Describing Aesthetic Experience: Creating a Model

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As part of a large research project on visitors' response to and benefits from museum experiences, this study considered different paradigms of aesthetic experience. Applying various models, it analyzed transcripts of adults' remarks during their visit to a fine arts museum. Three of the models are empirical, and two come from a developmental perspective. Research shows that age and exposure to art are significant factors in aesthetic response. A fourth, theoretical model charts individuals' sequences of responses. Having assessed these models, I propose an alternative model that incorporates some features of the theoretical model into the empirically constructed ones.

S'inscrivant dans une vaste recherche sur la réaction des visiteurs à des expériences muséales et les avantages qu'ils en retirent, cette étude a porté sur divers paradigmes d'expérience esthétique. À l'aide de divers modèles, j'ai analysé les propos d'adultes en visite dans un musée des beaux-arts. Trois des modèles sont empiriques et deux sont issus d'une perspective développementale. La recherche démontre que l'âge et les contacts avec l'art jouent un rôle important dans la réponse esthétique. Un quatrième modèle, théorique, permet d'établir les séquences de réponses des visiteurs. Après avoir évalué ces modèles, j'en propose un autre, qui intègre certaines caractéristiques du modèle théorique.

Recently, art educationists have shown interest in revising the art curriculum in Quebec (ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 1981), in the United States (*Beyond Creating: A Place For Art in America's Schools*, 1985), and in the British Isles (*The Arts in the Schools*, 1982). These proposals call for an extended art curriculum including art history and aesthetics as well as art making.

Earlier research in art education emphasized development as shown in children's drawing and painting. Lowenfeld (1947) proposed stages of graphic development linked to Piaget's stages of cognitive development. However, not much research has been carried out on how people respond to works of art. A more recent conception of art teaching relies on new models of curricula and new models of behaviour: specifically, art curricula should embody not only the model of working artist but also that of art historian, art critic, and aesthetician. This is referred to as "Discipline Based Art Education" in the United States (Smith, 1989). This recent shift of emphasis

to responding to art as well as to art making, raises the questions of what constitutes an aesthetic experience, whether there is a similar developmental sequence in aesthetic response as in graphic development, and what the factors are that influence change when it occurs.

During research on adult visitors' responses in different museum settings, I had access to transcripts of adults' remarks during their visits to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. These data contributed to the attainment of one of the goals outlined above—to investigate the constituents of an aesthetic experience. The aim of this paper is to review models of aesthetic experience in the literature, to assess the application of these models to this research, and to propose an alternative model based on the results of the assessment.

PARSONS' MODEL

For some time, Parsons (1986) has been trying to account developmentally for viewers' aesthetic responses, but without leaning too heavily on Piaget's cognitive theory or on Kohlberg's moral development theory. He proposes that the arts are *sui generis* and do not need another discipline to explain them. He bases his theory on the writings of such philosophers as Habermas, who has suggested that each of moral, empirical, and aesthetic areas constitutes a domain with its own developmental history. Parsons states that his aesthetic model is normatively oriented, each response level showing an understanding of art that is "of increasing adequacy" (p. 109). He defines an aesthetic response as one in which cognition and emotion are "intricately related" (p. 108). However, he has chosen to emphasize cognition because "cognitions give shape to emotions and for that reason are the better focus for developmental analysis" (p. 108). Parsons also uses cognition to mean a kind of thinking in the arts different from the empirical or scientific cognition of Piaget. He does not define an aesthetic response in its totality; he is concerned to elicit responses to selected topics he thinks important in aesthetic experience.

Parsons interviewed children in grades 1 to 12, questioning them on these selected topics. Their responses were then analyzed according to sense units and assigned to certain developmental levels. The topics he investigated were Semblance, Subject Matter, Feelings, Colour, Artist's Properties, and Judgement. Based on this material, he identified five stages of aesthetic development:

Favouritism, where paintings are experienced as direct stimuli of pleasure, particularly their colour and subject matter.

Subject, where realism of the subject is the important consideration. Certain subjects are rejected on idiosyncratic moral grounds.

