

Authenticity and the Aesthetic Experience of History

Erich Hatala Matthes, Department of Philosophy, Wellesley College

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Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that norms of artistic and aesthetic authenticity that prioritize material origins foreclose on broader opportunities for aesthetic experience: particularly, for the aesthetic experience of history. I focus on Carolyn Korsmeyer's recent articles in defense of the aesthetic value of genuineness and argue that her rejection of the aesthetic significance of historical value is mistaken. Rather, I argue that recognizing the aesthetic significance of historical value points the way towards rethinking the dominance of the very norms of authenticity that Korsmeyer endeavors to defend and explain.

I. Introduction

The recent destruction of ruins at the ancient city of Palmyra has spurred intense public discussions about the value of ancient objects and the possibility (or lack thereof) of their restoration. Writing in *The Guardian*, Jonathan Jones urges that Palmyra “must not be turned into a fake replica of its former glory,” claiming, “What is never legitimate is to rebuild ancient monuments using modern materials to replace lost parts” (Jones 2016). Professor Bill Finlayson is quoted by the BBC cautioning that “the dangerous precedent [of on-site reconstruction] suggests that if you destroy something, you can rebuild it and it has the same authenticity as the original” (Turner 2016).

In this paper, I challenge the norms of artistic and aesthetic authenticity that underlie these comments. I argue that an undue emphasis on material origin in common thinking about authenticity forecloses on opportunities for aesthetic experience, and in particular for the aesthetic experience of history. I begin by examining a series of recent articles by Carolyn Korsmeyer, in which she argues in favor of the aesthetic value of “genuineness” (Korsmeyer 2008, 2008, 2012, 2016). Focusing on her treatment of the distinction between “age value” and “historical value,” I aim to establish three conclusions that challenge Korsmeyer's claims. First, that appeal to historical value, as opposed to age value, is sometimes essential for explaining the value of genuineness. Second, that historical value can have just as much aesthetic significance as age value. And third, that

neither historical value nor age value (nor the aesthetic experiences they offer) need be tethered to common norms surrounding the value of material authenticity.

For the purposes of this discussion I will make the following assumptions. Although there remains debate about the nature of aesthetic experience, I will follow Korsmeyer and assume that an aesthetic experience is one with a phenomenal character that is, at least in part, prompted by and focused on a particular object (Korsmeyer 2016: 22; Cf. Korsmeyer 2012: 367). This phenomenal character need not be uniform across experiences, but will have, as she puts it, “a singular affective intensity, directness, and immediacy during which attention focuses upon the thing itself” (Korsmeyer 2016: 222). Furthermore, I will grant with Korsmeyer that aesthetically relevant properties need not be perceptually discernible, though I will spend some time discussing the mechanisms through which such properties affect aesthetic experience (Korsmeyer 2008). Finally, I will assume that an object has a certain kind of aesthetic value when it affords worthwhile aesthetic experiences of the relevant kind. For instance, Korsmeyer argues that “age value” (which requires genuineness) is an aesthetic value because of the aesthetic experience of age (and hence genuineness) that it affords (Korsmeyer 2008: 122-23).

II. Korsmeyer on Genuineness

Korsmeyer aims to “defend genuineness as an aesthetic property, an aesthetic value, and a feature of experience” (Korsmeyer 2008: 117-18). She treats “genuineness” and “authenticity” as synonymous terms, and I will follow suit (Korsmeyer 2016: 220; 2012: 366; though see Korsmeyer 2008: 117). Her primary aim is to vindicate the intuitive feeling that genuine items offer a special kind of experience (“a thrill or shiver,” the invocation of “sublimity,” “a small dose of awe”) lacked by replicas, an experience that she identifies as aesthetic (Korsmeyer 2016: 222-3; 2012: 369). Indeed, the contrast between the experience of genuine items and replicas is a touchstone

throughout her articles. She emphasizes how replicas fail to attract attention in the way that genuine items do, and describes the disappointment that attends learning that a presumed genuine artifact is actually a fake (Korsmeyer 2016: 221; 2012: 365, 75-76; 2008: 196-97). She notes that this is a feature of aesthetic experience that extends beyond artworks to artifacts and places as well (Korsmeyer 2012: 366).

