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What Is Evolutionary Aesthetics? Three Waves

STATE OF THE ART OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Evolutionary aesthetics (EA) is often associated with the rise of evolutionary psychology, from roughly the 1980s until the 2010s. Yet that was neither the beginning nor the end of the field but rather a middle wave after the first and before the third. How has the field evolved? What are the epistemic and methodological problems it has addressed, and how? What is the field heading towards in the current scholarly environment? A self-reflexive conception of the history of EA is still lacking, although EA research is acquiring more and more perspectives from different disciplinary viewpoints. I will present a bird's-eye view of EA by identifying and positioning three of its major currents in relation to each other. This state-of-the-art article also serves as an up-to-date introduction to the field for the non-initiated.

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A broad overview of the history and development of evolutionary aesthetics (EA) is in order to establish a loose conception of EA's past identity and contributions as well as to facilitate thinking about its future. Previous overviews have been narrower in scope, focusing on environmental aesthetics, art philosophy, or certain specific fields of art research.[1] Here, the term 'evolutionary aesthetics' includes research on aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgement concerning both art and nature, and I exclude treatments of specific art forms.[2] My aim is to sketch some larger trends and formative ideas on how the evolutionary treatment of 'the aesthetic' has come to be as it is. Accordingly, this overview may also serve as a first starting point for further explorations of EA.

I describe the three waves of EA by summarizing the works of scholars I find to be some of the best known, influential, or illustrative of the state of the field. I both draw similarities and emphasize differences between the waves as I proceed. The waves are not meant to be understood as distinct from each other or as methodologically strictly defined. Rather, I provide the reader with some loose conception of the historical paradigm changes within EA. I do not wish to imply that the idea of evolution, in the broad sense, first came to philosophical aesthetics from the life sciences or Darwinism. The idea of a chain of transitions can be identified in, for example, the works of Friedrich Schiller and Georg W. F. Hegel. However, here I focus on the developments in aesthetics inspired by Darwinism.

I. THE FIRST WAVE

EA is not mainstream in current aesthetics. However, during its first wave in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, it

1 For example, Aiken summarizes the literature from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s. Nancy E. Aiken, 'Literature of Early "Scientific" and "Evolution" Aesthetics', in *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts*, ed. Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner (Saint Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1999), 417–32. Ruso, Renninger, and Atzwanger review theories on habitat preference from the 1970s to 2000; see Bernhart Ruso, LeeAnn Renninger, and Klaus Atzwanger, 'Human Habitat Preferences: A Generative Territory for Evolutionary Aesthetics Research', in *Evolutionary Aesthetics*, ed. Eckart Voland and Karl Grammer (Berlin: Springer, 2003), 279–94. Seghers restricts the scope of her review to what I call the second wave and, more closely, evolutionary psychological approaches – research looking at the mind – to music, dance, storytelling, and visual arts. Eveline Seghers, 'The Artful Mind: A Critical Review of the Evolutionary Psychological Study of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (2015): 225–48. Davies, in turn, reviews evolutionary literary studies of the 1990s to 2010. Stephen Davies, 'Evolutionary Approaches to Literature', in *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, ed. Noël Carroll and John Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 137–46. One of the most general overviews is by Davies, but he does not identify particular historical trends in the field. Stephen Davies, 'Evolution, Aesthetics, and Art: An Overview', in *Routledge Handbook of Evolution and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Joyce (New York: Routledge, 2018), 358–71.

2 For music, see Anton Killin. 'Music and Human Evolution: Philosophical Aspects', in Joyce, *Handbook*, 372–86. For storytelling, see Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, 'Emotional Responses to Fiction: An Evolutionary Perspective', in Joyce, *Handbook*, 387–98. For visual self-decoration and ritual, see Stephen Davies, *Adornment: What Self-Decoration Tells Us about Who We Are* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

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was mentioned in aesthetics textbooks – at least in passing.[3] Drawing on empiricism, evolutionary aestheticians objected to speculative philosophy, while still subscribing to certain Kantian assumptions. Furthermore, they positioned themselves in opposition to the philosophical aesthetics of the era by paying attention to the tastes of children and non-Western aesthetic cultures. Although they thus held that what was at the time deemed inferior or insignificant was worth investigating, they still assumed that the tastes of children and non-Western aesthetic cultures represented 'lower forms' of aesthetic life. For example, Grant Allen and Yrjö Hirn shared this position.

