

# The Aesthetics of Mixing the Senses

## Cross-Modal Aesthetics

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The term «aesthetics» comes from the Greek *aesthesis*, meaning «sense perception.» The modern Western understanding of aesthetics was forged in the mid-eighteenth century. It was elaborated on the basis of a taxonomy of «the five arts» (architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry). The scope and criteria of the various arts were delimited in terms of the dualism of vision (epitomized by painting) and hearing (epitomized by either music or poetry). The «dark» or «lower» senses of smell, taste and touch were deemed too base to hold any significance for the fine arts. Theatre and dance were also excluded on account of their hybrid character, since they played to more than one sense at once (Rée 2000).

At the close of the eighteenth century, in his monumental *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant sought to transcend the dualism of vision and hearing and replace it with a fundamental division between the «arts of space» (e.g. painting) and the «arts of time» (e.g. music), accessible to «outer intuition» and «inner intuition» respectively. It could be said that Kant rarefied aesthetics by divorcing it from perception and substituting intuition. After Kant, aesthetic judgment would be properly neutral, passionless and disinterested (see Turner 1994; Eagleton 1990). This definition of aesthetics guaranteed the autonomy of the enclave now known as «art» but at the expense of sensory plenitude.

In its modern incarnation (or rather, disincarnation), aesthetics has to do with the appreciation of the formal relations intrinsic to a work of art, irrespective of that work's content. Thus, in one characterization of the proper object of aesthetics, Robert Redfield offered the following analogy:

«Art [...] is like a window with a garden behind it. One may focus on either the garden or the window. The common viewer of a Constable landscape or a statue by St. Gaudens focuses on the garden. Not many people [...] «are capable of adjusting their perceptive apparatus to the windowpane and the transparency that is the work of art» (Redfield 1971: 46 quoting Ortega y Gasset)

The implication of this analogy is that it is only the uncommon viewer, or connoisseur, capable of training his or her gaze on the windowpane itself, who is capable of enjoying a pure aesthetic experience, and of exercising the proper form of judgment.

In addition to insisting on the separation of form from content, the modernist definition of aesthetics is predicated on the separation of the senses (Jones 2005). That is, aesthetic perception is dependent on a dual process of sensory demarcation and the elision of non-intrinsic sensations so that the viewer may come to appreciate the «organic unity» of a given work of art, be it a painting or a symphony. By way of illustration, consider the following passage from an essay by Harold Osborne entitled «The Cultivation of Sensibility in Art Education»:

«In the appreciation of a work of art we concentrate attention exclusively upon a selected region of the presented world. When listening to music we shut out so far as possible the sounds of our neighbours' coughing, the rustle of programmes, even our own bodily sensations. When reading a poem, looking at a film or watching a stage play we tend to be imperceptive and unmindful of sensations from outside.

But within the chosen sector we are alert to the intrinsic qualities of the sense-impressions imparted rather than to their practical implications and we are alert to the patterned constructs formed by the relations in which these intrinsic qualities stand to each other ... This is perception for its own sake, and represents the kernel of truth in the traditional formula «disinterested interest» (Osborne 1984: 32)

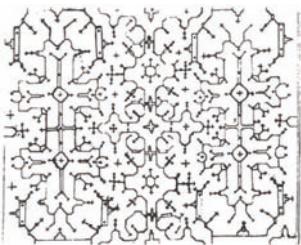
It should be noted that the aesthetic sensibility of which Osborne speaks is not only something that is cultivated by the viewer from within, it is also instilled in the viewer from without by the architectural design and codes of conduct (e.g. no touching, no chatting, no eating, etc.) which obtain within the art museum or concert hall, which are each in their own way spaces for the production of «single-sense epiphanies» (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Bennett 1995; Drobnick 2004). In *How to Use Your Eyes*, James Elkins, Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has boldly tried to move aesthetic appreciation out of the rarefied air of the art museum and into everyday life. This treatise consists of 32 chapters dedicated to teaching us «how to look» at man-made and natural objects ranging from postage stamps to sunsets. Elkins' approach is profoundly revealing, but at the same time curiously stultifying insofar as the nonvisual senses are concerned. «For me,» Elkins writes,