Korsmeyer is clear that her interest in genuineness is prompted primarily by things that are old, and my discussion will focus on the dimensions of her account that concern the relationship between authenticity and the past (Korsmeyer 2012: 366; 2016; Korsmeyer et al. 2014). In particular, throughout her articles, Korsmeyer consistently invokes the art historian Alois Riegl's distinction between "age value" and "historical value" (Korsmeyer 2008: 122; 2016: 222; Korsmeyer et al. 2014: 429; Riegl 1982). Whereas "[Historical value] engages quests for information and knowledge about previous ways of life" (Korsmeyer 2016: 222-23), "age value is to be found in objects that embody the passage of time and that show the marks of their antiquity," yielding a distinctive aesthetic experience (Korsmeyer 2008: 122). Yuriko Saito presents a similar account that emphasizes the aesthetic relevance of age. She writes:

...[in] my aesthetic appreciation of aged objects...the associated ideas get triggered by the sensuous appearance of the object: a crack in the pot, wear and tear on a fabric, the faded colors of a painting, and the weather-beaten façade of a building. The locus of our experience is the object's appearance, and the mode of association is the "contrast" between the present condition and the earlier condition (Saito 2007: 182).

According to Korsmeyer, the relevance of the past to aesthetic experience seems to cleave along the same line as the distinction between age value and historical value. While she is adamant about the aesthetic importance of age value, which she says is "always inseparable from the sensible and affective impact that an object has on the viewer," she is more tentative about the aesthetic significance of historical value. She writes: "To the degree that historical value is connected to

science and research and the accumulation of knowledge of the past, and to the degree that it calls such investigative sensibilities into play, it may conceivably reside outside the aesthetic frame” (Korsmeyer 2008), a claim that becomes increasingly forceful throughout her work. Korsmeyer does grant that historical properties can be relevant to aesthetics: for instance, for the role they play in artistic categorization (Korsmeyer 2008; Cf. Walton 1970). But she distinguishes the indirect aesthetic relevance of historical properties from their historical value, and significantly, from the “direct and immediate” aesthetic interest that can be prompted by objects with age value (Korsmeyer 2008: 122).

III. Redeeming the Aesthetic Experience of History

I want to challenge the idea that age value is the primary or exclusive avenue through which the past enters the aesthetic frame. In doing so, I will put pressure on the dominant norms concerning authenticity and its relationship to aesthetic experience. In order to do this I will first examine the mechanism through which Korsmeyer thinks that genuine aged objects influence aesthetic experience. I will then discuss a set of cases that emphasize the importance of historical value, in contrast with age value.

As mentioned above, Korsmeyer wants to show that non-perceptual properties (like genuineness) can feature in aesthetic experience. How do they do this? The answer is that aesthetic experiences are cognitively penetrable. According to Korsmeyer, “The non-perceptual cognitive state of believing an object to be genuine has a particular phenomenal character, and that character penetrates the perceptual experience of the object, occasioning an aesthetic encounter” (Korsmeyer 2012: 374). Korsmeyer is not alone in holding this view: indeed, it is a natural route for anyone wishing to explain how non-perceptual properties can be incorporated into aesthetic experience (Cf. Hopkins 2005: 127). For Korsmeyer, however, the role played by cognitive penetrability is more

specific than the general observation that our aesthetic experience is “imbued with thought, imagination, and emotion” (Goldman 2006: 337). Rather, on Korsmeyer’s account, the cognitive penetrability of experience is used to justify the otherwise “magical thinking” involved in the thought that “the experience of being in contact with the real thing conveys an impression that the act of touching possesses a sort of transitivity: that by touching, one becomes a link in a chain that unites one with some original object, with a creative hand, with a remembered or historical event, or with others who have touched the same thing” (Korsmeyer 2012: 372).

It is essential to recognize that this “transitivity of touch” is at the root of Korsmeyer’s view about the value of genuineness. While Korsmeyer devotes most of her attention to explaining why genuineness is necessary to preserving the transitivity of touch, and thus providing a distinctive aesthetic experience, she often seems to suggest that it is sufficient as well. In the quote above, she notes that the act of touching itself possesses the relevant transitivity. Elsewhere, she writes: “in the case of most artefacts their *mere authenticity* is what is important” (Korsmeyer 2016: 221, emphasis added).

