

Aethics

On aesthetic testimony, aesthetic virtue, and
the moral duties of aesthetic experts

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Abstract

Although gaining knowledge through experts' testimony is unproblematic in most epistemic domains, the status of aesthetic experts and aesthetic testimony is puzzling. In fact, aesthetic agents who form aesthetic judgements based only on experts' testimony seem to lack substantial skills. This paper maintains that while aesthetic testimony and aesthetic experts are not problematic per se, aesthetic virtue requires agents to grasp the reasons that make an artwork beautiful. Furthermore, this paper re-conceptualizes the role of aesthetic experts by assigning them certain moral responsibilities. I end the paper by arguing that this reconceptualization has important consequences for how we conceive of the role and duties of museum workers as well as on the debates over the colonial heritage held in museums.

I hereby declare and assure that I, Ilaria Flisi, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works - including electronic media - have been identified and the sources clearly stated.

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Introduction

Imagine living in a post-pandemic world, one in which travelling and visiting museums are normal activities again. Moved by your all-consuming passion for Italian Renaissance, you decide to visit The Uffizi Galleries in the hope of admiring the works of Sandro Botticelli. You take with you one of your favorite books on this topic, *Botticelli* written by Barbara Deimling, a scholar specialized in Italian Renaissance, in the hope of finally reading her words – where art historical explanations and aesthetic judgments follow one another – in front of the artworks. There is one particular artwork that you hope to see, the *Madonna of the Rose Garden*. You move from one room to the next marveling at the breathtaking masterworks but, when you finally arrive at the room where the *Madonna* is supposed to be, you find an empty wall.

In fact, Botticelli's panel has been lent – together with over forty other artworks – by the Florentine museum to the Hong Kong Museum of Art for the exhibition *Botticelli and His Times*. Albeit rather disappointed, you read Deimling's explanations and judgments while picturing in your head how beautiful the *Madonna* is. At the end of the visit, you describe your aesthetic experience to a friend of yours who was waiting for you in Piazza della Signoria. You look at him and exclaim, "You really did miss something! The *Madonna of the Rose Garden* was truly beautiful!"

Are you justified in claiming that Botticelli's artwork is beautiful based only on the aesthetic testimony of an aesthetic expert? Is there even such a thing as aesthetic expertise anyway?

The idea that there are aesthetic experts seems obvious and bizarre at the same time. On the one hand, we are aware that curators, art critics and art historians have a more extensive and detailed aesthetic knowledge (i.e., knowledge about art – where this typically includes lots of art historical knowledge – and about specific artworks and artists) than our own. On the other hand, we feel some sort of discomfort when one claims

that Botticelli's *Madonna* is beautiful without having seen it oneself but because an art critic or an art historian said so.

In this paper, I will argue that aesthetic experts do exist but that their role should be re-conceptualized so as to include certain moral duties. More specifically, and against those accounts that discount the role of aesthetic testimony entirely (Meskin, 2007; Hopkins, 2011), I will defend a view according to which acquiring aesthetic knowledge through testimony is not per se problematic. However, to be virtuous aesthetic agents and to make good aesthetic judgments we need something more than aesthetic knowledge.¹ What we need is aesthetic understanding, which – unlike knowledge – cannot be directly transmitted through testimony (Hills, 2020; Nguyen, 2020).

Aesthetic understanding needs lots of practice and training (and some mistakes along the way) because it includes a set of abilities difficult to master. Hence, aesthetic understanding comes in degrees. Some agents are still aesthetically immature, others master certain skills but not all of them and others have full aesthetic understanding, which marks aesthetic maturity and aesthetic virtue.

The fact that aesthetic understanding requires training and practice means that we also need people who are able to educate and guide us. Typically, these people are aesthetic experts, whose aesthetic testimony we should use as a jumping-off point and as a guide – not as a substitute – for developing and acquiring aesthetic understanding.

As we will see, aesthetic understanding is an important component of aesthetic virtue, which Alison Hills claims to be fundamentally similar to – yet distinct from – moral virtue. I will argue that the link between aesthetics and ethics is much stronger than Hills has been willing to concede. In fact, aesthetic and moral virtue are not just structurally similar, they also enter into each other's territory and even contribute to each other's growth and expansion. Acknowledging this stronger link

¹ One could wonder, along David Enoch's lines, why we should care about being aesthetic agents, let alone virtuous ones. Perhaps there are people out there who are happy to be "shmagents" (Enoch, 2006), and are not interested in being either agents or virtuous. This is indeed a relevant question but one I cannot hope to address here. A few convincing answers (mostly about agency) have, however, been given by Carla Bagnoli (2013), Christine M. Korsgaard (1989; 2009), and J. David Velleman (2009). For an overview of Korsgaard and Velleman's positions, see also Caroline T. Arruda (2016).

between aesthetics and ethics helps us to re-conceptualize the role of aesthetic experts by assigning them certain moral duties and responsibilities.

We stand in need of an account of aesthetic expertise that acknowledges the importance of aesthetic experts in our aesthetic lives but helps us to discriminate between good and bad aesthetic experts, and assigns them some (moral) responsibilities and duties. This paper aims to do just that.

The paper consists of three sections. Section 1 will provide an overview of so-called pessimistic positions (that is, a cluster of views that ranges from discounting aesthetic testimony entirely to acknowledging its value but also its limits) about aesthetic testimony. In section 2, I will argue in favor of a moderate version of pessimism. I will then explain the difference between aesthetic knowledge and understanding, and show why aesthetic understanding is a fundamental component of aesthetic virtue. At the end of section 2, I will part ways with Hills and explore the implications of structuring aesthetic virtue on a parallel with moral virtue. This will lead me to create a much stronger link between the two sets of virtue. As I will argue in section 3, a stronger link between aesthetics and ethics will help us to re-conceptualize the role of aesthetic experts by assigning them a few moral duties.

1. Aesthetic Testimony

Recalling the example of *The Madonna of the Rose Garden*, the resistance to considering our aesthetic judgment that Botticelli's panel is beautiful justified is explained not only by the fact that our judgement is based on an aesthetic expert's testimony, but also by the further observation that it is *only* based on the expert's testimony. We have not had first-hand experience with the artwork. Our aesthetic judgment rests only on the trust we put on the testimony of Barbara Deimling, the aesthetic expert of my example.² Part of the discomfort we feel towards aesthetic experts comes from a more general discomfort towards aesthetic testimony as such. Therefore, this first section will explore the debate on whether aesthetic testimony is a reliable source of aesthetic knowledge at all.

² In this paper, I will use an everyday definition of expertise, according to which an expert is a person who is competent about a specific field or topic and who is trustworthy (Fricker E., 2006; Fricker M., 2011).

Aaron Meskin defines aesthetic testimony as “formal and informal testimony about the beauty, aesthetic value, artistic value, etc., of objects” and as consisting “in the expression of evaluative aesthetic judgments” (Meskin, 2004, p. 69). Thus, expressions such as “This is beautiful”, “That is tacky” count as forms of aesthetic testimony.

Aesthetic testimony can be pure or impure. Aesthetic testimony is pure when the person who gives the testimony does not provide arguments or reasons in support of her claim. Aesthetic testimony is impure when arguments and reasons are provided (Elgin, 2002, p. 291; Hills, 2013, p. 552; Lord, 2016, p. 2; Hills, 2020, p. 5).

Many scholars claim that while in most domains testimony is a reliable source of knowledge, the status of aesthetic testimony is puzzling. In fact, while we seem to be quick to accept testimony on non-aesthetic topics, we are more resistant when it comes to aesthetic matters (Meskin, 2004, 2007; Laetz, 2008; Robson, 2012; Hills, 2013; Hills, 2020; Nguyen, 2020). Think of ordinary situations, such as going to a doctor’s appointment or asking for directions. The majority of people would say that we are justified in accepting our doctor’s testimony when she tells us that we need an antibiotic to treat cystitis. We tend to trust the passerby who tells us that the nice bookshop we are looking for is at the end of the street on the left. On the contrary, while a friend’s testimony that *Please Like Me* is a good series might motivate us to watch it, we generally think that we should watch it ourselves in order to be justified in claiming that it is an excellent series.

For the sake of clarity, and following a division widely accepted in the debate on aesthetic testimony, I will divide the positions on acquiring aesthetic knowledge through testimony into two branches, optimism and pessimism (Hopkins, 2011; Robson, 2012). Before proceeding, it is important to point out that aesthetic testimony shares its puzzling status with other forms of testimony. In fact, moral testimony generates the very same worries as aesthetic testimony.³ For this reason, the debate about

³ Jon Robson extends this to mathematic testimony too (Robson, 2012). I think that an important difference between mathematic testimony and aesthetic and moral testimony is that while the latter two forms of testimony attribute value, the former does not. The attribution of value and its practical consequences for the testimony’s receiving end are important elements to consider while discussing the epistemic status of testimony itself. However, in the present paper, issues arising from mathematic testimony will be left aside.

the epistemic status of aesthetic testimony mirrors the meta-ethical debate, and even the specific positions (i.e., two versions of pessimism, unavailability and unusability) reflect positions endorsed in the moral case (Hopkins, 2011; Hills, 2013).

