbeautiful, as unstylishly differentiated, as the people and things it records, variegated pencil strokes urgently marking out sags and wrinkles, droops and bristles, splintery and worn-out surfaces, often in short, broken hatches, sometimes in contrasting long, wavering ones in an insistent graphic interplay especially evident in the engraved version.*<sup>32</sup>

At no point does Nochlin appeal to non-aesthetic properties such as the orientation and sizes of lines to explain the aesthetic properties of the work. She identifies uses, ‘variegated pencil strokes’ or ‘short, broken hatches’ and ‘contrasting, long wavering ones’. Her descriptions are aesthetic (‘stiffness and angularity of the pencil strokes’) and they make connections between aesthetic properties and the content thereby conveyed: ‘this difficult reality is recorded with a line as caringly unbeautiful, as unstylishly differentiated, as the people and things it records.’

Clark’s approach is similar, but he challenges us with the extent of historical fact that he presents. For example, his discussion of Camille Pissarro’s *Two Young Peasant Women* (ca. 1891) in ‘We Field-Women’<sup>33</sup> details considerations that might seem to be extrinsic social and art-historical facts that are a matter of cognition and interpretation and not

31 Nochlin, ‘Van Gogh, Renouard, and the Weaver’s Crisis in Lyons’, 95–119.

32 Ibid., 103–104, my emphasis.

33 Clark, ‘We Field-Women’, 55–137.



perception. But he draws on these to explain that the work as a whole yields a specific ‘feel of light’ to convey a complex content. Clark’s expansive discussion puts pressure on the question of whether we can perceive the melding of social and art historical content and the aesthetic qualities that are inseparable from that content.

Clark details how broader social concern over the rapidly modernizing world comes together thematically for Pissarro with his concern that modern art was moving away from the Impressionist and Pointillist principles he believed in. To this double end, Pissarro contests the theme of peasant labour as it is embodied thematically and aesthetically through pictures of rest or respite from that labour in earlier nineteenth-century art. His challenge is to show a particular moment of rest in a way that conveys that respite of this kind comes with a historically specific form of peasant labour that is to be rejected even though it makes possible rest that is genuine and human. Clark explains how this pushes at the limits of Pissarro’s technique and reconstructs Pissarro’s struggles to show that there is something of value that is being lost in the old way of life even though ‘it is cruel and we can’t wish to keep it and ... above all don’t want to sentimentalize in any way’.

Everything we value in the past ...—and that means all the dreams and duplicities the peasant was made to stand for over four centuries—is being destroyed by progress. Progress is odious and absurd; and yet we cannot argue that what we value in the past should survive, because it too was odious, even if not absurd; and because the price of it was misery, which progress ameliorates.<sup>34</sup>

The issue is how this complex content is conveyed by Pissarro’s depiction of two peasant women in a moment of personal uncertainty and respite from labour. Clark highlights that Pissarro understands modernism to require that a painting should not ‘figure the values that matter to you’ but ‘have them be instanced by what you do’.<sup>35</sup> That is why the uncertainty of the future ‘is embodied in an atmosphere, a state of light’.<sup>36</sup> Clark argues that ‘[t]his is the picture’s triumph ... that it gets its metaphor of ease and inwardness into the foreground air, *into a shade that is palpable but not localized. An atmosphere that is there in the totality of surface touches, but never anywhere in particular—never marked, never epitomized*’.<sup>37</sup>

But if the work’s aesthetic properties include palpably hot, humid, shady light—that help convey a respite from labour that is genuine yet uncertain—what are the properties on which these depend and how is this to be explained?

It is all a matter of surface and light. But these are the aspects of the picture that are hardest to grasp and describe ... . For here is the picture’s central, and most elusive, effect. Only slowly, if my experience is typical, does it dawn on the viewer that the key to the picture’s color organization is the fact that its two peasants are taking their rest in a translucent foreground shade, with here and there a trace of sunlight coming through the leaves onto their fists or foreheads. ... Rest seeks shadow, work usually cannot. *The contrast between the one state of light and the other is what carries the picture’s*

34 Ibid., 127.

35 Ibid., 65.

36 Ibid., 122.

37 Ibid., 122, my emphasis.

*semantic charge—this is its way of reinventing the pastoral. ... Light is the guarantee of pictorial integrity, and also, ultimately, of expressive integrity. There can be ... plenty of sweetness and sentimentality in a picture, as long as the light ... embodies the qualities of energy, equanimity, and truthfulness which elsewhere evaporate the moment they are pursued. ...*

*Therefore the shade that surrounds the two actors has to come out of the whole texture of coloured marks—come out of it like a secretion, or emanation, which can never be tied down to this or that painterly cue. Therefore the landscape in sunlight has somehow to participate in the shade, or be viewed through it, or be shot through with its qualities.<sup>38</sup>*

If Clark's discussion is compelling, the description of the painting's diffused, muggy summer light is of a holistic effect that we can see—even if what we see might only dawn with much looking which can be enriched and filled out by extensive facts about Pissarro and his social context that Clark acquaints us with and helps us understand.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have argued that aesthetic properties depend on *uses* of properties such as colours and that uses are perceptible. In seeing an artwork, we see *uses* of properties integral to the work, and we see *uses* of properties in seeing *what* the artwork conveys. The notion of *use* is contextual and historical. The paper developed this point by examining connections between aesthetics, philosophy of perception and art history. Looking back to key arguments in aesthetics for the historical nature of artworks and aesthetic properties by Danto and Walton, it is clear that such arguments need to draw on philosophy of perception to make claims about the perceptibility of historical objects and properties—either to deny or to affirm that artworks and aesthetic properties are perceptible. I argued that the balance of considerations lies in favour of perceptibility if we embrace the idea that perceptual experience is contentful, that mature human perception represents individual members of kinds and their properties. Turning to central discussions from socially oriented art historians Baxandall, Nochlin and Clark, I showed that their detailed reconstructions explain how properties are used to convey contents that are integrated with aesthetic properties. Their accounts contend that such uses are perceptible either by virtue of the historically specific perceptual skills that artists share with their viewers or by augmenting the perception of differently skilled perceivers like ourselves with contextual understanding.<sup>39</sup>

Sonia Sedivy  
University of Toronto Scarborough  
[sonia.sedivy@utoronto.ca](mailto:sonia.sedivy@utoronto.ca)

38 Ibid., 64–65, my emphasis.

39 I would like to thank the participants at the “Art, History and Perception” workshop in Toronto for their helpful discussion of an earlier version of this paper, with special thanks to Zachary Weinstein for ongoing conversation about these issues. I am grateful to the anonymous referee for the *British Journal of Aesthetics* for their insightful comments.