The premise of EA was that aesthetic life is universal. This evoked the question of what behaviours and mental capacities lead to the development of aesthetic sensibility as a species-typical feature of humans. Allen wrote:

> [The] psychological aesthetician] must look rather to those simpler and more universal feelings which are common to all the race, and which form the groundwork for every higher mode of æsthetic sensibility. It is enough for him that all village children call a daisy or a primrose pretty: he need not go far afield to discuss the peculiar specific merits of a Botticelli or a Pinturiccio.[4]

Twenty years later, Hirn characterized his approach in a similar vein:

> [T]he great systems of aesthetic philosophy have never expressly stated the problem of finding an origin for the art-impulse; and any interpretation of that impulse which may be derived constructively from their speculations upon the work of acknowledged artists is irreconcilable with the wider notion of art as a universal human activity.[5]

Although positioning themselves in opposition to the other aestheticians of their time, Allen and Hirn were still influenced by the Kantian idea of disinterested contemplation being at the heart of aesthetic judgement. John Dewey disagreed, arguing that the investigation of aesthetic experience should be grounded in the lived environment rather than treated as an isolated, independent, or pure aesthetic attitude.[6] As Jerome Popp wrote, Dewey was 'the first philosopher to see in Darwin's thesis the basis for developing a naturalistic theory of meaning, including a naturalized theory of value'.[7] Hence, Dewey should be included in the history of EA.

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3 For textbooks, in English, see the 5th Earl of Listowel [William Francis Hare], *Modern Aesthetics: An Historical Introduction*, rev. ed. (1933; London: Allen & Unwin, 1967), 137, 170–72; in German, see Moritz Geiger, *Die Bedeutung der Kunst: Zugänge zu einer materialen Wertästhetik* (Munich: Fink, 1976), 321–22; and in Finnish, see Eino Krohn, *Esteettinen maailma* [World of Aesthetics], 2nd ed. (Helsinki: Otava, 1965), 63–64, 141–43. Positivism in academia and, alongside it, a psychological approach to aesthetics were on the rise in the latter half of nineteenth-century Europe, with such thinkers as Robert Vischer (1847–1933), Johannes Volkelt (1848–1930), Theodor Lipps (1851–1914), and Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856–1935). See Päivi Huuhtanen *Tunteesta henkeen: Antipositivismi ja suomalainen estetiikka 1900–1939* [From Feeling to Spirit: Antipositivism and Finnish Aesthetics 1900–1939] (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1978), 28, 60–61. The scientific trend in aesthetics fashionably merged with Darwinism, forming what was first called 'physiological aesthetics', and then 'evolutionary aesthetics'. See Grant Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics* (London: King, 1877); Yrjö Hirn, *The Origins of Art: A Psychological and Sociological Inquiry* (London: Macmillan, 1900), 12.

4 Grant Allen, 'Aesthetic Evolution in Man', *Mind* 5 (1880): 446.

5 Hirn, *Origins*, 22.

6 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York: Perigee, 2005), 130.

7 Jerome A. Popp, *Evolution's First Philosopher: John Dewey and the Continuity of Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), xi.

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Although not self-identifying as an evolutionary aesthetician, Dewey discussed Darwinism and argued that it introduced an important shift in philosophy. According to him, this meant that philosophy started to pay attention to the constant change of the world instead of postulating closed causalities and determined dualisms.[8] Dewey's significance for EA is also based on his direct influence, which carries on to this day. As noted by Mariagrazia Portera, Dewey's notion of habits is especially helpful for understanding the third wave of EA, as it can be used to explain how an individual's aesthetic behaviour develops within a certain type of aesthetic environment.[9]

II. THE SECOND WAVE

EA's second wave spanned the latter half of the twentieth century through to the early twenty-first century and came in two phases.