Optimists contend that we can legitimately use aesthetic testimony as a source of aesthetic knowledge. This, however, does not mean that anything goes. In fact, optimists hold, we will typically need reasons in order to justifiably trust the speaker's testimony.⁴ On the contrary, pessimists deny the legitimacy of using aesthetic testimony as a source of aesthetic knowledge. Pessimism could take two versions, unavailability pessimism and unusability pessimism (Hopkins, 2011; Robson, 2012). According to unavailability pessimism, aesthetic testimony is not a reliable source of knowledge in the first place. In other words, aesthetic testimony simply cannot offer or transmit any form of aesthetic knowledge (Hopkins, 2011). Four different explanations may be given why this is the case.

A first explanation is that there is no aesthetic knowledge to begin with. Aesthetic error theory, for instance, maintains that all substantive aesthetic judgements are ultimately false. Therefore, there is no substantive aesthetic knowledge to transmit (Meskin, 2007; Hopkins, 2011; Hills, 2013). Admittedly, the idea that there is no aesthetic knowledge whatsoever is quite counterintuitive and, so far, no one has been able to formulate a convincing version of aesthetic error theory (Meskin, 2004).

A second option is that aesthetic knowledge is non-propositional. According to aesthetic expressivism and aesthetic emotivism, which is a form of expressivism, aesthetic judgments involve non-cognitive components, such as the expression of feelings and the stimulation of certain responses. Aesthetic testimony fails because there are no propositions involved when aesthetic judgments are made, and non-

⁴ Optimist positions can take many different forms, to which I cannot do justice here. However, these positions usually belong to either of two families, reductionism and anti-reductionism. Non-reductionists like Thomas Reid (1764/1997) or Tyler Burge (1993) claim that we are justified in accepting what we are told as long as we do not have doubts about a testifier's reliability or about a specific instance of testimony. Non-reductionists like David Hume (1748/1999) hold that we need non-testimonially based positive reasons for believing that a specific testimony is reliable (e.g., listen to more speakers, examine the speakers' character, etc.). For a more detailed explanation of the positions on this topic, see Jennifer Lackey (2011).

cognitive components cannot be transmitted through testimony (Meskin, 2007; Hills, 2013).

Expressivism and emotivism are unable to explain the epistemic difference between someone who had first-hand experience with an artwork and someone who had only second-hand experience with it, since, according to these two theories, they would both lack aesthetic knowledge (Meskin, 2007). Yet, it seems that such a difference exists. There seems to be an asymmetry between someone who, upon reading the aesthetic expert's judgment, just imagines how beautiful the *Madonna of the Rose Garden* is and someone who actually sees the artwork. This asymmetry cannot be explained only in terms of feelings and emotions. In fact, we would say that a person who had perceptual experience with an artwork *knows* something more than a person who just imagined it, no matter how vivid her imagination is. For instance, only by actually seeing the *Madonna* one can know the exact shade of blue or red that Botticelli used for Mary's clothes or how he used the tempera to reproduce a marble floor. However, neither expressivism nor emotivism are able to account for this asymmetry.

A third alternative is that aesthetic testimony cannot be a solid ground for aesthetic knowledge or aesthetic judgments because in order to formulate an aesthetic judgment we need first-hand perceptual experience (i.e., acquaintance) of it. This intuition is expressed by one of the most famous and widely accepted principles in aesthetics, the acquaintance principle.⁵

According to the acquaintance principle, aesthetic testimony cannot transmit aesthetic knowledge because one ought to arrive at an aesthetic judgment based on one's own direct experience with the object of such judgment (Meskin, 2007; Nguyen, 2020). The acquaintance principle is in line with Kant's theory of taste, according to which aesthetic judgments are subjective, and can only be made on the basis of disinterested

⁵ The acquaintance principle has been criticized for not being able to account for the epistemic value of recordings and photographs. For this reason, the principle has been revised and combined with the transparency theory. Photographs and recordings, albeit unable to provide us with first-hand experience of artworks, systematically preserve the artworks' original characteristics. Photographs are prosthetic aids to vision as much as recording are prosthetic aids to hearing. In this way, they both give us immediate experiences of such artworks, and, therefore, they can justifiably be used to form aesthetic judgments (Meskin, 2004; Laetz, 2008; Lord, 2016).

pleasure.⁶ According to Kant, aesthetic testimony is problematic because if one trusts aesthetic experts when making an aesthetic judgment, one is responsive to the experts' testimony and not to the aesthetic qualities of the artwork. The resulting aesthetic judgment is grounded on testimony and not on disinterested pleasure (Allison, 2001; Meskin, 2004; 2007; Hopkins, 2011; Robson, 2012; Zangwill, 2019; Hills, 2020; Nguyen, 2020).

The acquaintance principle, because of the importance it gives to first-hand experience, is able to explain the asymmetry between someone who has perceptual experience of an artwork and someone who just hears or reads about it, an asymmetry that neither expressivism or emotivism were able to account for. Yet, it cannot explain cases in which one is acquainted with an artwork but still aesthetically subservient (Nguyen, 2020).

Imagine that the friend of the example I began with, the one to whom you exclaimed that Botticelli's work was beautiful, invites you to elaborate on the reasons why you find the artwork beautiful. In this scenario, let us imagine that the Uffizi's curators have put an exact copy of the *Madonna* on the wall, so you had an immediate experience of the artwork, in a way. In trying to explain your aesthetic judgement, you repeat Barbara Deimling's explanation word for word. In this case, although the speaker is acquainted and engaged with the artwork, she is just repeating the aesthetic judgment made by someone else. She is not using her own aesthetic faculties and resources but she defers to the expert entirely. Intuitively, the speaker seems to lack some substantial skills that would make her aesthetic claims justified. Yet, because the speaker is, ultimately, acquainted with the artwork, the acquaintance

⁶ There is some debate about whether Kant should be considered an unavailability pessimist (Hopkins, 2000; Meskin, 2004; Hopkins, 2011; Robson, 2012) or an unusability pessimist (Gorodeisky, 2010). This debate is further complicated by the tension between two aspects of Kant's theory of taste. In fact, on the one hand, Kant claims that judgments of beauty (or, equally, judgments of taste) are subjective and based on pleasure, and, on the other hand, he claims that judgments of beauty are universal, demand agreement from others and possess objectivity (Miller, 1998; Hopkins, 2000; Allison, 2001; Eaton, 2006; Zangwill, 2019). I do not aim at resolving this tension, nor do I have definitive arguments for excluding the possibility that Kant's theory speaks in favor of unusability pessimism. Yet, because of the influence his theory of taste had on the formulation of the acquaintance principle, Kant is considered an unavailability pessimist in the present paper.

principle is not able to explain what she is lacking. Hence, this third alternative is not entirely convincing either.

A fourth and last option is to claim that the widespread disagreement about aesthetic matters is a sign of the fact that aesthetic discourse is relative to the person or to cultures. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, as the saying goes. If people’s aesthetic judgements have different truth conditions, as aesthetic relativist claims, then aesthetic testimony cannot transmit aesthetic knowledge because the person giving the testimony and the receiving end might have different aesthetic frameworks (Meskin, 2004; Hopkins, 2011; Robson, 2012; Hills, 2020).

However, as Meskin (2004) has pointed out, aesthetic relativism is unable to explain agreement across different frameworks. In other words, relativism cannot explain the reason why one cannot accept the speaker’s testimony when the two agents share the same aesthetic framework. Moreover, there seem to be “timeless” artworks, which not only resist the test of time but are appreciated by people belonging to radically different cultural contexts (Meskin, 2004).

According to unusability pessimism, by contrast, there are circumstances in which aesthetic claims could transmit aesthetic knowledge. However, additional norms make aesthetic testimony an illegitimate source of knowledge. Aesthetic knowledge could be available through aesthetic testimony but other reasons prevent us from using it (Hopkins, 2011). There are two possible reasons why we might not be able to use aesthetic testimony.

First, there are no reliable sources of testimony. Aesthetic testimony is not problematic per se. It is possible for aesthetic testimony to provide aesthetic knowledge. The real problem, one might claim, is the lack of reliable judges. Most people are simply incompetent when it comes to aesthetic matters because they lack the knowledge of art history that is necessary to recognize an artwork’s aesthetic properties and to make informed aesthetic judgments (Meskin, 2004; Driver, 2006; Meskin, 2007; Laetz, 2008; Hopkins, 2011; Robson, 2012; Hills, 2013, 2020). This view has the clear advantage of acknowledging the value of aesthetic testimony and explaining its weakness at the same time. In fact, while it claims that most aesthetic testimony is unreliable, it leaves open the possibility that, when trustworthy and competent experts are identified, the process of

accepting aesthetic testimony is reliable and aesthetic knowledge can be transmitted (Meskin, 2004; 2007).

Second, aesthetic knowledge, however possible, is not enough to make good aesthetic judgments. There is something more we should look for. What we need to make good aesthetic judgments is aesthetic understanding, which, unlike aesthetic knowledge, cannot be directly or easily transmitted through testimony (Hills, 2009; Hopkins, 2011; Hills, 2013; 2020; Nguyen, 2020).

Unusability pessimism has gained much support in recent years, and it has been considered the most plausible form of pessimism (Hopkins, 2011; Robson, 2012). In the next section, I will provide a rationale for why I consider the second form of unusability pessimism a very intuitive option and one that is able to combine the best of both worlds, so to speak. I will appeal to a distinction between aesthetic knowledge and aesthetic understanding and claim, following Alison Hills (2018; 2020), that to be a virtuous aesthetic agent the latter is what we should look for.

