Reflections on Art: Aesthetic Experience, Classical Tradition, and Critical Judgment

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Abstract
Aesthetic experience is formed at the convergence of formal structure, historical lineage, and the embodied viewer's perceptual engagement. This article traces that convergence over a broad temporal and conceptual arc, beginning with classical ideals of proportion, harmony, and symbolic ordering in Greco-Roman and Renaissance traditions. It proceeds to examine the disruptive ruptures introduced by modernist and avant-garde movements, including impressionist reconfigurations of color and light, cubist deconstructions of form, and conceptual art's prioritization of idea over object. The discussion then moves to contemporary practices that dematerialize the art object, repositioning the viewer as an active participant through performance, installation, and immersive digital environments. Drawing on hermeneutic philosophy, sociocultural critique, perceptual psychology grounded in Gestalt theory, and empathy-focused neuroscience research, the analysis demonstrates how aesthetic judgment is historically situated, socially mediated, and emotionally embodied. Classical academic canons continue to influence pedagogy and reception, yet expanded categories beauty, the ugly, the grotesque, the tragic, the conceptual, and the relational, demand more inclusive interpretive frameworks. Institutional and critical discourses shape the boundaries of art, especially when ordinary objects or provisional materials enter curatorial spaces. Recognizing these layered conditions encourages pluralistic, critical approaches to art appreciation. The article concludes that fostering historical literacy alongside empathetic engagement equips students and audiences to co-create meaning across cultural contexts and evolving aesthetic paradigms.
Keywords: *Aesthetic experience; Art canon; Conceptual art; Viewer participation; Art criticism; Empathy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Aesthetic experience is never neutral. It unfolds at the intersection of form, memory, culture, and the embodied perceiver who stands before the work. This article proposes to analyze how aesthetic experience is constructed and interpreted across classical and contemporary art contexts, taking seriously both the weight of artistic traditions and the lived, situated responses of viewers. The inquiry is motivated by pedagogical questions emerging from higher art education: How do students learn to "read" artworks not merely as beautiful objects, but as layered cultural, emotional, and cognitive events? The movement in what follows is deliberate: from inherited canons to lived encounters, from the museum wall to the imaginative interior of the viewer.

Historically grounded approaches remind us that artworks are never isolated from the conditions of their making. Greek and Roman traditions established proportion, material discipline, and symbolic ordering as durable reference points in academic art, even as later cultures reinterpreted these legacies to serve new visual languages (Gutiérrez, 2013; Gadamer, 1995). In medieval and ecclesiastical settings, visual production was frequently subordinated to devotional function, constraining artistic autonomy and codifying image use within liturgical frameworks (Lahoz, 2012). Gadamer's hermeneutic insight that artworks are both historically embedded and continuously re-interpreted underscores why reception cannot be separated from context (Gadamer, 1995). Yet context alone does not exhaust the work of interpretation.

Viewers bring prior classifications, emotional states, and social settings that condition what they see and how they evaluate it. A viewer's predisposition to recognize "this is art" versus "this is just something interesting" alters the weight given to formal analysis, affective response, or narrative content (Leder et al., 2004). Institutional frames also matter. A work encountered in a museum may read as a historical document, whereas in a studio critique, it may become a provocation to experiment, analysis, or self-reflection (Leder et al., 2004).

At stake, then, are three guiding themes that structure the present article: first, the role of tradition in shaping artistic norms; second, the subjectivity of aesthetic perception, including sensory, emotional, and empathetic engagements; and third, the evolving artwork–viewer–context triad, where meaning is co-produced in time. These themes will be developed across historical references, conceptual distinctions, and close attention to pedagogical and interpretive practice.

2. Foundations of the Aesthetic Experience

2.1 Definition and Core Components

The term *aesthetics* derives from the Greek *aisthêsis*, signifying the capacity for sensation and perception. Sanagogo (2012) broadens the field to include the study of sensitivity, taste, beauty, feeling, art, and object appreciation, positioning aesthetics as a potential that traverses all human activity, even beyond formal artistic production. Within that expanded field, classic categories, beautiful, ugly, sublime, grotesque, comic, and tragic, organize recurrent modes of response while reminding us that aesthetic value cannot be collapsed into harmony alone (Sanagogo, 2012). Buck-Morss (1993), reading Benjamin, shows how these categories stretch further still when entire political or technological environments become aestheticized, fascism, warfare, and mass spectacle all inscribe aesthetic codes into public consciousness.

Sensory Perception

Aesthetic encounter begins sensorially: line, texture, chromatic contrast, spatial rhythm, scale. Yet sensation is not mechanically additive. Gestalt theory reminds us that wholes are perceived before parts; the perceptual "take" organizes itself according to pattern, grouping, and figure–ground relations (Ciafardo, 2020; Köhler, 1972). Because perceptual fields resist simple summation, small formal shifts can transform the meaning of the whole composition. Muradas (1995) argues that once a work is complete, altering even a minor element effectively produces another work with a different intentional horizon.

Perception is also selective. Visual hierarchies emerge not only from compositional design but from the viewer's shifting attention. Schnaith (1988) observes that visual objects gain significance only as they are chosen by the observer; focal points are not fixed but negotiated in looking. This fluidity is pedagogically important: training the eye means learning to redirect attention, to read structure, to recognize how formal signals guide or misguide interpreters.