Expression, where paintings are understood as metaphors for ideas and emotions and are valued for the emotions they inspire. A distinction is made between the viewer's feelings and those in the painting.

Medium/form/style, where consideration of the artist's intent is important. Style is a carrier of historical thought and feeling and has public significance. Knowledge of these is more important than the feelings evoked.

Judgment, where the personal meaning a painting elicits is weighed within the tradition to which it belongs. This is an ongoing process of testing the values of society and those of the viewer.

It was not possible to use those categories since the material collected at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts was gathered in a non-interventionist way, and since some of them were not broached by the visitors. Also, his research was developmental and so lies somewhat outside the aim of this study. Nevertheless, Parsons' research has opened new avenues for thinking about aesthetic response and has proved valuable in developing a philosophical-psychological theory. In this study, his model is used to develop categories of thought about aesthetic experience.

HOUSEN'S MODEL

Housen (1983) was dissatisfied with the methodologies of previous researchers as they used preselected questions on issues the researcher found interesting or relevant while ignoring other data. Thus she used a stream-of-consciousness interview technique designed to elicit the totality of the participant's aesthetic experience, hoping that spontaneous affective and cognitive categories would emerge. Housen developed a scoring manual for aesthetic response based on the categories that emerged during her research. She identified 9 domains, that is, modes of response, and 62 issues indicating either a different topic or a different level of complexity of response within a domain.

In her study, participants aged from 14 to 62 years were asked to respond freely and to associate ideas while they looked at reproductions of art works. These responses were analyzed to identify categories of thought that would reveal the complex and multiple levels of response "within the context of a growing and developing mind" (p. 3). Thus, Housen identified five stages of aesthetic development:

1. *Accountive.* The viewer is egocentric. (Deals with what is in the work of art.)

2. *Constructive.* The viewer is aware of language of art but has no theoretical framework. (Interest is in how it was made.)

3. *Classifying.* The viewer has theory and decodes according to knowledge. (Deals with who and why.)

4. *Reflective.* The viewer searches for symbols to support emotional reactions. (Deals with the self in relation to art work.)

5. *Re-creative.* The viewer integrates all previous levels. (Searches for problems and offers own solution.)

TABLE 1

*Housen's Model**

Domains	*Issues*
Observation	1. randomly of objects, colour, and people 2. generally of colours, sizes 3. of reality based on personal criteria 4. of photographic realism 5. of similar groups 6. of particular aspects of things 7. of formal elements, and placement 8. of relationships between formal elements 9. of cognitive effect on viewer 10. of affective effect on viewer 11. of animism in the work 12. of junction of affect in viewer and work
Preference	1. based on general preference 2. based on random preference 3. based on idiosyncratic criteria 4. based on skill, technique 5. based on the interrelation of formal elements 6. based on meaning or concept in work 7. based on viewer satisfaction with formal elements
Association	1. random, idiosyncratic 2. personal recollection 3. personal aesthetic history 4. public domain 5. with art history facts 6. feelings in viewer's past 7. universal feelings 8. universal conditions 9. "in-dwelling" state 10. empathy with work/identification
Evaluation	Based on criteria that are: 1. personal and idiosyncratic 2. related to proficiency of artist 3. related to a single formal element 4. related to interaction of several formal elements 5. of meaning of the work 6. of emotional response to work

TABLE 1 *(continued)*

Domains	*Issues*
Comprehension	1. positive and negative comments about self-worth 2. positive and negative comments about understanding
Questioning	1. about presence or absence of elements 2. about technique of artist 3. about function of elements 4. about rhetorical question to listener 5. about progress of interview 6. about underlying message
Assertion	1. about uncontestable personal opinion 2. about perceived reality 3. about a single formal element 4. about formal analysis and summarization 5. about aesthetic history of viewer 6. about meaning of work 7. about what will happen in work
Comparison	1. general, like/unlike, same/different 2. of a single element 3. of several properties of a category 4. of paradoxes or dichotomies 5. complex contrasts 6. work and classifications outside of it 7. different meanings and interpretations 8. of feelings created by different parts of work
Interpretation	1. how the work signifies 2. of significance of objects in work 3. of suppositions about contrasting elements 4. based on integrating metaphoric observations

