

Thomas Jefferson on Taste and the Fine Arts



M. Andrew Holowchak

Series in American History



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To a very cherished and dear friend, Vivienne Kelly,
who is a sculptor of no small talent!

Preface

“*De gustibus non est disputandum*; that is, there is no disputing against Hobby-Horses; and, for my part, I seldom do; nor could I with any sort of grace, had I been an enemy to them at the bottom; for happening, at certain intervals and changes of the Moon, to be both fiddler and painter, according as the fly stings.” ~Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*¹

While touring the pleasure gardens of England with John Adams, Jefferson was at times awed by the resplendent beauty, but at other times, taken aback by cumbrous superfluity. While at the garden at Cheswick, he writes, “The garden shows still too much of art.” At Blenheim, he says the same, “Art appears too much.”²

That sentiment was no *obiter dictum*. It was written with due circumspection. Art could be overdone. That he learned from reading and assimilating Lord Kames’, William Hogarth’s, Edmund Burke’s, and Hugh Blair’s views on beauty, sublimity, the art of criticism, and taste, as well as Thomas Whately’s critical comments in his very popular *Observations on Modern Gardening*—a sort of critical guide to the aesthetics of pleasure gardening. In the words of Whately, when gardening is overdone, there is “a jealousy of art” and “art then intrudes.”³ A new science, to be dubbed by Alexander Baumgarten “aesthetics” in 1735, was birthed.⁴

Kames and Blair noted that taste required the right amount of the right sort of aesthetic stimulation: too little, and it would be underdeveloped and unappreciative of beauty and sublimity; too much (e.g., French rococo), and it would be overindulged to such an extent that its judgments would be forced and without an appreciation of the practical aspects of beauty and sublimity.

¹ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn and Joan New (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 14.

² Thomas Jefferson, “A Tour of the Gardens of England,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 623 and 627.

³ Thomas Whately, *Observations of Modern Gardening*, ed. Michael Symes (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2016), 119–20.

⁴ Peter Lamarque, “History of Aesthetics,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0002.xml>, accessed 2 Apr. 2022.

Like Kames and Blair, Jefferson sought an aesthetic mean, yet his was an American sense of that aesthetic mean. That mean was to be serviceable for what he envisaged would be a predominantly agrarian nation—one without the degradation that occurred in overcrowded cities, like London, in which manufacture predominated and the overburdened laborers often “rejuvenated” themselves through gambling, drinking, and prostitution. Jeffersonian republicanism was to be a corrective to the centuries-old abuses of heavy-handed, intrusive government.

That corrective was a movement toward greater liberty and equality and that movement demanded not only political, moral, and educational reforms, but also—and this has been eschewed in major works of Jefferson’s political thinking—aesthetical reforms. No nation could be great without its citizens having some appreciation for beauty.

What amount of art was needed for Jefferson’s American aesthetic mean?

Art for Jefferson was like a republican government. Too much government for a large nation was to be avoided, as liberty would be suffocated. Too little government for a large nation was to be avoided, as it would result in anarchy. Yet among the extremes of surplus and privation of government, the latter was preferable to the former. It was the same with art for the young nation.

Art, if overdone, would be a useless indulgence and an impediment to liberty. It would be difficult, for example, for a nation of mostly farmers to cultivate a large appreciation for sculpture or painting, and if cultivated, it would be a hindrance to industry. Art, if neglected, would stall the engine of liberty. There would never have been an American Revolution, for instance, had the Founders not been skilled in the arts of rhetoric and oratory. And so, Jefferson’s critical comments apropos of the fine arts must be seen from the perspective of his republican ideals. William Howard Adams eloquently expresses that notion in the form of a dilemma. “European luxury, overrefinement and effeminacy expressed in much of contemporary art was [*sic*] a threat to the morals and public happiness of the people and their representatives in the new American government. The dilemma was how to establish a foundation of the arts in America without accepting the time-honored conditions of wealth and rank in which they flourished.”⁵

As we shall see in chapter 1, Lord Kames and Hugh Blair, whose views on taste Jefferson to some extent appropriated,⁶ argued that cultivation and

⁵ William Howard Adams, *The Eye of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of the Arts, 1976), xxxviii.