In turn, this will lead us to the moral domain. In fact, the account of aesthetic virtue endorsed by Hills is structured upon a parallel with moral virtue. As I will argue in the next section, this parallel has more serious implications than the ones Hills is willing to concede. One of these implications, which I will discuss in the last section, is that the role of aesthetic experts should be re-conceptualized by assigning them certain moral duties, or so I will claim.

2. Aesthetic knowledge, understanding and virtue

As I have briefly mentioned at the end of the previous section, the second option of unusability pessimism, according to which aesthetic knowledge is not really what we need to make aesthetic judgments, is the most plausible one in the debate about the status of aesthetic testimony and aesthetic experts. In fact, this position accommodates our ordinary intuitions about such topics.

Acquiring aesthetic knowledge through aesthetic testimony is not problematic per se. In fact, most of our aesthetic knowledge has been gained in this way. For instance, when I was in high school, art history – an important component of aesthetic knowledge – was part of my program and with it came an art history teacher. No one ever doubted that her testimony could give us aesthetic knowledge. One could indeed cast

doubts on whether a specific person is qualified enough to teach or on whether she is able to transmit her aesthetic knowledge in an appropriate way. Yet, if we were to cast doubts on the more general practice of transmitting knowledge through testimony, then we should reconsider the whole education system, not only the aesthetic domain.

The first option of unusability pessimism (i.e., there are no reliable sources of testimony) is quite appealing. However, it still seems to be missing the point. First, it might be difficult to identify reliable aesthetic experts but it is not an impossible task. We do not need to find universal aesthetic experts. People who are experts on specific aesthetic matters will do just fine. Second, even if we found experts whom we can trust unconditionally, it would still seem problematic to defer to them entirely.

The real problem with aesthetic matters, and aesthetic testimony more specifically, seems to be that we think that we have to make up our minds and settle the question by ourselves. I believe that the second option of unusability pessimism, which will be referred to as moderate unusability pessimism from now on, is precisely able to express and accommodate this intuition while avoiding the problems of the other aforementioned positions.

According to moderate unusability pessimism, aesthetic testimony is not problematic per se, neither is the possibility of finding reliable aesthetic experts. However, to be virtuous aesthetic agents we should aim for aesthetic understanding rather than aesthetic knowledge.⁷ While the latter can easily be transmitted via testimony (and, in fact, this is a quite ordinary practice), the former needs to be developed by the agent herself through (lots of) practice and education.

In the remainder of this paper, I will first distinguish aesthetic knowledge from aesthetic understanding, and then, following Hills, explain why the latter is a central component of aesthetic virtue. The fact that Hills' account of aesthetic virtue is structured upon a parallel with moral virtue has important implications, which I will discuss in a moment.

⁷ As previously mentioned, one might wonder why we should care about being virtuous aesthetic agents. This is a relevant question and one that, in a way, motivated me to write this paper in the first place. Although I cannot address this question here, I have indicated (see note 1) a few scholars who have provided convincing answers to David Enoch's shmagency objection (2006), and have shown why being shmagents is not a realistic option for us, and what motivates us to act. I believe that similar arguments can be applied to the aesthetic domain too.

Knowledge and understanding in general – and, therefore, their aesthetic counterparts – are quite similar concepts. Understanding is so closely connected to knowledge that, in some cases, the two terms are used as synonyms. However, there are important differences. Typically, both knowledge and understanding are factive, they both imply truth (Kvanvig, 2003; Hills, 2016; 2017). However, while knowledge has truth as its goal and purpose, correctness is not the main purpose of understanding (Nguyen, 2020). When one understands why p – where p is an aesthetic judgment – one can successfully:

- a. Follow the explanation of why p when given by someone else
- b. Explain why p in their own words
- c. Draw the conclusion that p from the reasons that make p true
- d. Draw similar conclusions in similar cases
- e. Give the right explanation when someone asks why p
- f. Give the right explanation in similar cases

The distinctive element of understanding is that it involves cognitive control, namely, the ability to grasp explanatory and coherence relations. This means that, while knowledge can be piecemeal, understanding implies completeness and comes in chunks of information (Kvanvig, 2003; Hills, 2016; 2017).

For instance, I could know many unrelated pieces of information about Sandro Botticelli and his artworks. I could know that he was born in Florence in 1444 or 1445, that he was apprenticed to Filippo Lippi between 1464 and 1467, and that the *Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus*, his most famous masterpieces, were both realized more than ten years after the *Madonna of the Rose Garden*. However, I have understanding of Botticelli's work only if I put these pieces of information together and understand their relations. For example, I would need to understand that Botticelli's first religious works were influenced by Lippi, and that he was later influenced by Neo-Platonism, which explains his later mythological subjects, and so on.

This does not mean that these chunks of information have to be assimilated right away in order to have understanding. In fact, understanding comes in degrees. Some people are able to give more detailed and richer explanations than others, so they have greater

understanding of some subject matter – say, Botticelli’s style and work – than others do (Kvanvig, 2003; Hills, 2016; 2017).

To have – and master – understanding is pragmatically valuable because it organizes and structures our thinking. Understanding allows us to navigate our way through different pieces of information, going from one piece to other related ones, it helps us in justifying our judgments to others, and it is useful as a basis for action (Kvanvig, 2003; Hills, 2017). Nonetheless, understanding is not easy to achieve, it is a sort of know-how and it includes a set of abilities quite difficult to master (Irvin, 2007; Hills, 2009; 2016; 2017). Most importantly, understanding is a central component of aesthetic virtue.

Aesthetic virtue – which mirrors moral virtue (Kieran, 2010; Hills, 2018) – is “the orientation of a whole person towards aesthetic value and aesthetic reasons through action, non-cognitive and cognitive attitudes” (Hills, 2020, p. 2). I will go through each of these components in more detail.

First, action. An aesthetically virtuous person engages with artworks and does aesthetic right actions. Indeed, we cannot all be great artists, but aesthetic virtue is visible in everyday activities too, such as the way in which you decorate your house, you dress yourself, the music you listen to and so on (Hills, 2018; 2020).

Second, non-cognitive attitudes. A virtuous aesthetic agent has the right motivations, feelings and emotions, and she responds to the reasons that make a piece of art valuable qua art (Hills, 2018; 2020). For instance, a virtuous agent feels disinterested pleasure towards artworks, and she is not a snob, which means that she does not appreciate an artwork for its economic value or because it is a mark of a specific social identity or social elite (Kieran, 2010). However, we have to keep in mind that money, social norms and cultural factors do influence our aesthetic judgments, even if we are unaware of it (Hills, 2020). Therefore, a virtuous aesthetic agent should check her motivations and feelings when making aesthetic judgments.

Third, cognitive attitudes. Virtuous aesthetic agents ground their aesthetic judgments on the reasons that make an artwork valuable. Virtuous aesthetic agents have aesthetic understanding, they grasp the reasons why the artwork they are appreciating (or creating) is good (or not), they are able to explain these reasons to others (in a more or less

detailed way), and they are able to generalize to similar cases (Hills, 2018; 2020).

This account of aesthetic virtue gives a prominent role to aesthetic understanding. In fact, aesthetic understanding is the cognitive component of aesthetic virtue (Hills, 2020). At the same time, endorsing this account of aesthetic virtue has some important consequences.

First, since (aesthetic) understanding is, as we have seen, a form of know-how and a set of abilities, it needs practice. Lots of it. This means that aesthetic understanding cannot be easily or directly transmitted by aesthetic experts through aesthetic testimony (Hills, 2013; 2016). This is not to say that aesthetic experts and aesthetic testimony do not have any role whatsoever, as we will see shortly. Yet, acquiring aesthetic understanding is like playing a game. To get to end of the game (and, possibly, win) you just have to play yourself. To defer to experts and to their aesthetic testimony is very much like taking a shortcut (Nguyen, 2020). There simply is no way to circumvent this. To be a virtuous aesthetic agent you need aesthetic understanding. To get aesthetic understanding you have to practice and train. It is that simple.

Second, the process of making aesthetic judgments based on aesthetic understanding is more important than the result. As we have seen, both knowledge and understanding are connected to truth. However, truth is not the main purpose of (aesthetic) understanding. Aesthetic understanding is similar to playing a game, where playing is more important than winning. We indeed engage in the game with the goal of winning but the goal that leads us to take part in the game does not necessarily coincide with the real purpose of the game itself (Nguyen, 2020). In fact, the primary value of engaging with artworks is the process of trying to generate aesthetic judgments on the basis of aesthetic understanding. Seeking for these kinds of aesthetic judgments is more valuable than actually having them (Nguyen, 2020). Having correct aesthetic judgments should be conceived of as an end-result, one that we achieve once we have full aesthetic understanding but we have to be ready to make many mistakes along the way. It is just part of the process.

Third, from what has been said so far, it should be clear that aesthetic understanding comes in degrees and it develops through time (Hills, 2020). This means that understanding allows for phases of immaturity, in which aesthetic agents still need the external guide of

educators (i.e., experts), and a final phase of maturity, in which agents fully master all the abilities that understanding requires and are able to form correct aesthetic judgments by themselves, and many other in-between phases. More importantly, aesthetic understanding requires education and training and, therefore, people who are able to educate us. Typically, these people are aesthetic experts, who have a greater aesthetic understanding and aesthetic knowledge than we do, and who can guide us through our quest for aesthetic understanding (Miller, 1998; Irvin, 2007; Schellekens, 2007; Hills, 2020; Nguyen, 2020).

