

WILEY



Is Wine an Art Object?

Author(s): William B. Fretter

Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971), pp. 97-100

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [The American Society for Aesthetics](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/429579>

Accessed: 11/11/2013 11:45

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Wiley and *The American Society for Aesthetics* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

WILLIAM B. FRETTER

Is Wine an Art Object?

IT IS COMMONLY SUPPOSED that the idea of taste is only a metaphor and can be applied chiefly to choices one makes in the arts of sight and sound. Taste itself, taste literally interpreted, is not supposed to perceive unities which are art works. Thus wines cannot be works of art. This I dispute.

I begin with some disclaimers and an acknowledgment. I do not intend to discuss the "art of making wine," or the "art of drinking wine"; nor shall I give advice about stocking a wine cellar or the virtues of an even temperature in a limestone cave; and I shall not write about the relative merits of California as compared with French or German wines.

Some years ago I bought a copy of Stephen Pepper's *The Work of Art*.¹ As a non-professional I found it fairly heavy going but yet rewarding. I had been interested in art and music for a long time, and had rather unsuccessfully made a quest for an understanding of greatness in music and art, partly to light me on my search for an understanding of greatness in scientific achievement and discovery. Pepper's book concerns itself more with an analysis of aesthetic communication than with the reasons why one artistic object is a masterpiece and another is not. The book as it describes the process of aesthetic communication creates a light of insight that intensifies on successive readings. What is a work of art? Can a judgment of beauty be true? The dynamics of the masterpiece, the control object, a ve-

hicle of aesthetic communication, and the concept of fusion are discussed in successive chapters.

Perhaps my comments on wine and its aesthetic qualities will illustrate in another way Pepper's ideas and will show that their applicability is not limited to painting, sculpture, music, and literature. Human beings have valued wine for thousands of years, as they have valued painting and sculpture, and the depiction throughout history of wine in paintings, drawings, and sculpture² provides beautiful illustrations of the interaction among these arts.

It is particularly important in the case of non-verbal aesthetic communication to be able to look at the object, or hear it, to look at pictures, or listen to a song or a flute or a record. Words are inadequate and particularly so for the aesthetic appreciation of wine. But the basic question is: can wine be considered as a work of art? Before I discuss this in terms of Pepper's question,³ What is a work of art? the question of particularity must be raised. We must consider a particular wine, in fact a particular glass of wine. Just as all paintings are not works of art, so all glasses of wine are not works of art. Paintings can be ordinary and inartistic, commercial music can be "musak," and wine too can be ordinary. Wine can be spoiled and too old, and paintings can be faded and deteriorated. Thus not all wine is art, any more than all painting or all music or all writing is art. Also some wine, while classifiable as art, is not as good as other wine.

Stephen Pepper discusses the work of art

WILLIAM B. FRETTER is professor in the physics department, University of California, Berkeley.

in terms of three objects: the vehicle, the object of immediate perception, and the object of criticism.⁴ In the case of a painting, the vehicle is probably a canvas with oil pigments spread upon it. It is "the instrument for the production, preservation, and control of the object of aesthetic worth." For wine, the vehicle is a mixture of water, alcohol, organic chemicals, and the pigments contained in a glass. The alcohol serves to preserve the rest of the wine and together with the water makes it possible for the observer to sense the qualities of the wine, just as the canvas holds the paint in the position the artist intended it to be and allows the observer to view the painting. The vehicle has in itself no aesthetic worth in either case, although the monetary worth may not be inconsiderable.

The object of immediate perception is described by Pepper as:

the experience a spectator has at any one time when stimulated by the vehicle. This is the object we see and feel and fill with meaning. It has a date and location. Many will set the location within our bodies. Definitely our bodies are much involved in the object of immediacy. Our sense organs, our eyes in this instance [a painting] give us the colors and the line and the shape; and our brains presumably give us the meaning of the represented objects dependent on learning and memory; and our endocrine systems presumably contribute to our emotion. Our bodies are involved in the perceptual response. The duration of an object of immediacy is a certain spread of time, the time that can be taken in intuitively at a single act of attention.⁵

For illustration Pepper uses the perception of a painting like Breughel's *Winter*, or of a statue which must be observed from all sides over a period of time. How does this apply to wine?

The object of immediate perception is first observed visually. We look at the wine in the glass for the character of its color, for its clarity, the degree of its viscosity, the pattern of the liquid on the inside of the glass above the wine, the gradations of color in the meniscus of the liquid, and the shape and color of the wine as it moves in the glass. The glass is analogous to the frame of a picture and should be consistent with the style and color of the wine in that a fine wine should be served in a beautiful glass, not in a water tumbler.