«looking is a kind of pure pleasure – it takes me out of myself and lets me think only of what I am seeing. Also, there is a pleasure in discovering these things. It is good to know that the visual world is more than television, movies, and art museums, and it is especially good to know that the world is full of fascinating things that can be seen at leisure, when you are by yourself and there is nothing to distract you. Seeing is, after all, a soundless activity. It isn't talking, or listening, or smelling, or touching. It happens best in solitude, when there is nothing in the world but you and the object of your attention» (Elkins 2000: xi)

In many non-Western societies, the aesthetic does not constitute a realm apart, but is rather an aspect of everyday life and ritual practice, and the senses are not separated from each other but rather combine in specific ways to achieve specific purposes, such as healing. Let us consider a pair of case studies in cross-cultural aesthetics. Each case discloses a different manner of crossing the senses.

### Healing Arts of the Shipibo-Conibo

Consider the geometric designs of the Shipibo-Conibo Indians of Peru (see Figure 1). These designs – which are said to originate in the markings of the cosmic serpent, Ronin – are woven into textiles, incised on pots and houseposts, painted on faces, and even recorded in folios which were supplied by the first missionaries who made contact with the Shipibo-Conibo (see Illius 2002). However, their foremost use is in the context of Shipibo-Conibo healing rituals.



**Figure 1:**  
Shipibo-Conibo Geometric  
Design (from Gebhart-Sayer  
1985, figure 14)

The Shipibo-Conibo understand medicine to be an art, literally, and their healing practices place a premium on synaesthesia in contrast to contemporary Western medical practice, which is geared to the anaesthetization of the patient.

One important condition of [Shipibo-Conibo] therapy is the aesthetically pleasing [*quiquin*] environment into which the shaman and the family place the patient. He is carefully surrounded by an ambience designed to appease both the senses and emotions. Visible and invisible geometric designs, melodious singing, and the fragrance from herbs and tobacco smoke pervade the atmosphere, and ritual purity characterizes his food and each person with whom he has contact. The patient is never left alone in the mosquito tent during the critical time of his illness. This setting induces in the patient the necessary emotional disposition for recovery. But how is this indigenous concept of aesthetics [*quiquin*] to be understood? (Gebhart-Sayer 1985: 161)

The Shipibo-Conibo term *quiquin*, which means both aesthetic and appropriate, is used to refer to pleasant auditory and olfactory as well as visual sensations. Let us follow how the shaman operates with *quiquin*-ness on these three sensory levels –

visual, auditory and olfactory – and how they are «synaesthetically combined to form a therapy of beauty, cultural relevance, and sophistication» (Gebhart-Sayer 1985: 162)

At the start of a healing session (there will be five such sessions in all), the shaman, under the influence of the *ayahuasca* hallucinogenic vine, sees the body of the patient «as if with an X-ray machine.» A sick person's visual body pattern appears «like a very messy design,» or mixed-up pile of garbage, and its pathological aura has a vile stench which is the mark of the attacking spirits (*nihue*) causing the illness. The healing ritual involves both the restoration of a healthy visual body pattern and the neutralization of the pathogenic aura through life-enhancing fragrance.

The shaman begins by brushing away the «mess» on the patient's body with his painted garment and fanning away the miasma of the attacking spirits with his fragrant herbal bundle, all the while blowing tobacco smoke. He then takes up his rattle and beats a smelling rhythm: the air is now «full of aromatic tobacco smoke and the good scent of herbs.» Following this, the shaman, still hallucinating, perceives whole «sheets» of luminescent geometric designs, drawn by the Hummingbird spirit, hovering in the air, which gradually descend to his lips. On reaching his lips the shaman sings the designs into songs. At the moment of coming into contact with the patient, the songs once again turn into designs that penetrate the patient's body and, ideally, «settle down permanently.» However, the whole time the healing design is being sung onto the body of the patient, the *nihue* will «try to ruin the pattern by singing evil-smelling anti-songs dealing with the odor of gasoline, fish poison, dogs, certain products of the cosmetic industry, menstrual blood, unclean people, and so on» (Gebhart-Sayer 1985: 171), and thereby smudge or contaminate it. This is why it may take up to five sessions for the design to come out «clear, neat, and complete,» and the cure to be finished. (If the design does not settle down permanently, the patient is unlikely to recover.)