To structure aesthetic virtue and aesthetic understanding upon a parallel with the moral case has more serious implications than the ones Hills has acknowledged. Hills, whose account of aesthetic virtue I have mostly endorsed in this paper, seems to be glossing over the relationship between aesthetic and moral virtue. Let me explain this better.

Hills, as mentioned, claims that aesthetic virtue is fundamentally similar to moral virtue, and even that there are analogies between specific virtues (e.g., honesty and courage) (Hills, 2018). Aesthetic virtue is parallel to moral virtue but, ultimately, the two are running on *separate* parallel tracks. Hills admits that there are cases in which having moral sensitivity could help us to understand artworks better, or cases in which developing aesthetic virtue could help us to develop moral virtue⁸ but these are exceptional cases and not the rule. Eventually, aesthetic and moral virtue, albeit importantly analogous, are two distinct sets of virtues (Hills, 2018). This is where I have to part ways with Hills.

Hill's view seems to be influenced, at least to a certain extent, by the ethical-aesthetic divide, namely the tendency – famously attributed to Kant – to keep the ethical and aesthetical domains separate (Carroll, 1996; Kieran, 2005; Carroll, 2006; Eaton, 2006; Kieran, 2006; Schellekens, 2007). Surely, Hills acknowledges some links between aesthetics and ethics but those connections are still very weak. On the contrary, I believe that we have reasons to establish a more robust connection between ethics and aesthetics.

In the next section, I will try to show that aesthetic and moral virtue do not just run on parallel tracks. They do enter in each other's territories and they do interweave in some important aspects. Strengthening the link

⁸ For instance, Hills claims that aesthetic virtue is typically easier to develop and it involves fewer risks, so it could be a stepping-stone to moral virtue (Hills, 2018).

between aesthetics and ethics will help us to bridge the ethical and aesthetical divide, which seems to contradict not only our common experience but also the discussions that are being held by curators and other museum workers. Moreover, can a stronger link between these two domains assist us in re-conceptualizing the role of aesthetic experts? Is it possible that aesthetic experts have moral duties too?

3. Exploring the aethics landscape

The aim of this section is twofold. First, I will try to show that there are good reasons to establish a more robust connection between ethics and aesthetics. Second, I will claim that this stronger connection has serious implications on how we should conceive of the role and (moral) duties of aesthetic experts.

3.1 Bridging the ethical-aesthetic divide

Contrary to Hills, I think we have reasons to create a much stronger link between ethics and aesthetics, and to see moral and aesthetic virtue as entering into each other's territory. In this section, I will consider and discuss two of these reasons.

First, there are many cases in which the (im)moral value of an artwork has a major impact on its overall artistic value. Let me give you an example. Imagine being a tourist at the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. You walk through the rooms until you find yourself in front of the *nkisi nkonde*. You might experience pleasure at the sight of this Congolese statue. You might be impressed by how different materials, like metal, wood and fabric, have been put together. You then go closer to the statue and read the label next to it, which says that the *nkisi nkonde* is a gift (Couttenier, 2018). You leave the museum very aesthetically pleased. Once you get home, your curiosity and desire to know more about the *nkisi nkonde* leads you to google it. Google informs you that the statue, far from being a gift, has actually been stolen in 1878 by the Belgian officer Alexandre Delcommune during a military attack to the villages in Boma, and that it has travelled from museum to museum until it arrived at the AfricaMuseum in 1910 (Couttenier, 2018). Suddenly, your aesthetic experience changes. Aesthetic pleasure turns into displeasure and even disapproval.

This sudden shift is not due to any change in the aesthetic qualities of the *nkisi nkonde*. What caused the shift are your moral values. It is because you now know that the statue has been plundered, and that the museum has not been honest about its origin that you came to dislike the *nkisi nkonde*. It is because you morally disapprove of theft and dishonesty that you are now unwilling and unable to derive aesthetic pleasure from the statue.

One might say that I have picked a very specific example but I think cases similar to this are actually quite familiar. Fans of *Call Me By Your Name* are more skeptical to praise the acting performance of Armie Hammer – who starred as Oliver in the film – now that he has been accused of cannibalism and rape (among other things). Many people decide not to buy a coat if it is made out of animals' skin.⁹ A *Kit Kat* chocolate bar will taste quite awful when we find out that Nestlé, the brand that produces it, has been found guilty of child slavery. Conversely, a chocolate bar of Tony's Chocolonely, a brand committed to producing slave-free and sustainable chocolate, will immediately taste slightly better. While kids enjoy *Pippi Longstocking* mainly because of Pippi's playfulness and because she lives by herself with a monkey and a horse, many adults appreciate these children's books even more when they re-read them at a later age and discover the powerful feminist and educational themes they contain. What these cases show is that ethical values have an important impact on our aesthetic experiences and on what we consider beautiful or ugly, and they contribute to the overall artistic value of an artwork, whether it be a painting, a statue, a performance, a song, a book, a piece of clothing or a particularly delicious food.

“Okay, but if we put ethical matters aside, what you felt *in that moment* was pleasure” one might say. An emotivist¹⁰ might claim something along these lines, namely that having an aesthetic experience is a matter of having certain feelings and emotions in the moment. An emotivist could say that I am mixing up ethics and aesthetics too much, and that I am confusing aesthetic experiences with the a posteriori reasons

⁹ The example of fur coats is discussed in more details by Marcia Muelder Eaton (2006).

¹⁰ Emotivism is the view according to which aesthetic judgments involve non-cognitive components, such as the expression of feelings and the stimulation of certain responses (Meskin, 2007).

that people give for liking something. What I have said in this paper does not exclude emotivist approaches to aesthetic experience. However, revising an aesthetic experience in light of moral reasons is a quite familiar phenomenon and one that needs to be accounted for.

When we revisit an aesthetic experience on ethical grounds, we find ourselves in a sort of muddy terrain, in which separating the ethical and aesthetic is not that simple, maybe not even possible. When we look at the once pleasant artwork, we feel a sort of unease and discomfort that cannot be ignored. Moral reasons are able to change the way we feel and experience artworks. We are not able to respond to them as we used to. We are not able to put ethical matters aside. This discomfort cannot be explained by a pure emotivist account. Only an account that acknowledges that sometimes ethics and aesthetics enter into each other's territory is able to explain the discomfort that often results in aesthetic revisions.

The fact that moral values have an impact on aesthetic values leads us to create a stronger link between moral and aesthetic virtue and to expand Hills' notion of aesthetic understanding. In fact, there are cases in which being an ethical person helps us to have better aesthetic understanding and, therefore, to be better aesthetic agents.

As we have seen in the previous section, to be virtuous aesthetic agents, according to Hills, we need aesthetic understanding. One of the most important components of aesthetic understanding is the ability to grasp the reasons that make an artwork beautiful (or ugly). Yet, Hills does not acknowledge that if moral reasons can have an impact on aesthetic value, this means that among the reasons that make an artwork beautiful there could be moral reasons too. Hence, you would need to be a morally virtuous (or at least a morally sensitive) person in order to grasp the (moral) reasons that contribute to an artwork's aesthetic value. In turn, grasping those reasons would lead you to acquire aesthetic understanding and prepare the way for aesthetic virtue. In such cases, being a morally virtuous agent makes you an overall better aesthetic agent. If this is true, then moral and aesthetic virtue do not just run on parallel tracks, as Hills claims. On the contrary, they intersect and even contribute to each other's development.

A second reason to establish a more robust link between moral and aesthetic virtue is that epistemic practices, aesthetic ones included, are substantially affected by ethical and socio-political considerations, such

as gender, race and class. As Fricker (2011) rightly pointed out, race, class and gender have an influence on who gets access to educational institutions in the first place. In turn, this has an impact on whom is considered trustworthy since people tend to think that a better education corresponds to more trustworthiness (Fricker, 2011). Because the powerful are more likely to get access to educational institutions, they are also more likely to be considered trustworthy and to reach positions of power and expertise. The norms of credibility tend to imitate the structure of social power (Fricker, 2011).

These considerations are not external to aesthetic practices. In the aesthetic domain too, socio-political factors have an impact on who gets access to aesthetic knowledge (e.g., on who is able to get access to university and attend courses where this knowledge is provided), on who is considered trustworthy and on who reaches powerful positions as aesthetic expert.

For instance, in 2014, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Ithaca S+R, the Association of Art Museum Directors, and the American Alliance of Museums measured the demographics of the staff of US art museums. In 2015, the results of the demographic survey were published, and they showed that people of colors had a hard time entering the positions of curators, educators, conservators and museums leadership. People holding those positions were 84 percent white non-Hispanic, four percent African American, six percent Asian, three percent Hispanic, and three percent two or more races. In 2018, a second demographic survey has been conducted, which showed some change in the ethnical and racial composition of museum population but this change was limited to the education and curatorial departments, while the composition of conservation and museum leadership departments remained unaltered (Westermann, Schonfeld, & Sweeney, 2019).