⁶ M. Andrew Holowchak, *Thomas Jefferson: Moralizer* (Jefferson City, NC: McFarland, 2017), chap. 3.

maturation of taste through the fine arts were themselves subject to rational principles. The account Kames gives largely suggests that only those with sufficient leisure, the wealthy and the wellborn, would be capable of that. Were Jefferson's views on the aesthetic sense sufficiently dissimilar in some respect from those of Kames to allow for the democratization of the aesthetic?

That was the problem that artist and philosopher William Hogarth confronted in *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753). Hogarth begins: "For though beauty is seen and confessed by all, yet, from the many fruitless attempts to account for the cause of its being so, inquiries on this head have almost been given up; and the subject generally thought to be a matter of too high and too delicate a nature to admit of any true or intelligible discussion."⁷ The reason for the confusion, it seems, is that all expositions of beauty have been highbrow, when the subject admits of a simpler explication. Men of letters, on the "more beaten path of moral beauty," have been "continually discoursing of effects instead of developing causes."⁸ All persons have a capacity for aesthetic appreciation, which ought not to be left exclusively to men of letters.

Aesthetic sensibility, Hogarth asserts, is not just for the elite—especially those practiced in the arts. "The more prevailing the notion may be, that painters and connoisseurs are the only competent judges of things of this sort; the more it becomes necessary to clear up and confirm ... that no one may be deterred, by the want of such previous knowledge, from entering into this enquiry."⁹ The principles of beauty and grace, like the principles of bodily motion, are in nature and discoverable by all persons, not merely by men of letters. That is a "democratic" point that Jefferson doubtless found appealing. Jefferson owned Hogarth's book and recommended it to Robert Skipwith, brother-in-law of Jefferson's soon-to-be wife Martha, in his suggestions for a private library (3 Aug. 1771), suitable to a pastoral gentleman.

What made an art "fine"? Jefferson writes to granddaughter Ellen Wayles Randolph (10 July 1805), "No perfect *definition* of what is a fine art has ever yet been given." Some say that a fine art allows for manual operations that conjoin "the exercise of the imagination or genius." According to this definition, sculpture, painting, architecture, and gardening are fine arts, but not music, poetry, and oratory. Others say that the fine arts are objects of the senses, while the sciences are objects of the understanding. According to this definition, gardening is a fine art, but not poetry and oratory.

⁷ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty: Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste* (London: J. Reeves, 1753), iii.

⁸ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, iii–iv.

⁹ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 3.

Jefferson himself never firmly settled on a definition. It is sufficient to say that “fine” had nothing to do with the quality of a work of art, but instead with the end for which it was created. The fine arts were of such productions that answered merely to aesthetic sensibility—appreciation of beauty only was the aim—not functionality. For Jefferson, all persons were by nature equipped with both a moral sense and an aesthetic sense (*viz.*, taste), and so all persons were at least capable of aesthetic appreciation.

Yet here we return to Kames’ notion, shared by most aestheticians of his time, that the cultivation of the fine arts and measured study of its principles required leisure. That militated against their appreciation by the *hoi polloi*. And so, in spite of Hogarth’s (and Jefferson’s) insistence that the principles of beauty and grace were accessible to all persons, few persons had sufficient leisure to hone their faculty of taste.

That there were fine arts was uncontested in Jefferson’s day, but their number was contested. Jefferson continues in his letter to his granddaughter Ellen:

I must observe that neither the *number* of the fine arts, nor the particular arts entitled to that appellation have been fixed by general consent. Many reckon but five Painting, sculpture, architecture, music & poetry. To these, some have added Oratory, including, within that, Rhetoric which is the art of style & composition. Others again add Gardening as a 7th fine art, not horticulture, but the art of embellishing grounds by fancy.

It is Lord Kames, says Jefferson, who has shown that gardening has its place among the fine arts. Because of the tight alliance with landscape painting, such painters tend to make the best designers of gardens.