Emotional Resonance and Empathic Projection

Sensory encounter rapidly shades into feeling. Capó (2004) develops the notion of *endopathy* or aesthetic empathy (*Einfühlung*) as a two-stage process of projection into the world of the artwork and subsequent imitation/internalization, allowing the viewer to experience the work from within its affective atmosphere. Gallese's (2001) neurocognitive account of shared neural systems for perceiving actions and emotions offers a biological substrate for such empathic uptake: because human brains simulate the intentions of others, viewers can resonate with the gestures embodied in images. Extending this, Ganczarek, Hünefeldt, and Olivetti Belardinelli (2018) distinguish aesthetic empathy from interpersonal empathy, noting that artworks invite internal projection whether through human depiction or through their status as human artifacts.

Cognitive Engagement and Context

No aesthetic experience is purely affective. Interpretation requires the viewer to situate the work in historical, cultural, or discursive frames, even when those frames are only partially known. De Certeau (1988) shows how visual communication is stratified across socioeconomic landscapes; images circulate differently across elite, popular, and resistant communities, and reading them requires attention to power and place. Institutional or spatial context, for example, museum versus gallery, reshapes evaluative focus, making historical documentation, formal experimentation, or affective immediacy alternately salient (Leder et al., 2004).

Table 1. Leder et al. (2004) Aesthetic Experience Model: Stages and Variables

Stages of Experience	Description	Contextual Variables
1. Perceptual Analysis	Initial visual exploration of formal features	Pre-classification (prior knowledge)
2. Implicit Memory Integration	Recognition based on familiarity and memory	Physical context (environmental cues)
3. Explicit Classification	Art categorization (style, genre, theme)	Social discourse (criticism, reviews)
4. Cognitive Mastering	Interpretation and meaning-making	Emotional-affective state of the viewer
5. Evaluation	Judgment of personal preference or aesthetic value	–

The Leder et al. (2004) framework clearly distinguishes stages of aesthetic processing from initial perception to final evaluation, highlighting how contextual factors such as the viewer's emotional state or social discourse significantly influence interpretation (see Table 1).

In pedagogical environments, students gradually learn to integrate these sensory, affective, and contextual registers, recognizing that formal structure, expressive intensity, and cultural reference interpenetrate. Figures in your source file that map Formal, Aesthetic-Sensitive, and Theoretical components will be referenced in later sections to scaffold that integrative learning (see Figure A, adapted from study graphics).

2.2 Aesthetic Experience vs. Beauty

A crucial clarification: not all-powerful aesthetic encounters are beautiful, and not all beauty guarantees aesthetic depth. Sanagogo's category system already positions the Ugly, Grotesque, and Tragic as legitimate aesthetic modalities alongside the Beautiful, widening the evaluative field. Historical theory reinforces this breadth. The Platonic–Aristotelian inheritance long privileged mimesis and proportion, but later thinkers warned against reducing art to imitation or decorative harmony; the very *confusion* inherent in transformed representation can generate meaning (Verdenius & Echeverri, 1996). Table 2 summarizes the three major components and the specific sub-elements used to evaluate each artwork.

Table 2. Conceptual Components and Their Analyzed Sub-elements

Component	Analyzed Sub-elements
Formal Component	Techniques and Materials; Style/Movement; Composition
Aesthetic-Sensitive	Aesthetic Experience; Sensory Perception; Subjective Interpretation
Theoretical Component	Themes and Concepts; Historical-Cultural Context; Symbols and Metaphors

Contemporary pedagogy must therefore equip viewers to recognize expressive intention even when form unsettles. Soto (2009) contrasts an *aesthetic principle* oriented toward sensory immediacy with a *poetic principle* that foregrounds intentional making, materials, and technique, suggesting that the richest works operate across both registers. Muradas (1995) similarly reminds us that meaning emerges from the relational mesh of a work's elements, plastic, symbolic, and affective, not from any single formal trait.

When beauty recedes and affective dissonance rises, viewers often rely on empathic or contextual frames to orient themselves. Capó's (2004) endopathic model encourages viewers to "enter" the work, while Gallese's (2001) mirror-based account explains why gestural distortions still register as humanly legible. This is especially relevant to artists such as Francis Bacon, whose violently reworked bodies and chromatic tensions defy harmonious proportion yet sustain intense aesthetic engagement (Algargos, 2015; Calvo Santos, 2016).

Finally, environments stripped of familiar cultural markers, what Augé (1998) calls *non-places*, can heighten reliance on immediate sensory and emotional cues; here the aesthetic experience may precede and even substitute for beauty-based judgment. The broadened frame adopted in this article will therefore treat beauty as one historical value among many aesthetic intensities, opening interpretive room for irony, rupture, trauma, digital hybridity, and emergent forms.

3. Aesthetic Judgment and Subjectivity

3.1 Philosophical Bases

Debates about aesthetic judgment often begin with Immanuel Kant's account of *disinterested pleasure*, the experience of delight in the form or purposiveness of an object without desire to possess or use it. Although Kant is not directly represented in the present reference list, his legacy persists across modern hermeneutic, phenomenological, and sociocultural readings of art. Gadamer's long meditation on understanding reminds us that judgment is never truly disinterested in the strict Kantian sense because interpretation is historically affected; viewers approach works through inherited prejudgments that both limit and enable meaning (Gadamer, 1995). In art reception specifically, the horizon of the interpreter fuses with that of the work, producing an event of understanding rather than a neutral verdict. Ortiz de Urbina's treatment of reception in the *History of Aesthetic Ideas and Contemporary Art Theories* further develops this point, emphasizing that what counts as a work worthy of judgment has itself shifted over time as theoretical frames change (Ortiz de Urbina, 1995).