The ethnical and racial homogeneity of art museums' employees is, in turn, due to the racial and ethnical homogeneity of museums' boards, which are the places where the important decisions concerning museums' staff and strategy are made. In fact, a 2017 study commissioned by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) found that 46 percent of all boards in American museums are composed of white people, generally males. Since board members tend to recruit people coming from their own social networks, which are mainly composed by other white (and wealthy)

males, this reflects on the composition of museums too, not only in terms of ethnicity and race but also class and gender (BoardSource, 2017). This is not only a socio-political concern but an epistemic and ethical one too. In fact, when the powerful are given more credibility than they deserve and the powerless are wrongly denied such credibility, there is a situation of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2011).

As the previous example shows, socio-political and ethical factors significantly affect aesthetic practices. However, nowhere in Hills' papers (and in other scholarly papers on similar topics for that matter) can we find any mention of these considerations. Aesthetics tends to proceed as if these socio-political and ethical factors were irrelevant to its practice. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Therefore, a second reason why we should conceive of the relation between aesthetics and ethics as a more robust one is that socio-political and ethical issues often have a deep impact on the aesthetic domain, on how aesthetic knowledge is produced and disseminated, and on who gets to be acknowledged as an aesthetic expert.

The two reasons that I have discussed in the first part of this section, do not just show that aesthetics and ethics, far from running on parallel tracks, actually do intertwine in some important respects. These two reasons also have serious implications for what it means to be an aesthetic expert. More specifically, if aesthetics and ethics share a robust link, this seems to redefine the role of aesthetic experts by assigning them a few moral duties.

As the moderate version of unusability pessimism that I have defended in this paper shows, aesthetic testimony or the presence of aesthetic experts are not problematic per se. Rather, the problem lies in how we make use of aesthetic testimony and in how we rely on aesthetic experts.

A mature aesthetic agent has full aesthetic understanding and engages with the artworks herself. She has the right motivations and feelings towards artworks (e.g., she is not a snob and does not really care how economically valuable an artwork is), she is able to reflect upon the merits and demerits of an artwork and to draw conclusions about its aesthetic value.¹¹ She is able to explain her judgments to others and to

¹¹ Hills (2020) points out that this looks like a very conscious and rationalized way of making aesthetic judgments. However, most of the times, our aesthetic judgments are

generalize to other cases. A mature aesthetic agent aims at having first-hand experience with the artworks before making aesthetic judgments about them.¹² Consequently, aesthetic testimony is only a provisional guide that helps the agent to make up her mind (Hills, 2020). Reliance on aesthetic experts and on their aesthetic testimony is conceived of as a jumping-off point for further reflection and for starting to make our own judgments, not as a substitute for this (Nguyen, 2020).

The account of aesthetic understanding defended in this paper leads us to re-define the role of aesthetic experts and the importance of aesthetic education. Because aesthetic understanding, being a form of know-how, needs a lot of training and practice, and because we need aesthetic education in order to achieve aesthetic virtue, we also need people who are in a position to educate us. Typically, these people are aesthetic experts, who possess greater aesthetic understanding and a deeper and broader aesthetic knowledge (Driver, 2006; Hills, 2009).

This account acknowledges that aesthetic thought does not happen in isolation and, therefore, it makes room for aesthetic experts in our aesthetic lives. At the same time, by reinforcing the link between aesthetics and ethics, this account helps us to re-conceptualize the role of aesthetic experts by assigning them a few moral duties and responsibilities. The notion of aesthetic expertise that comes out of this re-conceptualization is incompatible with a more traditional notion – common in other epistemic domain (e.g., vaccination experts, doctors, lawyers, business consultants, scientists, etc.) – that sees experts as authoritative figures to whom we should defer (almost) entirely (Kieran, 2008).

more immediate and direct. Either we like something or we do not. However, it is not unheard of to make aesthetic judgments in a more rationalized way. Think, for instance, of artworks where the subject is not clear or it is very complex. Moreover, we are sensitive to aesthetic reasons even when we are not reflecting on them. In fact, if the artwork were different, if its merits or flaws were different, our immediate feeling of pleasure or displeasure would probably be different too (Hills, 2020).

¹² This account is compatible with the acquaintance principle but it allows for more than the acquaintance principle in that it makes room for different degrees of aesthetic understanding and of engagement with artworks (Hills, 2020).

3.2 *Aesthetic experts and moral duties*

I would like to conclude this paper by pointing out two moral duties that aesthetic experts should incorporate into their practice and that contribute to re-conceptualize their role.¹³

First, aesthetic experts should take up and embrace an educational role. As we have seen, aesthetic virtue and aesthetic understanding need a lot of practice and training. The most qualified people to offer such training and education are aesthetic experts in virtue of the fact that they have reached aesthetic maturity. However, aesthetic experts should not take their educational role lightly, and they should be constantly aware of the fact that, for the most part, they will interact with immature aesthetic agents who are in different stages of their aesthetic training. To have an educational role also means to be in a position of power, which aesthetic experts should not abuse. The best way in which aesthetic experts could make use of their powerful position is by sharing their greater aesthetic knowledge.

In fact, acquiring aesthetic knowledge is one important way in which we can develop aesthetic understanding (Irvin, 2007; Nguyen, 2020). For instance, if we were to understand the reasons that make Botticelli's *Madonna* a beautiful piece of art, we would typically need some art historical knowledge. Knowing when the artwork was realized, what is its theme and subject, who commissioned it and why, how the artistic scene looked like at the time when Botticelli painted the *Madonna*, which were the materials and techniques available to him, and so on, is all art historical information that can be important to have when judging the value of an artwork. Moreover, these pieces of art historical knowledge could help us to improve our perceptual skills. Knowing that, in religious art, roses usually symbolize one of Mary's titles, the one of "rosa mystica", makes us paying attention to the presence of roses in other similar paintings. To have refined perceptual skills and to know the art

¹³ It is important, at this point, to clarify what I mean by "duty" in this context. One could think that the two moral duties I discuss in this section are supererogatory, and that aesthetic experts would not be blamed if they did not fulfill them. However, this is not my understanding of these two duties. In light of the impact that ethical and socio-political considerations, such as gender, race and class, have on epistemic and aesthetic practices, and of the role that museums, aesthetic experts and other public institutions have played in creating and fostering structural forms of injustice and racism, I consider these duties to be proper duties rather than supererogatory ones.

historical context in which an artwork was produced helps us to acquire aesthetic understanding in that it helps us to follow other people's explanations, to offer richer explanations ourselves, and to draw conclusions in other cases – skills that one is supposed to master when in possession of full aesthetic understanding.

What might experts do in order to fulfill their educational role? Aesthetic experts may be encouraged to write more art historical articles for the general public. One of the merits of public philosophy is that it makes difficult philosophical topics accessible to a wider audience and it shows how philosophy, far from being an abstract subject discussed by middle-aged (white) men armed with dusty books, could actually shed some light on everyday phenomena. Public art history could do the same. Moreover, art history could become a mandatory subject in schools. A more accessible education in art history would help us in starting the training and practice required by aesthetic understanding from an early age.

Another duty that comes with having a powerful educational role is that aesthetic experts should assist us in developing our own aesthetic understanding. Good aesthetic experts may be asked to give us aesthetic testimony in the form of aesthetic advice.¹⁴ Aesthetic advice is a form of impure testimony in that, unlike pure testimony, it allows the receiving end to appreciate the reasons in support of the judgment expressed by the expert. By giving impure testimony, aesthetic experts show immature aesthetic agents how aesthetic judgments are made, what are the reasons that underlie their judgments, which elements of the artwork they focused on, which features – in their opinion – deserve attention, and so on. Seeing how others make their aesthetic judgments is extremely useful because it shows us how it is done, and it puts us on the right path to start making our own aesthetic judgments. Aesthetic experts, however, should be aware that their aesthetic judgments are just a jumping-off point for making our own aesthetic judgments, and, therefore, they should not exercise any authority on them.

Second, aesthetic experts have a moral duty to expose epistemic injustices, admit past mistakes and be ready to make up for them. As we have seen, socio-political and ethical considerations are not irrelevant to

¹⁴ A similar argument has been made by Hills concerning moral advice (Hills, 2009).

aesthetics. On the contrary, they heavily affect matters of credibility and trustworthiness, they determine who gets acknowledged as an expert and maybe even what gets acknowledged as art. Aesthetic experts should be aware of these considerations and stop acting as if aesthetics and ethics were two completely separate domains.

What might the concrete implications of this be? We can see an important repercussion of this in the case of the contestation over what to do with colonial heritage held in museums. In fact, if aesthetic experts are assigned moral duties, then they cannot exclude themselves from debates and situations in which injustices have been committed, like in the case of the *nkisi nkonde* (and many others). This also gives them a moral duty to repair to colonial injustice and to work towards reconciliation.

At the same time, a redefined conception of aesthetic expertise that includes moral duties helps us to discriminate between “good” and “bad” reconciliation practices. For example, practices that empower and give equal status to artists coming from the places where colonial collections originate from are more likely to succeed in repairing to colonial injustice than practices in which Western actors and discourses still have a prominent role.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have tried to re-conceptualize the role of aesthetic experts by defending a moderate version of unusability pessimism and by laying bare some of their moral responsibilities. According to this account, aesthetic virtue requires us to develop aesthetic understanding, which – unlike aesthetic knowledge – comes in degrees and needs education and practice. Because aesthetic understanding is a form of know-how, it is less directly transmissible by aesthetic experts through aesthetic testimony. However, this does not mean that there is no room for experts or testimony in our aesthetic lives. I suggested that aesthetic experts have an important educational role. They can assist us in developing aesthetic understanding and reach aesthetic maturity.