The letter commits Jefferson to painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, and gardening—given his comments concerning Kames—in 1805, and suggests that he is open to the inclusion of oratory. In an earlier letter to John Banister (15 Oct. 1785), Jefferson lists painting, sculpture, architecture, and music among those fine arts which can be elegantly cultivated in Rome. In an 1806 letter to John Ogilvie (Jan. 31), he lists gardening, architecture, sculpture, painting, and music in the ninth category for his library at Monticello, thereby intimating that they are among the fine arts, but lists poetry, oratory, and criticism among the ninth (really, tenth), tenth (eleventh), and eleventh (twelfth) categories. It is unclear whether they are to be considered outside the fine arts, given that they are not in the ninth category, or whether they are to be considered as fine arts, with each deserving a separate categorization, for some inexplicable reason.

Yet, Jefferson's 1789 Catalog of Books—separated into History (Memory), Philosophy (Reason), and Fine Arts (Imagination)—lists gardening, architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry, oratory, and criticism under Fine Arts. It is the same with his earlier 1783 catalog. In his Retirement Library, he breaks Fine Arts into Beaux Arts (architecture, gardening, painting, sculpture, and music) and Belles Lettres (poetry, oratory, and criticism). So, notwithstanding the fact that Jefferson never settled on a definition of “fine arts,” it is clear that Jefferson considered the fine arts to be eight, and I cover all eight in this undertaking. This book—*Thomas Jefferson, Taste, and the Fine Arts*—is an expiscation and critical assessment of Jefferson's views on taste and the fine arts—an incursion into the mind of Thomas Jefferson, more than an attempt, like William Howard Adams' excellent 1986 essay, “The Fine Arts,” to recapitulate Jefferson's path over time to the fine arts. Adams' essay, however, disappoints inasmuch as his focus is on painting and sculpture. Adams says nothing about Jefferson's eightfold catalog of the fine arts—their number and what each comprises—and wholly overlooks the three of the four arts in Belles Lettres—poetry, oratory, and rhetoric—and devotes only one sentence to criticism. Of the Beaux Arts, he overpasses gardening and music, and devotes only a few paragraphs to architecture.

Besides the essay by Adams, there is nothing of which I know that offers a sustained discussion of Jefferson and Fine Arts. What is most astonishing is that significant biographies on Jefferson nowise include “fine arts” in their bibliography, though many of the individual fine arts are listed and covered in scattered places throughout the books. That is almost scandalous, given the indispensability of the fine arts, for Jefferson, in the education of Virginian gentlemen and their centrality in the education of Virginian females of refinement, and given that Fine Arts is one of the three axial branches of human learning for Jefferson.

Moreover, other than chapter 2 of my book, *Thomas Jefferson: Moralist*, there has never been a focused critical discussion of Jefferson's view of the aesthetic sense, which, along with reason and the moral sense, is one of the three axial faculties of humans. In this book, *Thomas Jefferson, Taste, and the Fine Arts*, I expand on my prior critical analysis, especially in my discussion in chapter 1 of Jefferson's epistemology of the sublime.

Thus, this book is a preliminary attempt to remedy the defects mentioned in the two prior paragraphs. I write “preliminary,” because besides being an expiscation and critical assessment of Jefferson on taste and the fine arts, it is an invitation for other scholars to make a study of Jefferson and taste and Fine Arts as well as those arts subsumable under Fine Arts.

I begin in Part One with Belles Lettres. Chapter 1 covers the art of criticism, which is, to all intents and purposes, a meta-art. In chapter 2, I cover poetry, of which Jefferson was especially fond as a youth, but came to disrelish later

in life. Next, I examine Jefferson's views of oratory and rhetoric, which might seem to be relatively insignificant arts but are politically two of the most important arts in a thriving Jeffersonian republic. Part Two covers the Beaux Arts. Chapters 4 and 5 cover gardening and architecture—two of the most useful fine arts. In chapter 6, I critically discuss Jefferson's views on painting and sculpture, which as his “gallery” at Monticello shows, Jefferson fully appreciated, though he thought that they were of limited value for a nation, in his vision, comprising mostly farmers. Music is the subject of the final chapter. It has a strange status for Jefferson, as he loved music perhaps as much as he loved architecture, though music might be deemed the least useful of the fine arts—put otherwise, the finest of the fine arts.