The first phase was characterized by a quantitative focus on the aesthetic appreciation of nature and coincided with the rise of philosophical environmental aesthetics. The widely shared background assumptions were that the human mind is adapted to Stone Age environments, and that human action is guided by pleasure. The interlinked claims put worth were: (1) *the habitat theory*: in the words of Jay Appleton, 'aesthetic pleasure in landscape derives from the observer experiencing an environment favourable to the satisfaction of his biological needs';[10] (2) *the savanna hypothesis*: our preferred landscapes resemble the African savannas where our species developed;[11] and (3) *the knowledge acquisition hypothesis*: such landscapes feed human curiosity, because they provide us with ideal amount of new information – the ideal amount being such that we can still process it in relation to our expectations and thus be involved in it.[12]

The second phase reintroduced an interest in artistic behaviour, characteristic of the first wave, leaving environmental preferences largely behind. It featured more elaborate and even sceptical views on the methodology of EA compared to the previous landscape preference hypotheses – some of this nuance may have resulted from the fact that the nature of artistic behaviour is multifaceted and elusive. Additionally, the advocates of the evolutionary paradigm had had more time to respond to some of the initial critiques of their position. The central difference in comparison to those of the first wave is that, unlike for Allen and Hirn, aesthetic preferences are not taken to surpass external interests. Rather, aesthetic preferences are seen as always being in

8 John Dewey, 'The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy' (1910), in *The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 8.

9 Mariagrazia Portera, 'Aesthetics as a Habit: Between Constraints and Freedom, Nudges and Creativity', *Philosophies* 7 (2022), https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies7020024. See also Mariagrazia Portera, 'Babies Rule! Niches, Scaffoldings, and the Development of an Aesthetic Capacity in Humans', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 60 (2020): 299–314. Although Darwinism influenced pragmatist aesthetics through Dewey, the framework is largely absent from phenomenological and analytic aesthetics.

10 Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (London: Wiley, 1975), 73. Here, 'biological needs' refer to, for example, the need for vistas and hiding places.

11 Gordon H. Orians, 'Habitat Selection: General Theory and Applications to Human Behavior', in *The Evolution of Human Social Behavior*, ed. Joan S. Lockard (New York: Elsevier, 1980), 49–66.

12 Stephen Kaplan and Rachel Kaplan, *Cognition and Environment: Functioning in an Uncertain World* (New York: Praeger, 1982), 77–79.

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the service of external purposes, albeit that the interestedness is directed towards the behaviour rather than its adaptive function. This being said, the ideas and debates of many central second-wave thinkers – for example, that art functions as cognitive stimulation – could already have been found in the first wave, as noted by Jörg Thomas Richter.[13]

The second wave transformed EA in a more scientific way. It was able to utilize a developed conception of evolution, the so-called modern synthesis, which brought theories of inheritance and natural selection together, combining them with the developments in evolutionary biology.[14] However, the very demand for empirical evidence and the difficulties in providing it gave rise to new problems and finally led to a yet further transformation of EA.

Considering art, the second wave relied on the concept of innateness. Art forms were seen as adaptations or the by-products of adaptations, or taken to be developed through sexual selection.[15] Winfried Menninghaus, in turn, expanded the EA's conception of adaptation into secondary adaptations, by claiming that, while art's evolutionary history in facilitating mate choice and social cohesion is plausible, in our current social environment art has started to serve a new evolutionary purpose as a means of self-education or self-development (*Selbstpraktiken*) of, for example, cognitive skills.[16]

Denis Dutton argued that art is not a single adaptation but employs our adaptations and their by-products.[17] This indicated a gradual turn away from the bold second-wave hypotheses by approaching bioculturalism, that is, the theory that human biological capacities are at play in aesthetic behaviour and therefore need to be part of the explanation without being the primary theory. This view becomes an explicit hallmark of the third wave.

As the evolutionary framework briskly made its way into social sciences and humanities, its initial hubris evoked strong counter-reactions, especially against reductionism and determinism.[18] One of the most influential critics, Stephen Davies, initiated a move

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13 Jörg Thomas Richter, 'Phantoms in the Retroscape: Remarks on Anglo-American Evolutionary Aesthetics around 1900', in *Telling Stories / Geschichten Erzählen: Literature and Evolution / Literatur und Evolution*, ed. Dirk Vanderbeke and Carsten Gansel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 216.

14 For the Modern Synthesis, see Julian Huxley, *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1945).

15 For art as adaptation, see Ellen Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 6; John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, 'Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds? Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Aesthetics, Fiction, and the Arts', *SubStance* 30 (2001): 23, 25; Brian Boyd, 'Evolutionary Theories of Art', in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 151–52. For art as by-product, see Steven Pinker, 'Toward a Consilient Study of Literature', *Philosophy and Literature* 31 (2007): 171. For art as sexually selected, see Geoffrey Miller, 'Evolution of Music through Sexual Selection', in *The Origins of Music*, ed. Nils L. Wallin, Björn Merker, and Steven Brown (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 329–60; Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

16 Winfried Menninghaus, *Wozu Kunst? Ästhetik nach Darwin* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 261–70, 273.