Furthermore, I have tried to show that the link between aesthetics and ethics is much stronger than scholars have been willing to concede. In fact, aesthetic and moral virtue are not just fundamentally similar, they enter into each other’s territory and even contribute to each other’s development. Acknowledging this stronger link between aesthetics and

ethics helps us to re-conceptualize the role of aesthetic experts by assigning them a few moral duties and responsibilities, which I have discussed at the end of the previous section.

One might claim that I am losing sight of what is “properly” aesthetical and what is “properly” ethical but I do not think this is the case. I am not trying to defend a view that sees the ethical and aesthetical as perfectly overlapping domains and according to which all art is moral. This account leaves open the possibility of enjoying art just for art’s sake. We can still go to a museum or an exposition just to see something beautiful. We can still read a book just because it is beautifully written and without looking for moral lessons. We do not need to be ethical all the time. Ethics and aesthetics do not need to lose their independence but this does not exclude the possibility that they intersect and interact in some ways.¹⁵ This paper has focused on these relations and interactions without trying to reduce aesthetics to an ethical matter.

This account has two main advantages. First, many scholars have described the ideal way in which mature aesthetic agents make virtuous aesthetic judgments (Carroll, 1996; 2021). However, aesthetic maturity is the end-result of a much longer process with several in-between phases. This account – which combines elements of Kantian ethics (e.g., importance of autonomy and of making up our own mind) with elements of Aristotelian ethics (e.g., importance of examples) – fits less-than-ideal situations, namely situations in which aesthetic agents are not mature yet.

Second, in recent years, there has been an urgent call, coming from neo-Kantian and constructivist ethics, for a new model of autonomy that ceases to associate autonomy with self-sufficiency and makes room for others in our moral lives (Bagnoli, 2020). The account of aesthetic expertise and aesthetic testimony defended in this paper is a partial response to this call. In fact, it is an account that acknowledges the presence and importance of aesthetic experts and, by assigning them certain moral duties, re-defines their role in such a way that they do not become substitutes for the ensuing process of making up our minds.

Nonetheless, there are questions that this account leaves open. One serious question concerns the impact that a stronger link between aesthetics and ethics has on artistic practices. More specifically, in this

¹⁵ Schellekens goes even further and claims that this interaction between aesthetics and ethics constitutes a philosophical domain of its own (Schellekens, 2007).

paper I have not delved into the distinction between aesthetic appreciators (i.e., curators, art historians, museum directors...) and aesthetic creators (i.e., artists). Rather, I have talked about aesthetic experts, which is a general term that encompasses both creators and appreciators, and I have discussed how we should re-conceive of their role as including moral duties. However, it is quite likely that artists and curators have different ways of fulfilling these moral duties in their everyday practices. How can artists meet their moral duties?

The answer to this question is likely to have an important impact on the debate surrounding museums' colonial heritage. In fact, while museum curators are trying to determine what to do with colonial artifacts – a debate that tends to assume polarized positions with those in favor of restitution, on the one hand, and those who argue in favor of keeping colonial artifacts in virtue of their cultural value on the other hand – it is important to investigate how artists themselves can contribute to reconciliation. We stand in need of a theoretical framework that elucidates artists' (moral) duties and responsibilities, and is informed by examples of artistic practices that have succeeded in repairing to colonial injustice.

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Research Proposal

Administrative details

1a. Title of the research project

Aethics: on the intersection between ethics and aesthetics and the moral-epistemic role of museums

1b. Summary of the theme and aim of the project (max. 200 words)

The idea that ethics and aesthetics are separate domains has prevented moral philosophers and curators to engage in proper conversation. This is unfortunate because, on the one hand, museum curators and the general public are struggling with typically ethical problems to which philosophers could contribute, and, on the other hand, to explore how ethics enters into the aesthetic domain would lead ethicists to examine traditional philosophical issues from a challenging perspective.

The aim of this project is to bridge the ethical-aesthetic divide, and to explore the intersections between aesthetics and ethics. Moreover, this project aims to analyze the implications of a stronger link between ethics and aesthetics for museums, curators and artists.

The project consists of two stages: 1) a theoretical stage that will explore how ethics and aesthetics relate, and 2) an applied stage that will examine the moral-epistemic role of museums and reflect upon concrete strategies that museums and curators can implement to fulfill this role.

This project takes a robust interdisciplinary approach by bringing together debates in ethics, political philosophy, aesthetics, art history and museum studies, which have hitherto been largely disconnected. Apart from literature review and conceptual analysis, this project will include an empirical component.

(Words 199)

1c. Keywords

Ethics; aesthetics; ethical-aesthetic divide; virtue; museums' moral duties; colonial heritage

Research Proposal

2a1, 2a2, 2a3, and 2a4. Description of the proposed research (max.2500 words)

2a1. Overall research question

The problem

Consider the following statements: (1) Aimé Mpane should be praised for [confronting the legacy of colonialism in his artworks](#),ⁱ (2) the aesthetic appreciation of the *nkisi nkonde* (statue exhibited at the AfricaMuseum) changes when we find out it was [not donated but plundered](#),ⁱⁱ (3) museums should do something about [their colonial heritage](#).ⁱⁱⁱ

Underlying all statements is a fundamental question: how are aesthetic and ethical values related? What is the impact of this relation on museum practices? More specifically, statements and questions like these urge us to inquire into the muddy terrain where aesthetics and ethics meet. Entering the aethics terrain compels us to examine the impact of a tighter link between aesthetics and ethics on private and public agents such as artists and museums.

Despite heated societal debates in recent years, there has been little scholarly engagement. Art historians and philosophers alike seem to have accepted the **ethical-aesthetic divide**, that is, the tendency to consider ethics and aesthetics as separate fields with separate concerns and to have lost interest in exploring the intersections between the two domains (Carroll, 1996; Jacobson, 1997; Kieran, 2005; Carroll, 2006; Eaton, 2006; Kieran, 2006; Schellekens, 2007; 2020).

This is unfortunate because the central questions in these debates are as acute as ever. Both the general public and [museum curators are struggling with distinctively philosophical-ethical questions](#),^{iv} while philosophers are only rarely involved. There is an evident need for **theoretically grounded nuance**, so as to counterbalance the growing tendency to embrace radical ends of what is in fact a highly rich theoretical spectrum. This project aims to offer just that.

Background and status quaestionis

Ancient Greeks used the word *kalokagathía* to express the concept of a person who had both aesthetically pleasing physical traits and ethical virtue. In fact, for Plato and Aristotle, art could not be thought of separately from its social and political implications, and, more specifically, moral merits and moral flaws corresponded to aesthetic merits and aesthetic defects respectively (Schellekens, 2007). On the contrary, nowadays ethics and aesthetics tend to be kept apart.

The tendency to separate these two domains, which is referred to as the ethical-aesthetic divide, has famously been attributed to **Kant's theory of taste**. While in his earliest significant discussion of taste, contained in the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764/1960), Kant maintained that morality was based on feeling, and that moral and aesthetic feeling were connected, he subsequently revised his moral theory (Allison, 2001). In *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World* (1770/1992), Kant introduced a distinction between sensible and intellectual cognition. Morality and its principles were now connected to pure intellect rather than feeling and sensibility. Hence, the close connection between taste and morality got lost (Allison, 2001).

This clear-cut separation between ethics and aesthetics needs to be challenged for a number of reasons. First, the separation seems to be grounded on a misguided interpretation of Kant's theory itself, where the connection between aesthetic and moral judgements is actually a persistent theme (Ginsborg, 2019). In fact, Kant not only conceived aesthetic and moral judgement as sharing some important features (e.g., disinterestedness, universality, autonomy and publicity) (Levinson, 1998; Miller, 1998; Allison, 2001; Zuckert, 2002; 2007; Schellekens, 2007) but he also acknowledged that aesthetics contributes to morality by teaching us to love something without interest (Matthews, 1997; Allison, 2001).

Second, common experience shows us that the **(im)moral value of an artwork can have a major impact on its artistic value**. Aesthetic revisions based on ethical reasons are rather frequent phenomena. Such aesthetic revisions are not brought about by a change in the aesthetic features of the objects of our aesthetic judgments. Rather, it is because we morally disapprove of what we came to know about such objects that we

change our aesthetic judgments. Moral values can have – and, in fact, do have – an impact on our aesthetic experiences.

Third, the ethical-aesthetical divide contradicts **discussions that are being held within museums' walls**. Debates about what to do with colonial art, about how to create an anti-racist collection, and about whether – and if so, how – to [decolonize museums](#)^v are, ultimately, ethical debates. Therefore, the reality of the issues museums and curators are struggling with could give philosophers a rationale for questioning the ethical-aesthetic divide.

In recent years, some scholars have argued in favor of an account of **aesthetic virtue** structured upon a parallel with ethical virtue. Alison Hills, for instance, not only considers aesthetic virtue fundamentally similar to moral virtue, but she also claims that there are analogies between specific virtues (e.g., honesty and courage) (Hills, 2018; 2020). Although Hills admits that having moral sensitivity could improve our understanding of artworks, and that developing aesthetic virtue could contribute to the development of moral virtue, these are **exceptional cases** and not the rule (Hills, 2018). Aesthetic and moral virtue are still running on separate tracks.