However, this has puzzling implications. Granted the phenomenon of wonder at aged things occurs, it does not occur constantly, or even frequently. Museums of art and anthropology are brimming with aged objects, but equally old objects do not seem equally primed to elicit the feelings of awe and sublimity that Korsmeyer implies that the transitivity of touch should generate.¹ Even diverse objects that put us “in touch” with the same historical figure seem more or less apt to provide the experiences of wonder that Korsmeyer is concerned with. As noted, Korsmeyer often appeals to the throngs who gather to view objects such as the Gettysburg Address (Korsmeyer 2012: 365). But if the value of our proximity to these objects lies in their ability to put us in touch with the past, why doesn’t one of Lincoln’s socks do the same work? The same point applies in the context

¹ I follow Korsmeyer here in using the causal language of “priming” and “generating,” but the underlying concern is really a normative one: it is fitting that these objects don’t all cause such experiences because they don’t all merit them.

of artworks. We have all seen photographs of the mobs around the Mona Lisa, cameras held high (the need to take one's own picture perhaps an extension of the transitivity of touch). I don't doubt that the crowd would dissipate if the painting were revealed to be a fake. But why no crowds around Da Vinci's lesser known drawings? The obvious answer is that they are not as famous as the Mona Lisa, but that introduces an alternative explanation that combines genuineness with other relevant historical properties. It does not in fact appear to be the *mere* authenticity of the object that draws crowds and elicits wonder, but rather, genuineness appears to be linked with historical value as well. I do not want to belabor the point that authenticity is not sufficient to provide the relevant aesthetic experience, as this claim is not Korsmeyer's primary focus. But granted that genuineness is necessary to providing the experience that draws crowds, these cases call into question whether it is primarily age value and the transitivity of touch, as Korsmeyer contends, that explain that necessity.

Having suggested that historical value can be key to understanding the appeal of genuineness, I now want to argue that it is just as aesthetically significant as age value. While age value focuses our attention on abstract concepts such as temporality and transience, historical value is concerned with the specific dimensions of past events. So not only might an object with age value be worthless in historical terms, but it would hold our attention in a different way.

Consider this remark by Arthur Danto in his essay on the battlefield at Gettysburg:

It is always moving to visit a battlefield when the traces of war itself have been erased by nature or transfigured by art, and to stand amid memorial weapons, which grow inevitably quaint and ornamental with the evolution of armamentary technology, mellowing under patinas and used, now, to punctuate the fading thematizations of strife (Danto 1987).

While this experience is marked by the passage of time, clearly its significance cannot adequately be captured by the notion of age value—while the armaments are weathered, it does not appear that the landscape itself can even be said to show signs of age value given that “the traces of war itself have been erased.” Danto's evocative description clearly captures an aesthetic experience, at least as much

as any of Korsmeyer's other cases: he describes the experience as "moving" and the portrait is replete with aesthetic concepts (Sibley 1959). Moreover, while the aesthetic experience of the battlefield incorporates "the past that it embodies" (as Korsmeyer puts it elsewhere), it does so in a manner that is necessarily bound up with historical information and knowledge, the very features that Korsmeyer associates with historical value and locates outside the aesthetic frame (Korsmeyer 2016: 222). The "fading thematizations of strife" cannot be accounted for by the concept of age value. Rather, Danto's description illuminates how the aesthetic experience of history operates by imbuing our sensory experience of things themselves with meaning based on historical knowledge. Moreover, it is worth noting that many of the "memorial weapons" at Gettysburg are replicas, but contra Korsmeyer, it is not obvious that this undermines their aesthetic appeal when regarded with respect to their historical value, as opposed to their age value. This claim will no doubt face opposing intuitions, so I will turn to a different case to assist in defending it.

At the Montshire Museum of Science in Vermont, there is an exhibit that allows visitors to experience various historical soundscapes of the local environment. By pressing a series of buttons, you can hear recordings of what the local fauna would have sounded like at different points in Vermont history. Close your eyes and you can feel the birdsong transport you to another time; you might imagine the museum evaporating as you fill in the historical landscape in your mind's eye. Now, I take it that this should clearly count as an aesthetic experience of history in the relevant sense: the direct object of attention is the birdsong, experienced with reference to its historical value. But notice that no aspect of this experience relies on genuineness in the sense of material origins: the recordings are not themselves recordings of a previous time, but fabrications of what those times would have sounded like. They are genuine in the sense that they are true: they don't include the sounds of fauna that we lack evidence for believing we could find in Vermont in 1875. However, they are just as much replicas as the material replicas that Korsmeyer thinks interrupt the transitivity

of touch (Korsmeyer 2012: 377). This suggests two conclusions. First, the aesthetic experience of history can come apart from genuineness in Korsmeyer's sense. Second, Korsmeyer's privileging of touch as the sensory modality most intimately related to the aesthetic value of genuineness can crowd out other ways of construing genuineness and the historical properties that it involves.²