Another strategy commonly employed by the evil *nihue* to prevent the cure from taking is to seek out the shaman's medicine vessel which contains all his design songs, and pry the lid off it. This causes the therapeutic power of the songs to escape. «This power is imagined as the fragrance of the design songs or the aromatic gas fizzing from fermenting yucca beer» (Gebhart-Sayer 1985: 172). The design songs thus have an olfactory dimension, in addition to their visual one, as their power is understood to reside in their fragrance.

The synaesthetic interrelationships of the designs, songs and fragrances used in Shipibo-Conibo healing rituals are nicely brought out in the following lines from a shamanic healing song:

*The (harmful) spirit pneuma  
swirling in your body's ultimate point.  
I shall tackle it right now  
with my fragrant chanting.*

...  
*I see brilliant bands of designs,  
curved and fragrant...*

An important point to note here is that, whereas we perceive these designs as visual abstractions, the Shipibo-Conibo perceive them as matrices of intersensory perception, since these geometric designs are at the same time musical scores and perfume recipes. They resonate in each of the senses at once. They are not simply addressed to the eye.

### **Listening to the Incense in Japan**

In «The Cultivation of Sensibility in Art Education,» Harold Osborne (1984) refers to the Japanese incense-guessing game, or «way of incense» (*kōdō*) approvingly as a means of cultivating the ability to make «fine discriminations within a narrow range of sensory quality». He characterizes *kōdō* as involving «the competitive discrimination of scents of the incense type.» As we shall see, while true in a surface sense,

<sup>1</sup>This account of the Japanese incense ceremony is based on personal experience and the following key sources: Morita (1999), Pybus (2001), and Bedini (1994)

this characterization is altogether too unisensory since the key to *kōdō* actually lies in crossing sensory borders.<sup>1</sup>

The history of incense in Japan is as old as that of Buddhism, since the two were introduced from China together in the sixth century. To this day, Buddhist monks use incense to sacralize a space, as a vehicle of prayer, and as an aid to concentration. However, incense may also be enjoyed without any religious purpose, in which case it is called ‘empty burning,’ a pastime which became especially popular during the Heian period (794–1192 CE), when the aristocracy delighted in compounding incense and then guessing the ingredients when burnt. The ‘way of incense’ proper was codified in the fourteenth century, with different schools devising different rules. The tea ceremony and the art of floral arrangement date from the same period. All three constituted essential accomplishments of the courtly class. The ceremony was taken over by other classes in subsequent centuries, but then fell into desuetude in the late nineteenth century, only to be revived as a Japanese family game in the twentieth century.

Originally the grading of incense was by country of origin, since *jinko* (aloeswood) from various parts of the world differed in quality: Manaban (from the Malabar coast of southern India) was the coarsest and Rakoku (from Thailand) among the finest. There are six such categories in all. In the fourteenth century a gustatory lexicon was devised for grading purposes:

<i>Sweet</i>	Honey or syruplike aroma
<i>Sour</i>	Unripe fruit aroma
<i>Hot</i>	Spicy aroma
<i>Salty</i>	Marine, ozonic or perspiration aroma
<i>Bitter</i>	Medicinal aroma

This gustatory ordination of incense makes sense from a physiological perspective, since the senses of taste and smell are so closely linked (see Stevenson and Boakes 2004). But the matter does not stop there. In the course of time a class dimension was added, so that this gustatory classification acquired a social lining. The scent of Malanban, for example, is considered sweet, unrefined and rather gritty whence the characterization of its demeanour as ‘The Coarse Peasant,’ while the aroma of Rakoku, which is pungent and bitter, has the demeanour of a warrior and is known as ‘The Samurai.’