Hills argues in favor of an account of aesthetic virtue that gives a prominent role to **aesthetic understanding** (Hills, 2018; 2020). The distinctive element of understanding is that it involves the ability to grasp explanatory and coherence relations (i.e., the reasons that make an artwork valuable or not valuable as a piece of art) (Kvanvig, 2003; Hills, 2016; 2017). Hills, however, does not acknowledge that if moral reasons can have an impact on aesthetic value, this means that among the reasons that make an artwork beautiful are moral reasons too. Hence, you would need to be a morally virtuous (or at least a morally sensitive) person to grasp the moral reasons that contribute to an artwork's artistic value. In turn, grasping those reasons would lead you to acquire aesthetic understanding and prepare the way for aesthetic virtue. We stand in need of a revised account of aesthetic virtue that acknowledges that there are cases in which being an ethical person helps us to have better aesthetic understanding and to be better aesthetic agents.

Museum studies' scholars have started to include museums among the other **educational institutions**, such as universities. In fact, museums possess all the features that generally characterize social institutions

(Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Miller, 2019). Museums have an embodied structure composed of differentiated but interrelated roles, hierarchically organized (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). For instance, museum curators and museum guards have a specific yet differentiated role that puts them in a higher hierarchical position than visitors establishing, in this way, a quite clear power relationship between them.

Moreover, museums have authority and power: they have the authority of choosing what to collect, what to exhibit and how. They have the authority of saying to people what they can and cannot see and how to interpret artifacts (Batkin, 1997; Roberts, 1989; Nixon Chen, 2013; Bennett, 2018). Museums have the power of creating new taxonomies. They arbitrarily distinguish between fine and decorative arts, between natural history and science and technology, and they adopt a sharp separation between different kinds of museums, a process that enables certain forms of knowing but prevents others (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Nixon Chen, 2013).

Notwithstanding these developments, scholars tend to overlook the fact that cases of **colonial heritage** held in museums confront curators (and [artists](#))^{vi} with ethical questions too. What should they do with such artifacts? Do museums have a moral duty to [return colonial-era heritage](#)?^{vii} If such heritage is [not repatriated](#),^{viii} how should it be exposed in museums?

Questions like these show that an exploration of **museums' moral duties** is still very much needed. The proposed PhD project aims to fill this lacuna.

2a2. Aim and objectives

The central aim of this project is to explore the **intersection between ethics and aesthetics**, and the implications of such intersections for museums so as to a) provide nuance and guidance to concrete societal debates concerning ethical issues in aesthetics and b) clarify the ethical role and responsibilities of museums and the ways they can be fulfilled.

This will be done by answering the following two more concrete questions and respective sub-questions, making up the two stages of the project:

1. *[Theoretical]* How do aesthetics and ethics relate? Does –the (im)moral value of an artwork influence its overall artistic value and, if so, to what extent? Can moral virtue contribute to (the development of) aesthetic virtue and if so, how?
2. *[Applied]* What is the moral-epistemic role of artists and of art institutions, such as museums? If artists and museums have moral duties, what are they and which strategies can they implement to fulfill them?

Stages

Stage 1: Bridging the ethical-aesthetic divide

The first stage of the project will be devoted to preparing the (theoretical) field, namely to create a common ground between ethics and aesthetics so as to bridge the ethical-aesthetic divide. This will be done in two parts.

- The first sub-part will explore the theoretical landscape of the positions on the impact of ethical values on artistic values, and provide a **conceptual map** of these positions. While according to some scholars the artistic value of an artworks is determined only by its aesthetic value (Bell, 1914), common experience shows that the moral value of an artwork influences its artistic value. However, stating that the artistic value of an artwork is determined *only* by its moral value would be equally problematic (Tolstoy, 1898/1995; Beardsmore, 1973). Because of the limits of both the abovementioned radical position, this sub-part will consider and discuss a **moderate position**, which acknowledges that moral values influence artistic value but does not reduce art to a moral matter (Carroll, 1996; Jacobson, 1997; Gaut, 1998; Kieran, 2003; 2005; Jacobson, 2006; Schellekens, 2007; 2020; Carroll, 2021).
- The second sub-part will further contribute to bridging the ethical-aesthetic divide by creating a **novel account of aesthetic virtue** in which ethical skills play a fundamental role. While some scholars have recently defended a notion of aesthetic virtue that is parallel and fundamentally similar to moral virtue (Kieran, 2010; Hills, 2018; 2020), moral and aesthetic virtue are still seen as two separate sets of virtue. In its place, this sub-part of the project will

explore the hypothesis that aesthetic and moral virtue contribute to each other's development, and that the two sets of virtue are tightly interconnected. Although it has been acknowledged that art can deepen our moral understanding (Murdoch, 1970/2003; Jacobson, 1997; Kieran, 2003; Jacobson, 2006), it remains to be seen how being an ethically virtuous person could contribute to being an aesthetically virtuous agent.

Stage 2: The moral-epistemic role of artists and museums

After having bridged the ethical-aesthetic divide in stage 1, the second stage of the project will examine the impact of a tighter connection between ethics and aesthetics on **museum practices**. This stage will focus on a specific ethical-aesthetic problem, which will be used as a case study, namely the colonial heritage held in museums.

More specifically, this stage aims at investigating the moral responsibilities of artists and of **museums** in addressing forms of structural and systematic racism and in the role they play in countering racism. This stage will consist of two sub-parts:

- The first sub-part aims at offering a novel account of art museums taken as educational institutions with a **socio-political and ethical role**. This stage will explore the hypothesis that museums, curators and artists have moral duties (Berleant, 1977). The educational and epistemic role of museums has recently received attention (Roberts, 1989; Nixon Chen, 2013). Several scholars have shown that museums, far from just reproducing forms of knowledge produced elsewhere, actively affect the production of knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Batkin, 1997; Nixon Chen, 2013). However, cases of colonial heritage held in museums urge us to examine museums' social-political and ethical role too.
- The second sub-part will yield **concrete strategies** that can be implemented by museums and museum workers to create an anti-racist future. Initially, the sub-part will reflect upon existing practices through semi-structured interviews with artists who have experimented with (or reflected on the possibility of) different modes of repairing colonial injustice. Then, the sub-part will

explore new forms of engaging with colonial heritage through a period of internship at the National Museum of World Cultures (originally created as a colonial museum) and of close collaboration with the Research Center for Material Culture.

2a3. Methodology

This is a philosophical project that takes a robustly interdisciplinary approach, being anchored in ethics, political philosophy, aesthetics, art history and museum studies. The methodology adopted will be **partially theoretical** and **partially applied**.

The first part of the project will be theoretical, and it will bring together recent literature on the impact of moral values on artistic values (Kieran, 2005; 2006; Eaton, 2006; Jacobson, 2006; Schellekens, 2007; 2020; Carroll, 2021) and on moral and aesthetic virtue (Kieran 2010; Hills, 2017; 2018; 2020). This part will include literature review and conceptual analysis.

The second part of the project will delve into museum studies' debates. It will, first, examine literature on the moral-epistemic role of museums (Roberts, 1989; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Batkin, 1997; Nixon Chen, 2013), and then focus on a specific ethical-aesthetic issue, namely the colonial heritage held in museums. This part will include an empirical component in the form of semi-structured interviews with artists and visitors at key museums in the Netherlands and a period of internship at a prominent Dutch museum.

2a4. Scientific and social relevance

Art historians and ethicists alike will benefit greatly from bringing together the ethical and aesthetic domain, whose intersection constitutes a very rich and promising terrain to explore.

On the one hand, art historians have a strong interest in philosophical topics (e.g., prof. Hanneke Grootenboer's [research](#)^{ix} on the philosophical impact of objects on the formation of thought) and ethics informs many art historical methods (Hatt & Klonk, 2006). For instance, feminist and postcolonial approaches to the interpretation of art have gained increasing popularity in recent years (Hatt & Klonk, 2006). Ethicists, who have extensively discussed topics such as [feminist ethics and meta-ethics](#),^x intersectionality and issues of race and colonialism,

would enrich these approaches by offering philosophical knowledge and **theoretical guidance**.

On the other hand, ethical debates would benefit from the engagement of aesthetic scholars and art historians who would urge ethicists to consider how traditional philosophical issues (e.g., authority, testimony, [truth](#),^{xi} moral duties and responsibilities, etc.) are discussed in other fields. Furthermore, interdisciplinary projects like this would put rather abstract moral theories to the tests (as in the case of colonial heritage, the case study of the present project).