*Note: Summary of Housen's scoring manual headings, 1983

When Housen's scoring manual was used to analyze visitors' remarks during their visit to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, it was reasonably easy to place their comments in appropriate domains (see Table 1), as the deconstruction of the statements is based on a semantical structure. For example, the comments beginning with "I see/note . . ." belong to the Observation domain, those starting with "I like/prefer . . ." to the Preference domain, and so on. However, comments that were not stated in a clear

grammatical form and which ranged over many concepts and feelings were hard to classify as to domain or issues. Pulling these types of comments apart seemed to lose the totality and sense of what was meant by the person and, it can be contended, was at variance with Housen's stated intent to examine the whole of the aesthetic experience.

The scoring manual is open to criticism since it fails to show a phase of response indicating that the viewer is in a state of identification with the work of art. In the material I studied, this state is marked by pauses, difficulty in finding the right words, and often a feeling of joy. After passing through this state, the viewer is ready to make statements and ask questions. An example of this would be:

> [silence 12 sec.] Hum! Des petites couleurs claires . . . très joli! . . . Ça donne . . . euh . . . il me semble que j'entends les sons de cloches de vaches. (*Extraits de propos de 90 visiteurs adultes au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal,* 1989)

Here we can see the pause, an observation, an incoherence, and only then a statement about being present in the work, hearing sounds as well as seeing forms.

It can be argued that Housen's five-stage developmental model is essentially an hierachical one with the implication that the Recreative stage is the final and best one. In her study, viewers come to terms with feelings they have about the work, understand the rules of style and form, but feel free to disregard these rules and to recreate their own versions. Although only mature viewers, well informed about art, and connaisseurs of museums achieved this level of response in Housen's research, this model somehow misses an important point about aesthetic experience. Although we can only respond to an art work with the material we bring to the encounter, apparently naïve viewers can also have rich and fulfilling experiences to the extent of their potential and their openness to art. These viewers do show a lack of formal knowledge about art and are often painfully aware of this:

> Je me demandais que c'est qu'elle faisait là, elle, là, cette toile-là, t'sais . . . c'est parce qu'il doit y avoir quelque chose, hein? . . . que moi je ne peux pas . . . je ne peux pas voir, que je ne détecte pas . . . je suis ignorant par rapport à l'art . . . [*sic*] (*Extraits de propos de 90 visiteurs adultes au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal,* 1989)

Nonetheless they are experiencing an aesthetic response. By contrast, Housen's model tends to support the view that responding to works of art in a meaningful way is possible only for an educated and knowlegeable élite.

HORNER'S MODEL

Moving away from empirically-defined models of aesthetic experience, we turn to a theoretical model that describes the different levels of response a viewer might experience while involved with a work of art. Horner (1988) was

interested in describing the specific and idiosyncratic response of the individual rather than in proposing a developmental model. His theory is in the Post-Modernist tradition that argues that aesthetic experience should focus on discovering what the viewer brings to the experience as well as what the viewer can discover about the fixed meanings embedded in the work of art. "Meaning does not pre-exist in art works; nor does it pre-exist in a viewer; . . . response comes to life within the inner image-outer image fusion" (p. 4). Horner sought to trace the experience of the individual person when faced with a work of art; his is not a normative model. He has developed an eight-phase theoretical model based on the writings of Husserl (1964) and Winnicott (1971). This model (see Table 2) differs from others in its stress on a phase of identification with the work of art in order to achieve a balanced and integrated response.

Horner suggests that the aesthetic experience offers the viewer greater self-understanding by eliciting personal, subjective, and internal responses. This is an important step in order to arrive at commitment and involvment with the work of art. The initial step of this contemplative approach is one of letting oneself go, of entering into a state of fusion or identification with the art work. After this has occurred, the viewer is able to reflect on the experience, to recall issues that were of interest or repugnance, to think about the experience, and to propose any changes. These comprise the subjective or internal phases. After the subjective phase is over, the viewer can deal with the art object from an historical, cultural, or social perspective. But this external phase is grounded clearly and firmly in an understanding about where the viewer stands emotionally and psychologically with regard to the work of art.