If Kant supplied the grammar of aesthetic autonomy, twentieth-century theory complicated it by insisting that judgment is socially mediated. Even without citing Pierre Bourdieu directly, the contours of a sociological aesthetics can be traced through works that expose how everyday spatial practice, codes of perception, and

cultural environments stratify access to and valuation of art. De Certeau (1988) shows that practices of walking, using, and appropriating urban signs produce differential cultural literacies that condition how symbolic objects are read. Schnaith (1988) argues that perceptual and representational codes are learned within visual cultures, which means that the capacity to see stylistic nuance is distributed unevenly.

Sanagogo (2012) widens the aesthetic field beyond fine art to include sensitivity, taste, and feeling across domains of life, a move that destabilizes hierarchies premised on elite cultural training and invites comparative study of "high" and "low" responses. Augé's (1998) concept of *non-places,* anonymous spaces of supermodernity such as airports and transit hubs, adds a spatial dimension: in placeless environments, habitual cultural anchors for judgment may weaken, making viewers rely more on immediate sensory and affective cues. Together, these works suggest that what might be called "cultural capital" operates through learned perceptual grammars, spatial literacies, and institutional exposure rather than innate refinement.

The modern and contemporary expansion of what counts as art, captured in Danto's philosophical horizon of the "end of art," puts further pressure on inherited criteria. Once anything can be art in principle, judgment must shift from categorical recognition to interpretive argument supported by context, intention, and theory (Danto, 1995). Subsequent critiques of Danto's demarcation problem in aesthetics show how fragile the boundary between art and non-art becomes when stripped of institutional and historical scaffolds (Páez, 2008; Peñuela, 2008).

3.2 Subjective Filters and Cultural Context

Aesthetic judgment is filtered through the lived histories of viewers. Memory, education, and cultural location contour what is noticed, valued, or dismissed. In pedagogical and research settings alike, qualitative and interpretive methods stress the importance of attending to lived experience as a condition of meaning-making; Van Manen (2003) shows how experiential narratives surface tacit understandings that structure response in educational contexts. Similarly, Paz (2003) argues that qualitative traditions in education reveal layered interpretive frameworks that formal analysis alone cannot capture.

Hermeneutic approaches deepen this insight. Because understanding is dialogical, the meaning of an artwork unfolds as the interpreter brings forward questions shaped by prior learning, cultural narratives, and even religious or political imaginaries (Gadamer, 1995; Gadamer, 1975). The reception of medieval iconography by contemporary audiences unfamiliar with its theological coding illustrates how gaps in cultural literacy alter both the immediacy and the depth of response (Lahoz, 2012).

Table 3. Hermeneutic Analysis of Student Interpretations Across Visual Art Cycles

Academic Cycle	Dominant Analytical Strengths	Areas Needing Development
4-7 (Professional Unit)	Formal precision, accurate use of visual vocabulary, strong identification of compositional elements	Limited theoretical depth, basic emotional interpretations
8 (Curricular Integration)	Advanced theoretical awareness, broader emotional and aesthetic categorization (sublime, grotesque)	Minor inconsistencies in symbolic interpretation

As depicted in Table 3, interpretative competencies evolve notably from early to advanced cycles. Students initially excel in formal analysis but gradually develop richer theoretical contexts and emotional interpretations with higher academic engagement. The difference between cultivated taste and popular taste emerges wherever access to symbolic codes is uneven. Schnaith (1988) shows that the visual field does not self-announce its hierarchies; what appears trivial to an untrained eye may function as a central structural device to a trained one. Sanagogo's (2012) inclusive mapping of aesthetic categories supports bridging this divide by legitimizing diverse responses, including those rooted in everyday sensibility rather than academic training. De Certeau (1988) reinforces the point: users of culture tactically appropriate signs in ways that differ from producers' intentions, generating parallel interpretive economies that complicate top-down models of refined taste.

Institutional mediation can widen or narrow these divides. As Danto (1995) and the demarcation debates that followed make clear, when galleries, universities, and critical discourses designate an object as art, they invite a cultivated reading; when similar objects circulate in informal or vernacular environments, they may be received through popular or experiential registers (Páez, 2008; Peñuela, 2008). Educational strategies that explicitly juxtapose these modes, placing, for example, Francis Bacon's emotionally charged figuration alongside devotional or vernacular imagery, can help students recognize how their interpretive habits are socially learned and historically contingent.

In sum, aesthetic judgment is not simply a private response nor a universal verdict, but a negotiated act shaped by philosophical inheritances, institutional signals, cultural literacies, and lived experience. Recognizing the subjective filters at play does not relativize art into meaninglessness; rather, it discloses the layered pathways through which artworks continue to speak across time and difference.