17 However, the fact that he used the term 'art instinct' and claimed that it is not largely cultural suggests that he was a nativist. Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 98, 206.

18 Kevin N. Laland and Gillian R. Brown, *Sense and Nonsense: Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Behaviour*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 61–72.

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towards what I anticipate will be the end of the innateness hypotheses.[19] His main contribution was to point out the problems of empirical underdetermination that have plagued many EA theories of the adaptationist or nativist persuasion.

III. THE THIRD WAVE

The third, current wave of EA began around the 2010s. It is characterized by a reference to the contemporary conception of evolution, the extended synthesis, which takes evolutionary factors other than natural selection and genetic inheritance into greater account.[20]

Criticism of nativist theories is growing within the humanities.[21] Matthew Rampley argues for turning away from biology and turning more towards the humanities to better account for the effect of culture and produce informative outcomes.[22] Responding to such concerns is central to the third wave. Yet this cannot happen by simply giving up or deconstructing the existing theoretical framework. Rather than inadvertently emphasizing the nature–culture dichotomy, the third wave embraces bioculturalism, which positions evolutionary explanations as one possible explanatory level alongside other, non-evolutionary ones.[23] Whitney Davis talks about 'post-culturalism' but I take him to endorse a similar view, given that his preferred approach builds on the premise that explanations about art may also engage contexts other than cultural history.[24]

Bioculturalism is based on the ongoing mesh of nature–culture interaction.[25] The third wave attempts to avoid wilder adaptationist speculations while not shying away from the potential usefulness of the evolutionary framework. Researchers have thus turned to previously unexplored levels of evolutionary explanations. Compared to the previous waves, which operated on the level of adaptations, the third-way researchers seek to expand the evolutionary viewpoint to better serve aesthetics. They no longer equate aesthetics with the construction of evolutionary functions but rather look for answers from different routes and degrees of evolution.[26]

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19 Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

20 For these contemporary conceptions, see Massimo Pigliucci and Gerd B. Müller, eds., *Evolution: The Extended Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

21 For example, Daniel Feige, 'Kunst als Produkt der natürlichen Evolution?', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 53 (2008): 29–31; Anne Enderwitz, 'Literature, Subjectivity and "Human Nature": Evolution in Literary Studies', *Subjectivity* 7 (2014): 254–69.

22 Matthew Rampley, *The Seductions of Darwin: Art, Evolution, Neuroscience* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 133–41.

23 Murray Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4; Dustin Hellberg, 'Peirce, Evolutionary Aesthetics, and Literary Meaning: Tension, Index, Symbol', *Semiotica*, no. 221 (2018): 77; Jerzy Luty, 'Is Art an Adaptation? The Timeless Controversy over the Existence of Aesthetic Universals (by the Lens of Evolutionary Informed Aesthetics)', *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* 7 (2021): 77–78.

24 Whitney Davis, 'Visuality and Vision: Questions for a Post-culturalist Art History', *Estetika* 54 (2017): 239.

25 Joseph Carroll et al., 'Biocultural Theory: The Current State of Knowledge', *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* 11 (2017): 2.

26 Richard A. Richards, *The Biology of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 59, 61.

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The incorporation of the developmental level in EA means that research investigates environments in which individuals' aesthetic behaviour develops. An example of a research question that has already been posed is: 'Are we, as human beings, *homines aesthetici* already at birth or, to the contrary, is the aesthetic something that we have to develop over time?'[27] The same question can be approached from the proximate level. How does aesthetic behaviour, for example forming aesthetic judgements, work? What are the mechanisms inducing this behaviour?[28]

Thanks to a new strand called coevolutionary aesthetics, EA theories have started to reach beyond the human perspective in the spirit of Charles Darwin. Although comparisons between the aesthetic behaviour of humans and other animals existed before, coevolutionary aesthetics claims via analogy that we should look at art and aesthetic judgement not as species-typical for humans alone. For example, the aesthetic objects of birds, such as colourful feathers, Richard Prum claims, develop as a loop with the development of aesthetic preferences of aesthetic subjects.[29]