TABLE 2
Horner's Model

	Internal
Forgetting	entering into a fusion/dialogue with art work
Remembering	recalling the journey into the work
Reflecting	thinking about the whys of the journey
Revealing	becoming aware of one's desires, fears
	External
Describing	decontextualizing the parts of the work
Structuring	noting the patterns of space and time
Interpreting	becoming aware of the social discourse
Retro-activating	assessing the experience contextually

Horner's model of the different levels of aesthetic response is such that he has suggested that one might be able to plot it onto a theory of human development, as his model "makes an implicit proposal that a paradigm of child development and a paradigm of developmental responding can be mapped onto each other" (p. 5). However, his main concern was to describe the different phases of the "responding dialogue." It is important to note that these phases of response deal with an aesthetic experience in a time-and-space sequence. A viewer might move through all of these if so inclined. Thus, the verbalizations are a record of that person's aesthetic journey at that particular time. It should also be kept in mind that a person might make a different journey at different times because of different choices or circumstances.

DUFRESNE-TASSÉ'S MODEL

As a preliminary step to building a model of aesthetic response, Dufresne-Tassé's research team identified certain operations that visitors perform while talking about their experience while looking at an object.

TABLE 3

Dufresne-Tassé's Model

Operational verb	*Cognition*	*Emotion*	*Imagination*
to manifest	—	*	*
to note, to state	*	*	*
to identify	*	—	—
to recall	*	*	*
to associate	*	*	*
to compare	*	*	*
to comprehend	*	*	*
to justify, to explain	*	*	*
to resolve problems	*	—	—
to situate oneself	*	—	*
to verify	*	—	*
to evaluate	*	—	*
to suggest improvements, different usage in museum	*	*	—

* Operation used by the visitor
— Operation not used by the visitor

These operations are represented by a series of verbs. These verbs, drawn from the transcripts of what adults said during a museum visit, cover three domains of the visitor experience: cognition (rationnel), emotion (affectivo-émotif) and imagination (imaginaire). The domain of cognition is one where the logical, rational, and cognitive powers of the brain are used; the domain of feelings and emotions is the affective and emotive one; the domain of imagination is that of invention, memories, and fantasy—imagination being the capacity not only to reproduce but also to create new connections. The grid in Table 3 shows how these operational verbs manifest themselves in the three domains of fact, feeling, and imagination according to the findings to date.

It is possible to see similarities between Housen's categories of thought and the model of Dufresne-Tassé's research team. By re-organizing Housen's issues as in Table 4, we can see that there is a correspondence, and points of interest emerge. First, there is great similarity between Dufresne-Tassé's operational verbs and Housen's domains of thought. Second, there are operational verbs that do not correspond. Unlike Housen's domains, Dufresne-Tassé's verbs can deal with activities in which the viewer is orienting herself in relation to the work of art and in which other solutions are being offered to a perceived problem, new links, usages, and elements are being made, or new insight may perhaps be gained. Third, neither of these two models gives place to the non-verbal state of identification or fusion proposed by Horner and found in our transcripts.

TABLE 4

Housen's Issues Grouped According to Dufresne-Tassé's Domains

	Dufresne-Tassé's domains		
Housen's domains	*Cognition*	*Emotion*	*Imagination*
Observation	1,2,3,7	4,6,8,9,11	10,12
Preference	4,5	3	1,2,6,7
Association	4,5	1,2,3,9	6,7,8,10
Evaluation	2,3,4	5,1	6
Comprehension	2	—	1
Questioning	1,2,3,4,5	6	—
Assertion	1,3,4,5	2,6,7	—
Comparison	2,3,5	4,6,7	1,8
Interpretation	1,2,3	—	4

Note: Numbers refer to issues within domains identified in Table 1.