4. Classical Tradition and the Aesthetic Canon

4.1 Origins of the Classical Canon

The very idea of a *canon* in Western art history owes much to the prestige of antiquity. The classical Greek practice, initially artisanal in social status but conceptually ambitious in outcome, established proportion, anatomical idealization, and compositional clarity as enduring reference points for later periods. Shiner and González (2014) remind us that in the ancient and medieval worlds, the distinctions we now draw between "fine art" and "craft" did not exist; artistic making belonged to a continuum of skilled practices grounded in tradition, invention, and material intelligence. That continuum helps explain how sculptural systems associated with ideal bodies, what later academicians would retroactively call "canons," could migrate across media and centuries without requiring a modern institutional definition of Art.
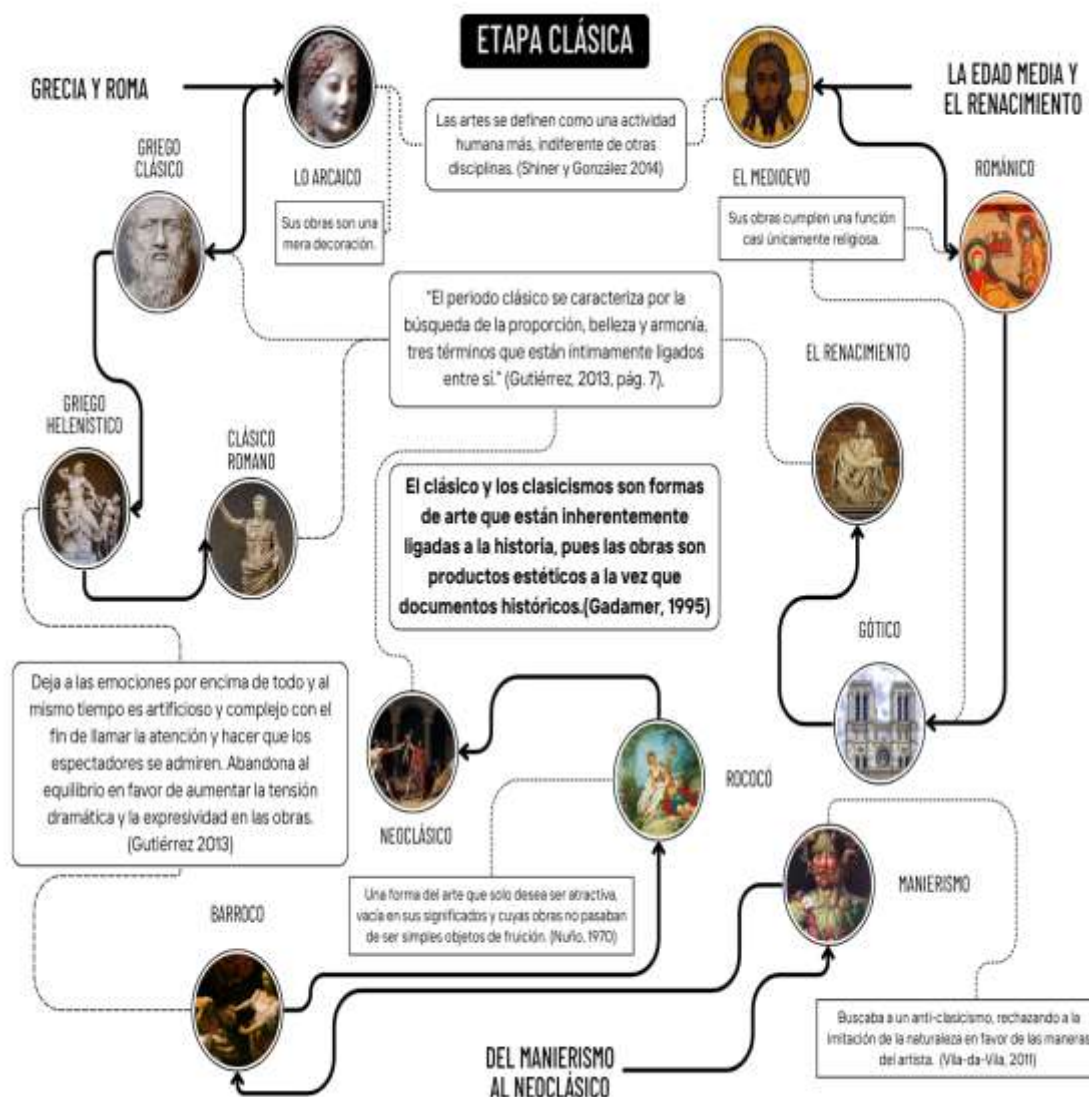
The persistence of such inherited procedures also clarifies why later viewers, faced with complex stylistic overlays, continue to read anatomical proportionality as a marker of "classical" quality, even when the work is historically hybrid. Student responses to the Laocoön study in your dataset, for example, frequently identify "classical canon," "idealized proportion," or "pyramidal/triangular" balance as signs of learned order within expressive turbulence.

Classical Greek art consolidated these formal ambitions in the 5th century BCE and then carried them forward, modified by Hellenistic theatricality and heightened emotional charge. Gadamer (1995) underscores that these works are historically embedded: they function simultaneously as aesthetic objects and as documents of a lived cultural world. As styles shifted, viewers learned to read them in different ways. Ortiz de Urbina (1995) distinguishes between a *ritual-historical* mode of reception grounded in use and context and an *imaginary museum* mode that abstracts works into aesthetic exemplars, a distinction that still informs classroom analysis of antique models.

Transmission into Rome intensified the codifying impulse. Greek classicism became a pedagogical standard in Roman territories after conquest; Hellenistic expressivity intermingled with Roman pragmatism, realism, and imperial display, producing a hybrid language of monumentality that future academies would mine for rules and prestige (Gutiérrez, 2013). Across these appropriations, the search for balance, harmony, and beauty remained a throughline. Gutiérrez (2013) explicitly links the *classical period* to these three interlocking ideals: proportion, beauty, and harmony, whose persistence explains classical art's long afterlife in pedagogical models.

The Renaissance famously reactivated Greco-Roman visual thought. Rooted in humanism, new science, and an awakened memory of Rome, Italian artists reconstructed antique anatomy, perspective, and sculptural poise while selectively retaining medieval devotional forms (Brihuega, 1995; Rodríguez, 2004; Pitarch et al., 2007). In practice, this revival fused Roman ideals of power, Gothic verticality, and Hellenistic theatrical expression, an intensely syncretic energy that helped institutionalize the concept of an academic canon (Brihuega, 1995).