Probing further, we discover that the Japanese do not simply smell (or taste) the woodsmoke but also ‘listen to the incense’ (*ko wo kiku*), as the saying goes. Various explanations have been offered for this turn of phrase. One authority notes that it translates the original Chinese phrase *wen xiang*, the pictograph for which resembles a person kneeling to pray and meditate. Another suggests that ‘listening’ more aptly conveys the concentration that is involved in *kōdō* than a term such as ‘smelling’ (or merely ‘hearing’). Yet another authority stresses the cosmological dimension: in Buddha’s world everything is fragrant, like incense, including the Buddha’s words or teachings, which are therefore to be scented as well as heard. Finally, it is significant to note that many forms of the game involve the recitation or composition of poetry, and thus implicate the verbal arts.

The visual and haptic senses also play a role in odour-appreciation Japanese-style: the former in the way calligraphy is used to record the contestants’ guesses and the latter in the way the master of ceremonies, the tabulator and all the contestants adopt a kneeling posture for the duration of the rite. The ostensibly restricted role which the visual and tactile or kinaesthetic senses play in the practice of *kōdō* is counterbalanced by the degree to which these senses are extended in the imagination. Consider the variant of the game called ‘Shirakawa Border Station,’ where the poem by the same names provides the ceremony with its structure – or rather, its map. The idea is to retrace the long journey (370 miles) from Kyoto to Shirakawa which the poet Noin (who lived during the late Heian period) undertook by foot, taking two full seasons to complete.

I left the capital,  
Veiled in spring mist  
An autumn wind blows here,  
At Shirakawa Border station

The protocol of the game is as follows:

- Step 1. The master of ceremonies (MC) informs the guests that the three kinds of *jinko* to be used (any three may be selected) are called Mist in the Capital, Autumn Wind, and Shirakawa Border Station. Sample pieces of Mist in the Capital (first), and Autumn Wind (second), are heated in censers and passed around, with the MC identifying them for the participants so the latter can memorize them. (Shirakawa Border Station is not circulated during the tryout phase)
- Step 2. The MC shuffles the three pieces in their respective packets (one each of Mist in the Capital, Autumn Wind and Shirakawa Border Station).
- Step 3. The samples are taken out of their packets, placed in censers and passed around again. Guests indicate their listening by writing down the names of the incense in the order in which they were circulated on the writing tablets provided by the tabulator.
- Step 4. The tablets are gathered up by the tabulator who records the participants' guesses on a master record sheet. The MC reveals the correct identifications and the following interpretation is offered:

For all fragrances correctly identified: Crossed the Border  
All fragrances incorrectly identified: Stopped at the Border  
Only Spring Mist correctly identified: Spring Wind  
Only Autumn Wind correctly identified: Fallen Leaves  
Only Shirakawa Border Station correctly identified: Travel Garments  
(Morita 1999: 78)

Everyone is then invited to comment on how they enjoyed the game, and the master record sheet is presented to the contestant who made the most correct identifications.

The theme of travelling by means of incense trails is a recurrent one in *kōdō*. It informs another variant of the game known as 'The Three Scenic Spots.' In this game, one imagines a boat ride to each of the three famous sites: Matsushima (an archipelago), Amanohashidate (a white spit of land covered in pine trees) and Itsukushima (with its famous Shinto red gateway). The question arises: Why all this emphasis on travel? Part of the answer lies in the fact that smells transport us, literally, on account of their strong associations with specific places, the way they are carried on the wind, and the way they act on our spirits. As Montaigne remarked in his *Essais*:

I have often noticed that [scents] cause changes in me, and act on my spirits according to their qualities; which make me agree with the theory that the introduction of incense and perfume into churches, so ancient and widespread a practice among all nations and religions, was for the purpose of raising our spirits, and of exciting and purifying our senses, the better to fit us for contemplation (quoted in Howes 1991: 129)

Also of note in this connection is the fact that it is easier to summon a visual image of a place to mind when you catch a whiff of some scent (e.g. that of lavender) than it is to summon a scent to mind when staring at an image of a landscape (e.g. of a lavender field in Provence). *Kōdō* capitalizes on this asymmetry in the cross-modal activation potential of the senses of sight and smell, and by so doing enriches the field of vision without detracting from the pleasures of olfaction.