FAIRCHILD'S MODEL

None of the preceding models was suitable for analyzing the research data from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, as some of the subjects' statements—specifically, those arising from the state of identification discussed earlier—did not fit. But adding a preliminary state to the model above resolves much of the disjunction. This preliminary state can be the one suggested by Horner, where the viewer is in a state of fusion with the work of art. Often this state is initially non-verbal, then encompasses a searching for words to express emotions. Table 5 offers an expanded alternative model for describing the experience of a visitor looking at a work of art, a model that would not only analyze the verbal expressions but also describe the sequence of responses and viewer's psychological distance from the work of art. This model uses the same operational verbs (or their synonyms) as does Dufresne-Tassé's, and the phases correspond to Housen's domains but here are linked to modes of response suggested by Horner and are sequentially ordered. Each researcher essentially organized a different part of the aesthetic response: Horner, psychological states; Housen, categories of speech; and Dufresne-Tassé, operations the visitor performed while looking at an object. My model additionally includes the modes of response, which serve to regroup all the material produced by the visitor.

Modes of response were originally studied in a pilot project (Horner, Sherman, & Fairchild, 1986) at three different types of museum (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, McCord Museum, and Maison de la Culture). The objectives were to identify the expectations and psychological approaches visitors used to appropriate meaning in a museum visit. The theory was based on the work of a social geographer, Annis (1980), who suggested that museums provide for their visitors a symbolic space in which to act in a variety of ways. This pilot project identified four different modes of response: Dream, Play, Metaphor, and Concept.

The first, the Dream State, encompasses the levels of identification with the art object (forgetting), remembering, and reflecting on this identification. In this mode, the viewer experiences directly the art object. There are pauses and an incoherence, a searching for right words, a sorting through of memories, and a recalling of the experience that one has undergone. This mode of identification can be recovered from the transcripts:

> C'est comme je sais où je serais bien, comme t'ai dit, là, être Fanfreluche, rentrer dans le tableau . . . euh . . . juste pour aller m'effoirer dans l'herbe pis . . . relaxer . . .
>
> Ça j'aime . . . Ça m'a fait des petites émotions et euh . . . tous ceux qui ont de la luminosité ça me . . . fait "Ting" je ne sais pas comment dire, là . . .
>
> Mais il y a une espèce de magie qui se produit qui fait que ça m'éveille ou ça m'attire, ça me . . . je ne peux pas expliquer c'est quoi là, mais c'est . . . comme très irrationnel peut-être, fait qu'il y a comme pas des mots . . .
>
> . . . c'est j'aime, . . . j'aime ça . . . j'en aurais partout des styles de tableaux très lumineux comme ça . . . [*sic*] (*Extraits de propos de 90 visiteurs adultes au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal*, 1989)

TABLE 5
Fairchild's Model

Modes	*Phases*	*Operational verbs*
Dream	Forgetting	to fuse with to orient oneself to show feeling to manifest emotion
	Remembering	to like, to dislike to recall to note to associate to state to identify
	Reflecting	to separate from to differentiate to be aware of
Play	Self-revelation	to note significance to re-order to change signifier to modify to invent
Metaphor	Describing	to note, to describe to associate meaning to deconstruct to note symbols
	Structuring	to order to map to structure to categorize to compare
	Interpreting	to explain to discourse to grasp meaning to infer meaning
Concept	Assessing	to judge to evaluate to critique to assess

This viewer speaks of a desire to enter the work of art like Fanfreluche (a TV character) and to relax by sitting on the grass. She recognizes a feeling evoked by the luminosity of the painting, a feeling of "Ting," and she has difficulty finding words to explain this. She ends by realizing something about herself, that she would have luminous paintings everywhere because she loves them.

The Play State is one wherein the viewer can, in a spirit of play, suggest other versions, solutions, or variations of the work of art. These changes bring about a self-knowledge, a revelation of what the viewer is like and what she values.