By the Enlightenment, Neoclassicism turned that inheritance into doctrine: a return to balance, harmony, and civic virtue that rejected Rococo frivolity and embraced Greco-Roman clarity as a moral-aesthetic corrective (Nuño, 1970). The long transmission of proportion, harmony, and symbolic order from Greek sculpture through Roman adaptation and later academic codification is summarized in Figure 1 (Gutiérrez, 2013; Gadamer, 1995; Brihuega, 1995; Nuño, 1970; Pitarch et al., 2007; Rodríguez, 2004).

Note. Graphic of the Classical Stage. Constructed by the researcher. (2025).
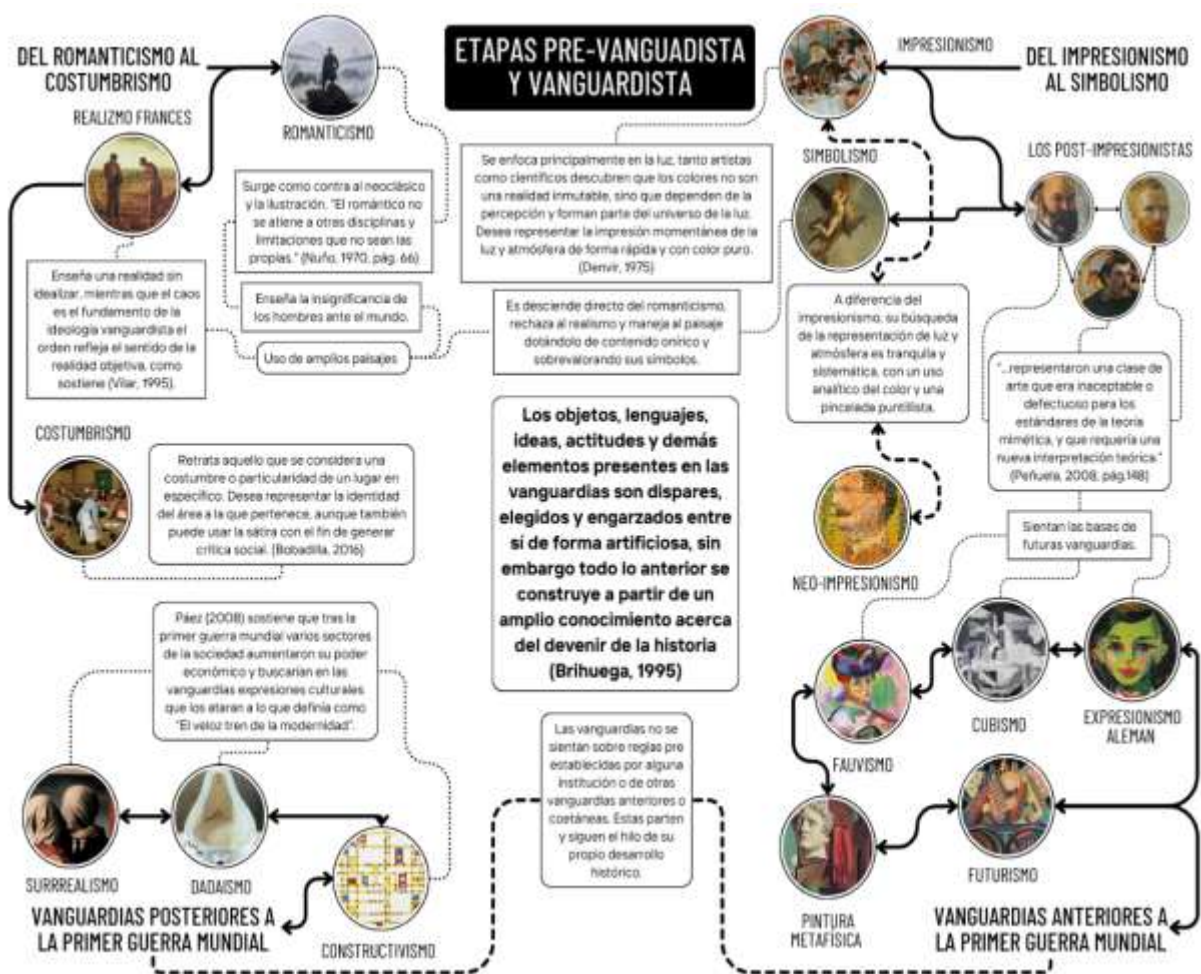
Figure 1. Classical stage

4.2 Critiques and Reinterpretations

The 19th and 20th centuries fractured the hegemony of the classical canon. As industrial modernity accelerated, artists and publics alike confronted conditions that rendered inherited mimetic and academic rules insufficient. The *pre-avant-garde* already signaled a turn away from strict mimesis and academy-bound canons; Brihuega (1995) warns against forcing the rich diversity of emergent movements into a universalist theory, emphasizing instead their historically specific rebellions against "official art." Impressionism's open-air immediacy, with its radical focus on light and perceptual variability, broke the finish and polish of academic painting (Denvir, 1975). Post-Impressionists pushed further, generating forms "unacceptable" under mimetic standards and demanding new theoretical interpretation (Peñuela, 2008).