In expiscation and critical discussion of Jefferson on taste and the fine arts, I attempt to answer some thorny questions. Was Jefferson's argument against the praxis of criticism merely an argument against its abuses, and thus, a justification of it? Why were women in America almost exclusively to be educated in certain of the fine arts—e.g., poetry, drawing, and music? Could farming, itself concerned mostly with yield, be subsumable in some sense under gardening? Why was music, perhaps the least useful of the fine arts, so important to Jefferson, given his obsession that that beauty is the most beautiful which can be put to aidful human use? If Jefferson thought that too much art was a concern for the jejune nation, why was Monticello almost tawdrily festooned with prints, paintings, busts, drawings, Native American artifacts, and other artistic items? Why did Jefferson, who was much enthusiastic about poetry as a youth, develop a distaste for it in later life?

The most singular question I pose is this. Was Jefferson's obsession that beauty itself be of some use in improving the human condition an albatross to his understanding of the fine arts, which were by definition to be appreciated for reasons other than their use, or was he in effect proposing a redefinition of Fine Arts—at least, for Americans?

My answer is that Jefferson, a man who, like Francis Bacon, was obsessed with the usefulness of knowledge, was interested in the fine arts only inasmuch as beauty could be coupled with utility. That beauty, for Jefferson, was the most beautiful which could be put to human use to better the human condition—e.g., to alleviate human suffering, increase the efficiency of production, and, most significantly, to stimulate moral improvement through reinforcing moral lessons. A tulip poplar, planted in the right location and trimmed of its lower branches, will in time not merely be a beautiful and towering tree, but will offer shade from the oppressive summer heat on a hot Virginian day for those who might wish to sit under it. A painting of a sleeping Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus after she helped him escape from the threat of the Minotaur, offers a lesson concerning the importance of fidelity in human relationships.

Thus, my thesis is that Jefferson's justification and personal cultivation of the fine arts were in effect "redefinitional"—that is, he was proposing a conception of fine arts that not only better fitted the American understanding of beauty, but also suggested a redefinition that better suited the nature of humans, and thus, globally appropriable. In sum, though the moral and aesthetic senses were for him functionally independent of each other, an appreciation of beauty that coupled itself with moral ends, one that was heterotelic, was much preferable to one that viewed beauty as its own end, one that was autotelic. One singular implication of Redefinitional Thesis is that it makes Jefferson through and through a critic of the fine arts—criticism included.

Here I note one oddity of the Redefinitional Thesis. That is Jefferson's Vitruvian tendency (chapter 5) not only to approach architecture but all the fine arts algorithmically—e.g., through principles of geometry or algebra, on especial display in "Thoughts on English Prosody" in chapter 2 and his design of Poplar Forest in chapter 5. Jefferson was fundamentally a mathematician who could see things, natural or artificial, only through the lens of numbers, figures, or equations.

As is my wont when writing on Jefferson, I often show a preference for quoting rather than paraphrasing him, which goes against the scholarly vogue. My reasons for that are two. First, scholars who paraphrase Jefferson often read into his words and wind up ascribing to Jefferson sentiments that he never articulated. That unfortunately happens all too frequently. Second and more importantly, Jefferson was well practiced in belle lettres, and I often consider it to be a signal injustice to place in my own words something Jefferson in his has expressed so eloquently. I shall try to eschew quotations of undue length.

Moreover, I have adopted the convention here, as in other publications, of labeling Jefferson's epistolary writings by reference only to his correspondent and to the date of the letter, if known, thereby giving readers the opportunity to refer to the edition of Jefferson's writings that is most readily available to them.¹⁰ Non-epistolary writings, in contrast, are fully referenced throughout this book.

Before closing, I would like to thank sincerely the two anonymous reviewers whose full and helpful comments have, I am certain, made this book much improved.

¹⁰ *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 42 Vols. (to date), ed. Julian Boyd, Charles T. Cullen, John Catanzariti, and Barbara B. Oberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950–) are readily accessible through *Founders Online*. There are also several one-volume compilations of Jefferson's writings—the best of which is Merrill D. Peterson's *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1984) and M. Andrew Holowchak's *The Scholar's Thomas Jefferson* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2021).

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