The modernist monomodal definition of aesthetics is at odds with the cross-modal aesthetic practices of the Shipibo-Conibo and the Japanese. Why is this so? As we

have seen, it is the philosophers of the eighteenth century, especially Kant, who are to blame for having «refined» our understanding of the nature of aesthetic experience and in the process elided the potential contribution of the nonvisual senses to the appreciation of pictorial art as of the nonauditory senses to the enjoyment of music, never mind the art of perfume, cooking or the dance. Given that the term aesthetic originally meant «sense perception,» without further specification as to modality, it behooves us to inquire into the prior history of this concept.

One of the finest studies on point is François Lissarraque's *The Aesthetics of the Greek Banquet: Images of Wine and Ritual*. The Greek banquet – or *symposion* (a term which actually refers to the moment at which people drink together, after the meal is over) was a highly ritualized occasion when adult male citizens gathered and among themselves would drink, sing lyric poetry, play music, engage in athletic and other pursuits, and converse on various topics. The tone of a symposion was dictated by the proportion in which the water and wine were mixed in the *krater*, the large jug which formed the focal point of the festivities. This vessel was a conveyor of images in the form of line-drawings of human figures (which reflected and modelled the behaviour of the guests) and the container of «the essential reaction,» as Lissarraque puts it, «the mixing of water and wine.» It bears underlining that wine was never drunk straight or unadulterated (a practice common among the Scythians, whom the Greeks despised for their lack of moderation in drinking as in other things) but always in proportions of 3:1, 5:3 or 3:2, depending on the desired strength of the mixture. The mix was dictated by the symposiarch, who also prescribed the topics for conversation and musical themes. Lissarraque elaborates:

«To be successful the symposion strives for a good mixture, not only of liquids but also of guests, who will harmonize with one another like the strings of an instrument. The mixture also includes balanced and varied delights: drinks, perfumes, songs, music, dancing, games, conversation. The symposion looks like a meeting with a changeable agenda, at once spectacle, performance and enjoyment, with an appeal to all the senses: hearing, taste, touch, smell, and sight.» (Lissarraque 1999: 19)

Space prevents us from reviewing all of the respects in which the symposion amounted to a banquet of sense – the aroma of the wine mingling with the libations of frankincense, the passing from hand to hand of the vases from which the guests drank and of the lyre with which they accompanied their singing, the erotic exchanges between the adult male citizens and the youths (both male and female) in attendance, the drinking games – but the foregoing list will have given the reader some sense of the mix. One game in particular stands out as a metaphor – or «reflection» – of the balanced delights and delight in balance that animated the symposion. It was called *askoliasmos*, and involved the contestant trying to maintain his position atop a wineskin that has been inflated until it is almost round and also made slick with grease. The game called for extraordinary proprioceptive skill. One wonders what sense the author of the *Critique of Judgment* (or his successors, such as Osborne and Elkins) would make of all this sensory interplay.

The ideal of a full-bodied, cross-modal aesthetics – as realized in the context of the Greek symposion – has persisted in the Western tradition, though most art historians like most music historians have failed to pick up on it, due to the sensory biases of their respective disciplines. For example, one finds this ideal informing the Renaissance banquet (Classen 2001), and certain of the artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as Symbolism and Futurism, as Constance Classen relates in a fascinating chapter of her book *The Color of Angels* subtitled «Crossing Sensory Borders in the Arts.»<sup>2</sup> Let me close by inviting the reader interested in recovering the sensory plenitude of the original meaning of aesthetics to read on.

<sup>2</sup> → pp. 63–74 in this catalogue

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