Next there is the wine's odor. Its aroma and bouquet are a complex of various odors: the smell of the fruit, of the alcohol, of the many organic compounds formed by the vine in the grape and by the winemaker in the processes of vinification and storage. The object of immediate perception depends also on the glass container, the temperature, and sometimes on the length of time the wine has been in the glass. But to appreciate wine as an aesthetic object, the sense of smell is essential.

The third sense used in connection with the object of immediate perception is that of taste. Like the smell of the wine, taste has many components, subtle differences in the development of the flavor caused by time and strong interactions among the olfactory sensations. Flavors may be complex, or simple, or distasteful, and the intensity of the flavor often determines whether or not it is acceptable.

Thus, as with painting and music, in a single perception of a work of art, we run into some unexpected complexities. What is usually called a single perception—say the first time one hears a musical composition or sees a picture—is already not one act of perceptual response but a succession of such acts. Yet somehow we obtain something of an integral perception of the work and of the series of perceptive immediacies.⁶

Finally, the full appreciation of the object of immediacy requires what aestheticians call "funding," which is the fusion of meanings from past experiences into a present experience.⁷ It implies memory of past experiences, of pictures seen, of symphonies or quartets heard, of books read, and of wines tasted. The experience of hearing a late quartet of Beethoven is enhanced if earlier one has heard it, or other late quartets, or early ones, or anything else Beethoven wrote. And the experience of tasting a Chambertin is enhanced if earlier one has tasted Chambertin, or Chambertin of another year or from another vineyard in Chambertin, or even a Gevrey-Chambertin from the region. Past experience is essential, and the continual renewing of the experience is desirable, especially where the memory of subtle flavors, odors, and colors is not always reliable.

We now come to the object of criticism,

the third of Pepper's objects following the vehicle and the object of immediate perception: "The object of criticism is the totality of relevant material based on the perceptions stimulated by an aesthetic vehicle It is the object perceived by a person who has become a competent spectator."⁸ Relevancy has two components: first, the direct stimulus, the sensory quality calling up a normal response. Wine should not taste like lemon juice, and it should not have even a strong component of lemon flavor. Nor should it taste like vinegar or smell like sulfur dioxide. Second, the internal components must be relevant to each other. A white wine should not have a strong tannin flavor, which is consistent with and relevant to the complex of flavors in a red wine. This concept of relevancy is similar to one invented in physics by R. T. Birge,⁹ that of internal consistency and external consistency of the data resulting from a scientific experiment.

A competent spectator, also, is needed to perceive the object of criticism. Competence implies discrimination, intelligence, and a certain cultural conditioning for the perception of a style of art or a type of wine. The competent spectator can observe internal consistency in a painting, the consistency of style, form, line, or representation. Consistency of style is particularly important in painting, music, or wine. A particular sweet wine may be considered a great wine, but sweetness is inconsistent in other styles of wine and is recognized by the competent spectator as undesirable. The development of sensory discrimination is thus essential in the education of the competent wine spectator. He notes whether or not the wine has the quality of aesthetic relevancy—internal consistency; flavors must not clash, colors must be consistent with odor and flavor, and all must be determined by fully funded impressions.

But can wine be beautiful? The aesthetic satisfaction gained from what Pepper calls the consummatory response with respect to the stimulating aesthetic vehicle determines whether or not we call the object beautiful. Experiences "controlled by the craftsmanship of artists through an aesthetic vehicle"¹⁰ give us aesthetic satisfaction and lead

us to call the object "beautiful." Saying a wine "is beautiful" implies that we find a fully funded aesthetic satisfaction. The wine-maker or the winegrower is a craftsman. He may also be an artist, but unless he is skilled at his craft, he will not produce a work of art. Control of the vehicle is as important in winemaking as it is in painting.

Is wine an abstract art? I suspect that most people will concede that abstract art can be beautiful. In a sense all art is abstract, and nonrepresentational art can be beautiful. A certain painting by Hans Hofmann, for instance, brings to my mind the thoughts and feelings I have when I taste a certain German wine of a type called *Trockenbeeren Auslesen* (literally, selected dry berries). It suggests farms or vineyards in autumn, ripe yellow wheat, sweet grapes, orange and red leaves, the richness of life. Both the painting and the German wine seem to abstract from a large accumulation of memories, perceptions, emotions, certain ones, and bring them together in relevance and internal consistency. Both give me great aesthetic satisfaction, and to me both are beautiful, abstract art. A fine champagne gives me the same feelings as the scherzo in Beethoven's string quartet in C sharp minor: in both cases a kind of practical joke seems to be played on the spectator. Both abstractly evoke internally consistent emotions, the components of the aesthetic vehicle being fully relevant.

