Aesthetics, sometimes called “the philosophy of art,” is a branch of philosophy concerned with questions relating to art and natural beauty. Aesthetics is especially concerned with how the art critic, the art educator, the art historian, and the ordinary person think and talk about art and beauty, and the conceptual problems which arise out of this kind of talk—problems surrounding the meaning of words like “imitation,” “representation,” “expression,” “form and content,” “style,” and “art” itself. What exactly do we mean when we say that a work of art “expresses” the feelings of the artist? Does this mean a child throwing a tantrum should be considered a work of art? What do we mean when we say that Duchamp’s *Fountain* (an ordinary urinal taken from a men’s room) is a “work of art”? Or when we call John Cage’s “4:33” (four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence) a piece of “music”? When an art critic says that one work of art is better than another, how do we know this is true? (How does the art critic know this?) What reasons does the critic offer and how well do these reasons support her verdict? Are beauty and artistic taste objective? Can there be any right or wrong when it comes to art appreciation? These are the kinds of questions aesthetics is concerned with.

Aesthetics is a relatively recent addition to philosophy, not appearing as something called “aesthetics” until the eighteenth century (as opposed to most other branches of philosophy which arose some two thousand years earlier, around 600 B.C.E.). Nonetheless, we find that earlier philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, discussed many issues that later became classified within “aesthetics,” and we usually include this sort of “aesthetics before aesthetics” in our history of aesthetics.

Most of the history of aesthetics has been concerned with answering the question, what is the nature of aesthetic experienced? That is, what is our experience of art and beauty like and how does it differ from other sorts of experience? During the last half of the twentieth century, however, attention shifted away from questions of natural beauty to human-made works of
art, and some aestheticians have even suggested that there is no “aesthetic experience,” that is, nothing peculiar to our experience of works of art and natural beauty.

**Suggested Further Reading**