The early avant-gardes, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, and Dada among them, rejected inherited norms in favor of experimental freedoms that privileged attitude, concept, fragmentation, velocity, or provocation over proportion and harmony. Their heterogeneity, historically aware yet anti-systematic, marks a decisive break between classicism and modernity (Brihuega, 1995). The Dada embrace of readymades and anti-technique explicitly challenged the relation between art and nature, detonating the last defenses of academic canon (Brihuega, 1995). As theoretical guardrails fell, the very boundary of "what counts as art" became unstable;

Danto (1995) famously dramatizes this with his comparison of nineteenth-century expectations to the shock of Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, an ordinary shovel admitted as art.

The rupture opened toward plural canons. Romanticism elevated subjective vision; Realism dignified peasant and labor scenes; both movements widened subject matter beyond court and church (Nuño, 1970). Costumbrismo extended this expansion by foregrounding local customs, regional identity, and even satirical critique of modernization, evidence that "canonical" art could emerge from vernacular lifeworlds (Bobadilla, 2016). Anthropological approaches insist that works outside elite institutions encode social knowledge equal in interpretive value to academic art; De Rota (1990) cautions against reading pre-Renaissance or "primitive" works only as decorative beauty, urging attention to other aesthetic aims. De Certeau (1988) similarly documents "images of resistance" generated in working-class and marginalized communities' visual practices that contest dominant cultural codes and argue for multiple, coexisting canons. Challenges to academic canon from Impressionist facture to Dada readymades and vernacular Costumbrista subjects are mapped in Figure 2 (Denvir, 1975; Brihuega, 1995; Peñuela, 2008; Páez, 2008; Bobadilla, 2016; De Rota, 1990; De Certeau, 1988).

Note. Graphic of the avant-garde stage. Researcher construction. (2025)

Figure 2. Pre-Avant-Garde / Avant-Garde Stages

Contemporary pedagogies reflect this expanded field by teaching students to classify works across broad cultural and historical spectra, Greek naturalism, Islamic iconoclasm, Romanesque devotion, Quattrocento perspective, humanist Renaissance, Enlightenment Baroque, and the canon-breaking avant-gardes so that no single lineage forecloses others (Danto, 1995). Table 4 offers a concise comparative overview, highlighting key artistic movements and their significant innovations across historical periods, from Classical to Contemporary art.

Table 4. Comparative Timeline of Major Aesthetic Movements

Historical Period	Major Movements	Key Innovations and Concepts	Notable Artists/Works
Classical (5th BCE–4th CE)	Greek/Roman Classicism	Proportion, harmony, ideal form	*Polykleitos* – Doryphoros, *Laocoön*
Medieval (5th–14th c.)	Romanesque/Gothic	Symbolic religious imagery, devotional function	Chartres Cathedral, Cimabue
Renaissance (14th–16th c.)	Humanism	Perspective, anatomical accuracy, revival of classical ideals	Leonardo da Vinci – Mona Lisa, Michelangelo – David
Enlightenment (17th–18th c.)	Baroque, Neoclassicism	Dramatic realism, emotional intensity (Baroque); Return to classical purity (Neoclassicism)	Caravaggio – The Calling of St. Matthew; Jacques-Louis David – Oath of the Horatii
Modernist/Avant-Garde (Late 19th–Mid-20th c.)	Impressionism, Cubism, Dada	Experimentation with color, light; Fragmentation, abstraction, conceptual challenge	Monet – Impression Sunrise; Picasso – Les Demoiselles d'Avignon; Duchamp – Fountain
Contemporary (Post-1950s)	Conceptualism, Installation, Digital & Immersive Art	Dematerialization, idea over object, viewer participation, relational aesthetics	Joseph Kosuth – One and Three Chairs; Yayoi Kusama – Infinity Mirror Rooms

5. Aesthetic Experience in Contemporary Art

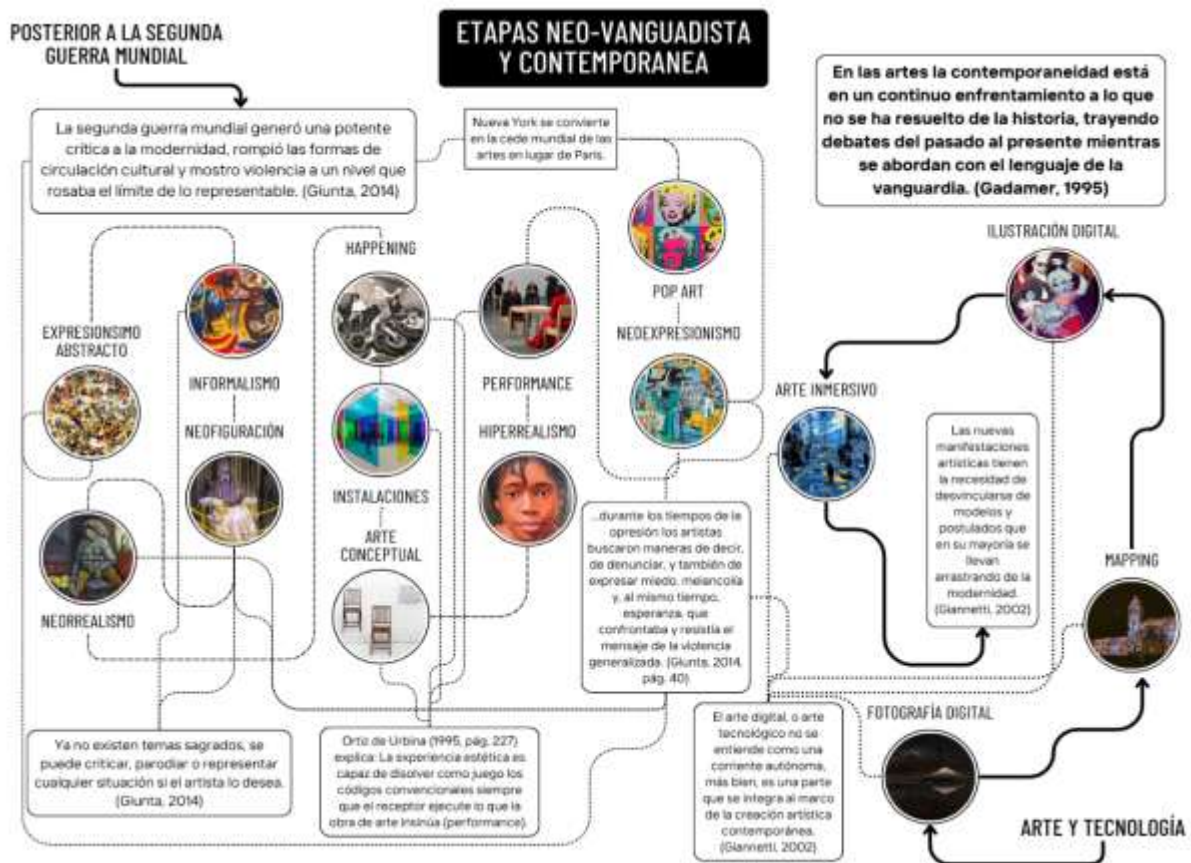### 5.1 Dematerialization of the Art Object