Finally, the curatorial world and society would benefit from this project too. In fact, there is a tendency to [embrace radical ends](#)^{xii} when discussing ethical-aesthetic issues such as [what to do with colonial heritage](#)^{xiii} (e.g., *either* colonial heritage remains in Western museums *or* it is repatriated). The present project would offer **theoretically grounded nuance** to these debates while acknowledging that museums, curators and artists have a moral duty to reflect upon their role in fostering racial inequalities and upon what [strategies they can implement](#)^{xiv} to move towards an [anti-racist future](#).^{xv}

(2a1, 2a2, 2a3, 2a4 total words 2492)

2b. Workplan and timetable

1	Theoretical	9	Values of art	1 Article in <i>Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft</i> (ZÄK) or similar	(Co-) Organization of an international conference	Organization of more informal events open to the general public (e.g., <i>Film & Philosophy</i>)
		9	A novel account of aesthetic virtue	1 Article in <i>British Journal of Aesthetics</i> and/or <i>Journal of Moral Philosophy</i>		
2	Applied	6	Ethical and educational role of museums	1 Article in <i>Journal of Museum Education</i> or similar	Interdisciplinary symposium in collaboration with NICA (Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis)	
		18	Strategies for artists and museums	1 Article in <i>Museum Anthropology</i> or similar	Workshop in collaboration with the Research Center for Material Culture and <i>Repair Lab</i>	
4		6	Finalizing PhD thesis			

2c. Bibliography

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2d. Summary for non-specialists (max. 500 words)

The art world is in turmoil. Greece has repeatedly demanded the repatriation of the [Elgin Marbles](#) (at the British Museum)^{xvi}, Egypt has been trying to retrieve [Nefertiti's bust](#)^{xvii} from Germany for decades, campaigns for the [removal of \(in\)famous statues and monuments](#)^{xviii} are spreading around the globe, the [whitewashing of Ancient statues](#)^{xix} has been exposed, and museum workers are questioning [museums' histories and practices](#).^{xx}

Notwithstanding the important differences between these examples, all of them lead us into a muddy terrain where aesthetic questions intertwine with moral ones. But despite recent societal debates, ethicists and aesthetic scholars have not engaged in proper conversation. This is not because, like in the case of a fatigued couple who sees their love fading away, they do not have anything to talk about anymore. Rather, the situation in which ethicists and aesthetic scholars find themselves resembles the one of two longtime friends who have grown apart and reunite after years of not speaking, or so this project hypothesizes.

The separation between ethics and aesthetics seems to be caused by the longstanding idea that these are two separate domains with different concerns. However, as the examples above show, the ethical and aesthetic domains enter into each other's territory in significant ways.

Ethicists and aesthetic scholars alike would benefit greatly from exploring the intersection between their two respective domains of competence. On the one hand, this exploration would give theoretical support to debates that are already being held by curators, and it would help the general public to acknowledge the complexity of these ethical-aesthetic issues without adopting radical strategies (art has *everything* or *nothing* to do with ethics). On the other hand, ethicists would gain from testing their moral theories on concrete cases.

The present projects aims to bridge the separation between ethics and aesthetics and to explore the overall aethics landscape. This will be done in two stages. The first stage will examine whether – and if so to what extent – the (im)moral value of artworks has an impact on their value qua art, and how so. This stage will also discuss the hypothesis that being a morally good person contributes to have a better understanding of what makes an artwork valuable.

The second stage will explore the implications of a closer connection between aesthetics and ethics for museums, curators and artists. Can they be said to have moral responsibilities? What are they and how can these responsibilities be fulfilled? The project will offer an answer to these questions by focusing on a particular case study, namely museums' colonial heritage.

Besides bringing together philosophical literature that has generally been kept separated, the project includes interviews with museum curators, artists and visitors and a period of internship at the National Museum of World Cultures (originally created as a colonial museum). During the course of the project, public events (e.g. *Film & Philosophy*) will be organized in order to highlight the societal relevance of the issues at the crossroads between ethics and aesthetics.

(Words 499)

Curriculum Vitae

3A. PERSONAL DETAILS

Name: Ilaria Flisi

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Date of birth: 08-02-1994 (Casalmaggiore, Italy)

3B. EDUCATION

2018 - present	<i>Radboud University, Nijmegen (Netherlands)</i> Research Master Philosophy (current GPA 8.1/10) Specialization: Social and Political Philosophy Thesis: on the status and role of aesthetic experts Supervisor: dr. Fleur Jongepier
2016 - present	<i>Università di Parma, Parma (Italy)</i> Master in Philosophy (GPA 29.5/30)
2017 - 2018	<i>Radboud University, Nijmegen (Netherlands)</i> Exchange Philosophy Student
2013 - 2016	<i>Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia, Modena (Italy)</i> B.A. Humanities for the Study of Culture (grade 110/110 <i>cum laude</i>) Specialization: Philosophy Thesis: Testimony in Epistemology and Ethics Supervisor: prof. Carla Bagnoli and prof. Annalisa Coliva
2008 - 2013	<i>Istituto Superiore G. Romani, Casalmaggiore (Italy)</i> Classical High School (grade 100/100)

3C. TEACHING & ASSISTANCE (RU)

2019	Student Assistant for 'Sociology, Philosophy and Ethics of Research' (MA course, Political Science)
2019 - 2020	Work In Progress (WIP) meetings organizer for ReMa (Philosophy) students
2018-2019	Mentor during the Introduction Week for BA 'Philosophy, Politics and Society'

3D. POSITIONS

ONGOING:

December 2020 - present	Editor of the <i>APA (American Philosophical Association) Blog</i> , "Reports from Abroad" series
January 2019 - present	Editor-in-chief of the faculty journal <i>Splijstof</i>
November 2018 - present	Founder <i>Film&Philosophy</i> events
August 2018 - present	Social media editor of <i>Splijstof</i>

PAST:

- 2018 - 2020 Student Representative of the Research Master (Philosophy) students, Radboud University
- 2018 - 2020 Secretary of *Splijstof*

3E. EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

ONGOING:

- > Member of Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis (NICA)
- > Member of Nijmegen Political Philosophy Workshop (NPPW)
- > Volunteer at *Nijmeegse Kunstnacht*, 2021

PAST:

- > Volunteer at *GoShort*, International Short Film Festival Nijmegen, 2019
- > Volunteer at *InScience*, International Science Film Festival Nijmegen, 2019

3F. PUBLICATIONS

- > Interview with dr. Lonneke Peperkamp on Just War Theory, *Blog of the APA*, August 2 2021.
- > “More Than an Oculus”, *Blog of the APA*, July 5 2021.
- > Report of the PhD Springschool “Moral Theory and Real Life”, *Blog of the APA*, June 14 2021.
- > Interview with dr. Anya Topolski on race and racism in Europe, *Blog of the APA*, May 3 2021.
- > Interview with Alex Groen (Oedipus Brewery) *Splijstof* (49-2)
- > “Its just the way I look at things. Interview with Fleur Jongepier” *Splijstof* (48-3)
- > “Exploring the unspeakable: Interview with Jim Burgman” *Splijstof* (48-3)
- > “The one with a Swiss dean and a bottle of wine. Interview with Christoph Lüthy” *Splijstof* (48-2)
- > “Bits and Pieces of the Constructivist Turn. Interview with Lisa Disch and Mathijs van de Sande” *Splijstof* (47-3)
- > Editorials for numerous *Splijstof* issues
- > “The Lady of Objectivity. Interview with Professor Carla Bagnoli” *Splijstof* (47-2)
- > Report of the conference “Evoluzione Umana. Darwin, i geni e la tecnica” (Università degli studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia, April 2017). *Scienza & Filosofia*, 18, 2017

3G. PRESENTATIONS

- > “Racism and Andrea Mantegna’s oculus”, presented at ReMa WIP meeting (February 12, 2020)
- > “Are you gullible?” presented at *Film&Philosophy* (July 23, 2019)

- > “Is there a moral duty of humanitarian intervention? Reflections on Just War Theory”, presented at ReMa WIP meeting (November 14, 2018)

3H. SYMPOSIA & WORKSHOPS ORGANIZED _____

- 2021 *Splijstof strikes back!*, yearly *Splijstof* symposium, online events (June 16, 23, July 7)
- 2019 *Philosophy&Food*, Radboud University (May 24)
- 2019 *Splijstof stares into the Abyss*, yearly *Splijstof* symposium, Radboud University (May 16)

3I. SYMPOSIA & WORKSHOPS ATTENDED _____

- 2021 OZSW PhD Springschool “Moral Theory and Real Life” (April 19-23)
- 2019 Workshop “The Morality of War” (November 18)
- 2019 Amsterdam Symposium on the History of Food (November 15-16)
- 2019 HLCS (Institute for Historical, Literary and Cultural Studies, Radboud University) conference ‘Is Europe inclusive?’ (November 14-15)
- 2019 OZSW ReMa Winter School (February 22-23)
- 2017 Seminario permanente sulla normatività pratica, II edition: Disagreement (March 31)

3J. GRANTS & PRIZES _____

- 2018 Scholarships for two year Research MA Programme in Philosophy (€10.000)
- 2017 Erasmus + grant (€2.760)
- 2017 UNIMORE Prize for excellent study curriculum (€700)

3K. LANGUAGE SKILLS _____

Italian (Native Language), English (Proficient), Latin (Reading Proficient), Greek (Reading Proficient), French (Basic).

ⁱ <https://tlmagazine.com/aime-mpane-between-shadow-and-light-sculpting-and-painting-humanity/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/topstuk-in-het-africamuseum-brutaal-geroofd-uit-congo-eigendom-van-de-belgische-staat~b7c2792b/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/13/rijksmuseum-laments-dutch-failure-to-return-stolen-colonial-art>

^{iv} <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/research/spaces-speculation/future-where-racism-has-no-place>

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- ^v <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyZAgG8--Xg>
- ^{vi} <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/decouvrir/reecrire-les-memoires-et-denoncer-lhistoire-lart-postcolonial/>
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- ^{viii} <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/11/22/returning-museum-objects-former-colonies-risks-denying-britains/>
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