

Selections from

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: “Goodman's Aesthetics”

For full text, see:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goodman-aesthetics/>

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3. The Theory of Symbol Systems in *Languages of Art*

Most of Goodman's aesthetics is contained in his *Languages of Art* (which he republished, with slight variations, in a second edition in 1976), although what is there presented is clarified, expanded, and sometimes corrected in later essays. As its subtitle, *An Approach to a General Theory of Symbols*, indicates, this is a book with bearings not only on art issues, but on a general understanding of symbols, linguistic and non-linguistic, in the sciences as well as in ordinary life. Indeed, *Languages of Art* has, amongst its merits, that of having broken, in a non-superficial and fruitful way, the divide between art and science. Goodman's general view is that we use symbols in our perceiving, understanding, and constructing the worlds of our experience: the different sciences and the different arts equally contribute to the enterprise of understanding the world. As in his works in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of language, Goodman's approach is often unorthodox and groundbreaking, and yet never in a way that fails to be refreshing and suggestive of future developments (some of those developments were pursued by Goodman himself in later essays and, most notably, in his last book, co-authored with Catherine Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* [1988]).

With respect to art in particular and to symbolic activities in general, Goodman advocates a form of *cognitivism*: by using symbols we discover (indeed we build) the worlds we live in, and the interest we have in symbols—artworks amongst them—is distinctively cognitive. Indeed, to Goodman, aesthetics is but a branch of epistemology. Paintings, sculptures, musical sonatas, dance pieces, etc. are all entities composed of symbols, which possess different functions and bear different relations with the worlds they refer to. Hence, artworks require interpretation and interpreting them amounts to understanding what they refer to, in which way, and within which systems of rules.

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4.6 The Question of the Aesthetic and the Question of Merit

Goodman's conclusions, on what roughly could be considered the question of what is art as well as on the question of artistic value, follow from his view that aesthetics is really a branch of epistemology and that there is ultimately no sharp division between art and other forms of human knowledge.

The aims of art are the aims of symbolic activity in general, and they have to do with understanding. (*Understanding* is, for Goodman, a broader concept than knowledge, one that is not bound by literal truth, and that is thus applicable also to the literally false and to what admits of no truth value: metaphors and paintings for example.) Artistic symbols, as symbols in general, are to be judged for the classifications they bring about, for how novel and insightful those categorizations are, for how they change our perception of the world and relations to it. The cognitive value of art counts as *artistic merit* only because the symbols involved and the experiences they bring about belong in some sense to what Goodman refers to as “the aesthetic.” Hence, the question of when such symbolic activities and

experiences are aesthetic or artistic is important, although, for Goodman, more in order to recognize the commonalities between art and other human activities, including science, than to isolate the artistic or aesthetic realm from other areas of knowledge and experience.

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Art has a general importance to the knowledge enterprise, which is addressed with special clarity in *Ways of Worldmaking*. A primary thesis in that work “is that the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding, and thus that the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology” (1978h, 102). A more general thesis of the book is that the multiple and competing “versions” of the world that humankind makes—through scientific theories (claiming, e.g., that the Sun is the center of the universe, or claiming that the Earth is) but also through mythology, art, philosophy, and so on and so forth—literally *make* worlds; they “fabricate” what we call “facts.” And there isn’t just *one*, all-embracing version of the world: multiple and incompatible versions are possible. That is, Goodman is a constructivist and a relativist. His relativism, however, is not one of laissez-faire: versions can be distinguished between right and wrong, and indeed attempts to construct a world may fail. For the worlds that Goodman posits are not possible worlds brought about by possible descriptions of the world. Rather, when the versions are right, they are all part of the actual world.

For such metaphysical and epistemological approach to include the arts amongst the means to construct worlds, one needs only to add that versions of the world include non-verbal versions and non-literal versions as well. Artforms that do not use language, such as painting or music or architecture, can offer ways of perceiving and understanding the world—indeed ways to construct a world—allowing us, for instance, to see and hear and perceive things in new and refreshing ways. Works of art can participate in worldmaking precisely because they have symbolic functions (1978h, 102). As linguistic labels categorize the world (and new, unusual labels as “grue” and “bleen” categorize it differently), so do pictorial labels, for instance, categorize it in a number of ways (and some of them indeed in new ways). Visiting a museum can change our perception of the world, making us notice new aspects of reality and allowing us to encounter a different reality. Literal denotation, metaphorical denotation, as well as exemplification and expression, can all contribute to the construction of a world. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* literally denotes no one, yet metaphorically it denotes many of us. And artworks, by exemplifying shapes, colors, emotional patterns, etc., as well as by expressing what they literally do not possess, can bring about a reorganization of the world of ordinary experience. This is not just true in the sense that seeing a painting may change our way of seeing the world. Works of art may have effects that go beyond their medium, and hence music may affect seeing, painting affect hearing, and so on. Especially in “these days of experimentation with the combination of media in the performing arts” [...] music, pictures, and dance “all interpenetrate in making a world” (1978h, 106).