By the second half of the twentieth century, artists across Europe and the Americas were working under the long shadow of war, technological acceleration, cultural displacement, and deep distrust of inherited traditions. The manuscript's Post-Avant-Garde and Contemporary Stages section links these social ruptures to artistic moves that *rejected technique* and *academic canons*, opening the field to radically new expressive strategies in which the *idea* could eclipse material craft. (Giunta, 2014). As violence, exile, and fractured cultural circulation reshaped artistic production, creators distorted or abandoned form to articulate critique, subjectivity, and social urgency. (Giunta, 2014).

Within this turbulent climate, artists and theorists began explicitly to separate concept from object. Your manuscript's "Conceptual and Installation Art" subsection defines *conceptual art* as a practice in which "the idea behind the work" is primary and "the viewer's interpretation is secondary," emphasizing that the *material product* is no longer the privileged carrier of meaning. (Ortiz de Urbina, 1995; Giunta, 2014). That reordering of priorities reframes the aesthetic experience as largely cognitive: the viewer receives a proposition, instruction, or linguistic condition and must complete the work as a thought-event.

Historical precedents for privileging idea over craft were radically sharpened by Dada, whose subversive tactics, collage, absurd performance, and the elevation of "readymades," ordinary objects declared art, were a deliberate rejection of technique in response to the catastrophic failures of modern technological civilization. (Brihuega, 1995). This gesture reaches a philosophical inflection in Danto's reflection on how the admission of an ordinary shovel (*In Advance of the Broken Arm*) into the art context collapses mimesis and forces theory to carry the burden of demarcating art from non-art. (Danto, 1995).

The same section of your manuscript situates Informalism as the abandonment of form in favor of subjective material freedom alongside Neo-Expressionism, which reintroduced figuration yet retained emotional excess and material aggression, reinforcing that the physical artifact could be provisional, gestural, even destructible. (Giunta, 2014). The swing between total material negation and raw material expressivity underscores how dematerialization is not a linear rejection of objects but a revaluation: material can be minimized, overloaded, substituted, or conceptually displaced.

Because dematerialization dislodges classical criteria of proportion, finish, or permanence, evaluative attention migrates toward context, intention, and discursive framing, precisely the territory where your study's "Theoretical Component" locates meaning "beyond words" in symbolic and contextual structures that sustain communication when conventional discourses fail. (Xenakis, 2018; De Certeau, 1988). The transition to concept-driven, participatory, and digital practices is diagrammed in Figure 3 (Giunta, 2014; Ortiz de Urbina, 1995; Giannetti, 2002; Xenakis, 2018; De Certeau, 1988; Capó, 2004; Gallese, 2001).

Note. *Graphic of the Post-Avant-Garde Stage. Constructed by the researcher. (2025).*

Figure 3. Post-Avant-Garde and Contemporary Stages

5.2 Viewer Participation and Relational Aesthetics

If conceptualism elevated the idea, performance, happening, and installation reconfigured the viewer as an active co-producer. Your manuscript quotes Ortiz de Urbina directly: "Aesthetic experience can dissolve conventional codes through play, so long as the viewer enacts what the artwork suggests (performance)" (Ortiz de Urbina, 1995). Performance abandons the demand for durable objects; the work exists only in time and disappears when the act concludes. (Ortiz de Urbina, 1995). Related but distinct, the *happening* introduces improvisation and open-ended participation, loosening authorial control and expanding the interpretive field. (Ortiz de Urbina, 1995).

Installation art extends this participatory turn into space: the work "occupies and transforms physical space" and is "completed only through the viewer's interaction." (Ortiz de Urbina, 1995; Giunta, 2014). Here, aesthetic experience is immersive, environmental, and relational; perception unfolds as the body moves, explores, and tests boundaries. Because the user's path, scale of encounter, and sensorimotor response co-constitute meaning, the distinction between observing and participating collapses. That spatial activation echoes De Certeau's emphasis on *practice*, the way users navigate and appropriate cultural spaces to resist dominant codes, suggesting that participatory installations may function as "images of resistance" in institutional or public settings. (De Certeau, 1988).