Then there is the *control* by the wine-maker. He must be a craftsman; he must grow the vines properly, pick the grapes at the right time, vinify properly, and store the wine in appropriate containers. As he creates an object of abstract art, the wine-maker, like the abstract painter, also deals with accidental qualities. Each year the weather is different, or the vines grow old, or rain molds the grapes before they are picked (some of these contingent factors add desirable flavors). Somewhere there is the artist, however, who may be the wine-maker, or the proprietor, or the wineseller who insists on a certain type of wine. The artist chooses the basic components: the variety of grape and soil, the exposure to the sun, the type of barrel used, the age of the

bottling, and even to some extent the vinification process itself (e.g., the length of time the juice ferments on the skins of the grapes). The artist controls these factors whenever he can to produce the work of art he has conceived. The beauty of the wine is not like the beauty of an autumn leaf on the vine, or of vineyards on rolling hills, or of the girl who is always in the advertising posters picking the grapes. The beauty of wine is a controlled abstract beauty expressing the intentions of the artist.

To call the winemaker an artist is to pose practical problems. One rarely knows his name, but one can be sure that associated with every glass of great wine is an artist. Rarely does his name appear on the bottle. Usually it is necessary to visit the winery to ascertain his identity, and even then it may not be easy to do so because the true artist and the skilled craftsman in winemaking may not be the same person.

James Zellerbach was an artist of a California wine. He made a wine he wanted to be similar to, but distinct from, a great French white burgundy, Montrachet. He studied the components necessary to such a wine, hired a competent winemaker, bought grapes from growers in the best parts of California, and imported barrels made from oak grown in the region of Limousin, in France. With these materials he produced his work of art, a rich white wine made from Pinot Chardonnay grapes. It was stored in the barrels long enough to acquire a slightly oaky taste. Its color is pale, the wine is clear. The color is consistent, a part of the beauty of the wine, but is not itself beautiful. The bouquet is strong and characteristic of the Chardonnay grape having a touch of oak. The taste of the wine is consistent with the bouquet; it is rich and heavy in body, as a white burgundy should be, but it has a flowery aroma that distinguishes it from other French burgundies. The aromas of French white burgundies also differ from each other within the type: the point is to make a wine characteristic of the type but distinguishable in itself. It is a beautiful wine, a great success. James Zellerbach is dead and his wines and

winery are dispersed, but in this wine he exhibited artistry.

The second wine I should like to mention is a French red burgundy from Chambertin made in 1959, a great year in Burgundy. The artist in this case was Ronald Avery, a wine merchant in Bristol, England. His conception of what a Chambertin should be is fully achieved in this wine. Made of Pinot Noir grapes of the type that produce a heavy-bodied wine, this wine on Avery's insistence was produced from grapes picked late in the year, sugar possibly being added. The wine is a dark purple, perfectly clear, slightly brownish where the wine meets the glass, and streaks of glycerine stream down the glass after it is swirled. The bouquet is strong and rich in the Pinot character, and in the mouth it is unctuous, rich, not very acid, enough tannin giving it good balance. A wine that matured early, it is in contrast with another Chambertin from the same year that is still not quite ready to drink. It is a typical Avery burgundy within the Chambertin type.

I do not hesitate to call these wines beautiful. They give me maximum aesthetic satisfaction. They are complex and rich in the varieties of sensual impressions they make. As abstract art, they bring to the spectator a stimulus that evokes in him emotions and thought according to his previous experiences and inclinations. And for full appreciation they require a competent observer who can fuse the meanings of past experiences into a present experience. They illustrate what Stephen Pepper means when he defines a work of art.

¹ Stephen C. Pepper, *The Work of Art* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1955).

² Edward Hyams, *Dionysus* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

³ Pepper, chap. 1.

⁴ Pepper, p. 16.

⁵ Pepper, p. 17.

⁶ Pepper, p. 19.

⁷ Pepper, p. 21.

⁸ Pepper, pp. 37, 38.

⁹ R. T. Birge, *Physical Review* 40 (1932): 207.

¹⁰ Pepper, p. 66.