We can read these conclusions back into the context of material objects by considering cases of age value and historical value that are not so clearly dependent on material genuineness as Korsmeyer thinks. In her recent book *Patina*, anthropologist Shannon Lee Dawdy explores the various dimensions of "pastness" on display in New Orleans, the "antique city." Dawdy suggests that patina (which we can gloss as akin to the aged appearance that Korsmeyer discusses) can be understood "as a medium of aesthetic value *perceived* to have accumulated through time" (Dawdy 2016: 5). The emphasis is Dawdy's own, and is meant to capture the fact that the "material realms" that residents and visitors prize for their history "have undergone major renovations, revolutions, and episodes of invention" (Dawdy 2016: 5). Her aim is not to debunk their attachments, but rather to explore the ways in which an aesthetic concern with the past is mediated by other forces. Indeed, sometimes these interventions are manifest, but do not result in the disappointment that Korsmeyer discusses in cases where previously unknown replicas are revealed.

Dawdy relates a conversation with "Tom," an antiques dealer and collector with a particular interest in clocks. He tells her that he doesn't like clocks that are "too clean," that "a real true collector like patina." When asked why, he explains that patina "just reminds you of the past and what the piece has been through." However, he then notes that he doesn't like clocks to be "real dirty or anything." Although he says he'll "go to great pains to keep original finishes," if the clock is too dirty, he explains to Dawdy that he will fabricate a new patina after he cleans it. As Dawdy notes

² Compare with other conceptions of authenticity that focus more on practices than material objects, such as the ritual reconstruction of Buddhist temples. See Karlstrom (2015).

in an editorial comment: “A ‘real true collector’ likes patina—and knows how to fake it” (Dawdy 2016: 132-33).

The point is not that Tom is uninterested in age value in Korsmeyer’s sense, but rather, that the right explanation for his interest may not require the same emphasis on genuineness as Korsmeyer’s account. Korsmeyer writes: “While marks of age may be replicated—chips, cracks, signs of wear—they do not have the same effect as something that is truly aged” (Korsmeyer 2016: 224). Yet this is precisely what Tom is doing. Why? Perhaps for the sake of selling the clock, but there is a less cynical explanation available. His interest in having clocks that are dirty but not *too* dirty, his comment that he likes “a little patina,” suggest the priority in having the right look of age, independently of whether that look was the result of age itself. It’s not that he doesn’t value original finishes, it’s just that he values a proper-looking patina more. The best “reminders of the past” may not be genuinely aged. Interestingly, it may be that an old clock (as opposed to a brand new one) is best, but not because it embodies the passage of time in Korsmeyer’s sense: rather, it is the knowledge of its oldness that grounds the relevant aesthetic experience, even if the sensuous manifestation of age is fabricated.

There isn’t space here to explore more of Dawdy’s fascinating book, and she is explicit that she is in part “redeeming nostalgia and the category of the fetish”: she is in agreement with Korsmeyer about the value of old things (Dawdy 2016: 143).³ But the picture that emerges from her investigations in New Orleans is that patina is more about the accrual of stories than it is about genuineness. As she puts it at one point: “The point is not that we should evaluate souvenirs along a scale from authentic to fake, but that their value inheres in their relationship to temporality and circulation” (Dawdy 2016: 122).

³ For further discussion of *Patina*, please see my book review, forthcoming in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

IV. Conclusion

I have presented a range of cases and considerations that challenge common norms surrounding authenticity and its relationship to aesthetic experience, and specifically the explanation and defense of these norms offered by Korsmeyer. By redeeming the aesthetic significance of historical value, and demonstrating how both it and age value need not be bound to considerations of material genuineness, we open up conceptual space for rethinking how we understand, create, and present opportunities for the aesthetic experience of history. Though I cannot fully explore the implications of this shift here, among other things, it holds promise for imbuing historic restoration with new moral and political significance. To circle back to the case of Palmyra, rather than bemoan the lack of authenticity of potential replicas and reconstructions, we might ask how these efforts can best harness the motivational affect of aesthetic experience (wonder, awe, thrill, etc.) to educate people about the ruins, the significance of their destruction, and how their history relates to the political situation in Syria today (Matthes 2017).⁴

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