Contemporary pedagogies that teach students to analyze formal, aesthetic-sensitive, and theoretical components together show how participation deepens interpretive literacy. In your study dataset, students' varied emotional and symbolic readings of projected works demonstrate that interactive engagement, discussion, guided looking, and analytic mapping modulate aesthetic response across educational levels. (Study findings overview).

Digital and immersive media have amplified participatory art's scope. Giannetti characterizes *digital aesthetics* as a technological branch that integrates projection, interactive systems, and spatial mapping into contemporary practice, extending installation logics across multiple platforms. (Giannetti, 2002). By detaching experience from

static objects and distributing it across sensors, images, and user input, digital work intensifies the relational dimension already present in performance and installation.

6. Art Criticism and Mediation of Judgment
6.1 Role of Critics and Institutions
In a fragmented contemporary field, critics, museums, galleries, and academic programs play decisive roles in stabilizing (or destabilizing) value. Your manuscript's theoretical discussion makes this explicit: when verbal discourse reaches its limits, *non-discursive practices,* including curated displays, pedagogical classifications, and institutional framing, carry the burden of articulating meaning. (De Certeau, 1988).

Institutions do more than house art objects; they actively shape their interpretation, enabling new understandings of artworks previously dismissed as primitive or marginal. De Certeau's study of class-segmented visual cultures in Latin America shows how elite image regimes humiliate the poor, while neighborhood image-making generates counter-discourses that reclaim identity, evidence that institutional control and grassroots production operate in tension but are mutually intelligible only through critical mediation. (De Certeau, 1988). Educational institutions in particular help viewers recognize *historical period, material, and ideological context* skills your study identifies as essential to properly situating works across Roman, Greek, Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical categories. (Study text). When these classificatory competences develop, audiences are better equipped to engage with conceptually challenging or dematerialized works because they can locate them within broader trajectories rather than reacting only at a surface level.

The rise of conceptual, performance, and media practices after World War II further increased reliance on theoretical and institutional framing. Giunta links the postwar critique of modernity to intensifying uses of exhibition platforms as vehicles for social denunciation and hope that curatorial mediation becomes part of the work's meaning (Giunta, 2014).

6.2 Critical Judgment vs. Public Reception
Differences between professional and popular reception are not new; they animated the nineteenth-century Salon des Refusés, where rejected works found alternative audiences and sparked debates that helped launch Impressionism. (Denvir, 1975). The same pattern recurs in later movements: Post-Impressionists were initially judged "unacceptable" under mimetic standards and demanded a new theory to be understood, an early sign that critical discourses lag public experience and vice versa. (Peñuela, 2008).

The avant-gardes intensified these ruptures by deliberately breaking with "official art" and its representational models, provoking polarized responses from institutions and publics alike. Brihuega warns that forcing their heterogeneous productions into a single universal schema erases the historically specific controversies through which their reception unfolded. (Brihuega, 1995). Dada's embrace of anti-technique and readymades scandalized traditional audiences while energizing radical circles; its provocations became test cases for the authority of critics and museums to legitimate objects that seemed indistinguishable from everyday things. (Brihuega, 1995).

Philosophically, these reception crises feed the demarcation problem: how can one distinguish art from non-art once form, craft, and tradition are no longer reliable guides? Danto frames the dilemma by pointing to ordinary objects reclassified as artworks in an artworld context, compelling interpreters to supply theory. (Danto, 1995). Subsequent critiques of Danto's criterion by Páez and Peñuela show that what counts as art remains contested and dependent on discursive negotiation, precisely the zone where professional criticism and public response collide. (Páez, 2008; Peñuela, 2008).

Your study of art students' interpretive growth demonstrates how *trained* and *untrained* viewers register works differently across formal, affective, and theoretical categories. Students at more advanced levels supply richer stylistic identifications and symbolic readings, underscoring that cultivated judgment can diverge sharply from immediate popular impressions, yet both remain part of the artwork's reception history. (Study findings overview).

Finally, the emergence of grassroots visual "images of resistance" in working-class neighborhoods' productions that challenge elite norms of value shows how public art practices generate their criteria of legitimacy outside institutional validation, further complicating the critic–public divide. (De Certeau, 1988).

7. CONCLUSION
Aesthetic experience arises where form, history, and lived perception converge. The materials analyzed across classical, modern, and contemporary examples show that no single evaluative criterion, such as beauty, mimesis,

innovation, empathy, or discourse, can fully explain the range of responses artworks evoke. Hermeneutic insight reminds us that every act of viewing is influenced by history: viewers approach works through horizons shaped by inherited traditions, and these horizons merge and evolve during the encounter. At the same time, the aesthetic field is fundamentally pluralistic. Categories like the beautiful, ugly, sublime, grotesque, comic, and tragic circulate throughout artistic and everyday contexts, expanding what is considered a legitimate response and relaxing hierarchies of refined taste. Social practice further complicates perception: visual codes and image regimes are unevenly distributed, and marginalized communities produce counter-images that challenge official culture. Institutional mediation remains crucial. The inclusion of everyday or concept-driven objects into art contexts forces theory to intervene, broadening the canon and encouraging interpretive discussion. The postwar climate of violence and displacement intensified this movement, pushing artists toward expressive rupture, dematerialization, and new symbolic languages. Nevertheless, continuity endures: ideals of proportion, symbolic traditions, and pedagogical lineages from classical antiquity still shape how works are taught and understood. An aesthetics focused on the future will therefore blend historical literacy with empathetic, critical, and inclusive ways of perceiving, remaining sensitive to human projection into images and to the shared frameworks through which meaning flows.

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