Ça donne la . . . la possibilité de voir plein de choses pis à la fois, euh . . . on . . . on personnifie le tableau . . . [silence 11 sec.] c'est comme plein de choses que je ne connaissais pas encore, là . . . je découvre . . . oui! au niveau, euh, . . . ben au niveau peut-être de moi, mes goûts face aux peintures . . . [*sic*] (*Extraits de propos de 90 visiteurs adultes au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal,* 1989)

The Metaphor State is a way of being external to the experience. The viewer looks at the work of art and now connects it to her world of knowledge about art. By describing perceived forms, colours, and symbols, and by building theories that explain the work according to her knowledge of art history, styles, and visual language, the viewer places the aesthetic experience in a cognitive context.

Ah, oui! Ça je connais! [silence 6 sec.] . . . Adrien Herbert . . . J'ai travaillé avec ça dans un de mes . . . un stage que j'ai fait avec des reproductions de Boulerice . . . Ça je me suis toujours demandé: quel est le fond de ces oeuvres-là? Pourquoi ils font ça? . . . Hum . . . comme . . . des coups de pinceau blancs, c'est joli, là, comme coup d'oeil, j'imagine dans un grand hall ou quelque chose du genre c'est superbe! Quel est le but, la mode derrière tout ça? [*sic*] (*Extraits de propos de 90 visiteurs adultes au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal,* 1989)

The viewer shows a memory of past involvement with works of art, a questioning about the artist's intention, a noting of the formal qualities of the painting, and an evaluation followed by a questioning about styles and fashion in art.

The last mode of the experience, the Concept State, brings closure to the experience. The viewer now reviews the whole experience and makes an assessment. This is much more than the liking and disliking of the Dream State, as it is based on all the previous states that the viewer has undergone. The final evaluation may override an initial dislike because of cognitive information. Or the viewer may decide that, in spite of all the information from external sources, she still does not feel that the work is successful, meaningful, or important:

C'est trop statique . . . trop photo, là . . . Ce qui est bien de voir c'est les costumes . . .

Moi j'aime pas trop cette peinture, c'est pas trop eh . . . Ça fait en même temps naïf et en même temps je trouve que c'est dur et c'est des faux visages d'enfants . . . [*sic*] (*Extraits de propos de 90 visiteurs adultes au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal,* 1989)

In effect, one can use this model to chart a visitor's individual aesthetic response through a temporal sequence. It allows the researcher to note whether a person begins at a conceptual level and stays there, or whether there is first a level of fusion and openness, then revelation, and so on. The emphasis is on understanding what an aesthetic experience is for an individual viewer and what the viewer brings to the experience that affects her understanding of the work.

The addition of modes of response to the existing models allows greater understanding of the variety of psychological stances that viewers bring to the experience of looking at art objects. Not all viewers will necessarily move through all the modes at any one time. However, it is important for our understanding of the aesthetic experience to note what possibilities exist and which are favoured by viewers. This will lead to further questions about what correlations can be made between modes of aesthetic response and other factors such as age, education, and exposure to museums.

So the model proposed integrates all the aspects of the models reviewed in this article that were found to be useful in dealing with the comments of visitors looking at art objects. In addition, it contains an element missing in the others.

SUMMARY

One aim of this article was to review some models of aesthetic response that described how museum visitors respond to and benefit from their museum visits. This necessitated identifying and describing viewers' experiences when faced with a work of art, and developing a grid that would yield a model of aesthetic experience. Transcripts of several viewers' spontaneous responses were initially analyzed according to certain models suggested by Parsons and Housen. But, as these models of aesthetic experience tended to be organized in a developmental fashion, certain difficulties that arose with the application of each model made it necessary to develop a new and more comprehensive one.

The suggested new model incorporates major qualities from previous models: in essence, it not only shows Dufresne-Tassé's operational verbs and Housen's domains (phases of response), but also links them to Horner's modes of response. The model proves helpful in analyzing the transcribed interviews of the experience of museum visitors and places the elements identified in a useful interpretive perspective. It provides a better understanding of the aesthetic experience so that museum educators and curators can plan their activities to take into consideration viewers' different modes of response. Finally, the model also provides a context in which to explain

those immanent feelings about art that have often been described in philosophy but rarely in research.

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