The term 'coevolutionary aesthetics' was coined by Prum, but he was not the first scholar to present the idea that aesthetic objects and the ability to attach aesthetic value to them are coevolving.[30] Already Ellen Dissanayake, the pioneer of the latter phase of the second wave in the 1980s, talked about the reciprocal selection pressures of aesthetic elements in rituals and the aesthetic preferences for them.[31] Even earlier, Hirn noted that aesthetic cognition and aesthetic objects codevelop:

> [T]he development of the aesthetic consciousness, appears as a series of conquests by which Beauty – or as it should perhaps be put to avoid misunderstanding, the aesthetically effective – is continually enlarging its realm with new provinces [...] there will soon be nothing that cannot acquire an aesthetic value.[32]

Compared to the second wave, Kant-inspired views on the autonomy of aesthetic judgement are again compatible with EA. This is because current research is not limited to explaining all aesthetic judgements or committed to the idea that the behavioural trait of forming aesthetic judgements must have certain adaptive functions or by-products thereof. Yet this does not entail a turn away from Deweyan pragmatism/naturalism and the notion of transformative interactions. Given a sufficiently multidisciplinary research approach, EA can take into account and incorporate insights that have always, in one way or another, formed the foundation of philosophical aesthetics.

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27 Portera, 'Babies Rule!', 306.

28 Fabrizio Desideri, 'Epigenesis and Coherence of the Aesthetic Mechanism', *Aisthesis* 8 (2015): 25–40.

29 Some behavioral ecologists find Prum's ideas methodologically and conceptually worrisome. They argue that his theory lacks evidence, builds strawmen of previous theorists, and gives too much emphasis to coevolution as the only evolutionary process affecting the development of beauty. See Gail L. Patricelli, Eileen A. Hebets, and Tamra C. Mendelson, review of *The Evolution of Beauty*, by Richard O. Prum, *Evolution* 73 (2019): 115–24.

30 Richard O. Prum, 'Coevolutionary Aesthetics in Human and Biotic Artworlds', *Biology and Philosophy* 28 (2013): 811–32; *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World – and Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2017).

31 Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?*, 155.

32 Yrjö Hirn, *Konsten och den estetiska betraktelsen: Tre föreläsningar i engelsk översättning* [Art and Aesthetic Consideration: Three Lectures in English Translation] (Helsinki: National Library of Finland, 1936), 6.

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IV. CONCLUSION

As noted at the beginning, EA used to be included in textbooks on philosophical aesthetics but has since become more marginalized. While EA never became the dominant strand of aesthetics, it has loomed in the background and developed along with the research conducted on evolution itself. Recent appeals to the evolutionary approach, such as in Davies's *The Philosophy of Art*, suggest that EA has much to offer for aesthetics, and should be better comprehended as a field of research contributing to aesthetics.[33] The potential of EA lies in its power to aid in the examining of philosophical concepts and conceptions – such as 'taste', 'aesthetic object', 'aesthetic judgement', and 'contemplation' – in the light of concepts from other fields like cognitive science, neuroscience, ethology, and ecology that have produced, via very different methods and premises, knowledge relevant for aesthetics. This kind of synthesizing research is crucial for the future's aesthetics as bioculturalism becomes more and more widely accepted as one of the most accurate and comprehensive outlooks on the human condition. In short, given that EA is growing more sensitive towards humanities, processes of cultural learning, and the potential of new emerging strands from within, we ought to keep a keen eye on what it has to offer for research in aesthetics.[34]

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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33 Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). Puolakka, too, devotes a sub-chapter to EA in his recent encyclopedia article. See Kalle Puolakka, 'Estetiikka', *Logos-ensyklopedia*, Tampere, 2018, https://filosofia.fi/fi/ensyklopedia/estetiikka.

34 The EA research network was founded in 2022 by Onerva Kiianlinna, Mariagrazia Portera, and Jan Verpooten. By that summer, the network had gathered together over 30 scholars from various academic backgrounds and career stages on its mailing list, hosted a talk by Richard Prum, and started an interdisciplinary working seminar. Considering that EA is not in the mainstream of aesthetics, this is informative. Namely, there is not only interest but also commitment, scholars willing to invest their scarce time to the advancement of the sub-field of aesthetics.

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