

The Major Dimensions of the Aesthetic Experience

AN ANALYSIS of any sort begins with a description of the phenomena under study. Yet a thoroughgoing and empirically grounded description of the aesthetic experience has been conspicuously absent from aesthetic theory—of whatever stripe—in the past. For the most part, aesthetic study has proceeded either from *a priori* assumptions concerning what the aesthetic experience must be or the basis of the analyst's own experiences. In this chapter we attempt to redress this omission by describing the recurring and central aspects of the aesthetic experience as recounted by the museum professionals we interviewed.

Unlike the approaches alluded to above, our only assumption was that the aesthetic experience would be qualitatively and experientially different from everyday visual encounters. Other than a focus on what was especially memorable, everything from the selection of what constituted an aesthetic encounter to the focus on particular dimensions as most salient was left open to the personal definition of the respondents. Rather than structuring the interviews around abstract questions concerning an average or typical aesthetic experience, we asked them to describe a recent encounter that they felt to be particularly significant. The analysis presented in this chapter is based on an examination of the wide range of responses we gathered through the interviews concerning personally meaningful encounters with works of art. Given the number and variety of both respondents and

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works discussed, we are confident that the description that emerges from our analysis is one which, at the very least, points to all the significant aspects of the aesthetic experience and defines most of them rather clearly.

The formulation of the major dimensions of the aesthetic experience is drawn from the responses to our query about these significant encounters with works of art. In asking the question, the interviewers encouraged the respondents to speak candidly as appreciators rather than as professionals concerned with possible purchases. In general, the responses were varied and tended to be complex, both in terms of the number of aspects of the encounter described and in the sophistication of the descriptions.

Overall, our attempt was to discern what modes of experiencing and responding to works of art were, if not common to all, then the most frequently described. Rather than finding either one way of responding, or one way for each curator, we found several modes that were common to a number of respondents. Perhaps even more interesting, we found that most of the museum professionals interacted with works of art in more than one of the ways described by the group as a whole.

Thus, each of the following sections represents one of the more significant ways in which these persons interacted with works of art. The majority of the respondents spoke of more than one aspect of their experience. These can be briefly described in four ways: a perceptual response, which concentrated on elements such as balance, form, and harmony; an emotional response, which emphasized reactions to the emotional content of the work and personal associations; an intellectual response, which focused on theoretical and art historical questions; and, finally, what we characterized as the communicative response, wherein there was a desire to relate to the artist, or to his or her time, or to his or her culture, through the mediation of the work of art.

The topic of each of the following sections is a global term such as "perceptual." By these groupings we do not mean to imply that the perceptual aspects of the experience were the same for all who describe them—far from it. Rather, each section describes the way in

which the umbrella term comprehends a variety of discrete but related types of experiencing.

THE PERCEPTUAL DIMENSION

Given the inherently visual nature of most art media, the fact that all of the museum professionals talked at one point or another about a perceptually oriented response to a work of art should not be surprising. This, however, in no way trivializes the importance of the perceptually oriented response as a dimension of the aesthetic experience. Of all the aspects of the experience, the perceptual was most often the first one mentioned and usually the most clearly articulated. All the museum professionals interviewed indicated that in those encounters that proved to be personally salient they felt they were visually engaged by and drawn to the features of the objects immediately before them. For 23 percent (13 of 57) this was the primary mode of response. Within this category, accounts ranged along a rough continuum from those bearing upon the object as a global entity, as a whole, or totality, to those dealing with the object in a more analytic, fragmented manner, as an entity constituted by an internal organization of a variety of components.

The most general remarks reflecting experiential engagement with works of art referred to sensing the overall physicality of the work. One of the respondents (109) described how he felt addressed by the "full presence" of the work, and another (107) spoke of grasping the work's "intuitive concreteness." This kind of global sensing of the objecthood of the work also was often discussed when respondents contrasted experiences of actual works of art with those of reproductions. One person remarked:

There is no substitute at all for the actual object. A quality comes through, nearly a texture. There isn't any substitute for the actual object. It tells you things that a reproduction never tells you. Just the fineness of things is never conveyed

by a reproduction. Even with glass intervening, you don't quite get just how wonderful it is. (415)

But more often, the museum professionals referred to the physicality of the work in statements concerning the impact upon them of the size or the scale of the object or its undeniable reality:

It's just one of the most phenomenal pieces of sculpture. . . . And you look at the side of it, every aspect of it, because classical sculpture has implicit in it a whole temporal quality, it actually takes time to go through all the little bits, you have to walk around a piece of sculpture because the artist built into that whole idea of three-dimensionality, it's implicit that you will walk around to understand it. And what you see when you look at this is that from every angle, the volumes change, and you just can't really appreciate it completely from one point to the other. But if you sit down and look at it from the back, then it's different again. And just the contrasting movements of this drapery, it's like a cascade. It's really one of the most exciting pieces of sculpture I've ever seen in my life, because it's just alive. (408)

The majority of perceptually oriented statements were more differentiated than simple remarks on the totality of the object. As is implied by the category title, most remarks concerned the respondents' appreciation of the organization of elements constituting the work, namely, its form, line, color, and surface.

A small number of the respondents described their perceptual appreciation in terms of a rather well-defined classical conception of beauty. That is, they characterized the works with which they had had significant encounters in terms of the ways the works reflected or embodied certain traditional principles of order, harmony, balance, and the like. Although most readers will be familiar with such classical conceptions, the statements made by two of the museum professionals provide concrete examples of the way in which this approach was described:

I began to see its beauty. . . . I loved the subtlety of the carving and the modeling with the clay, the locks of hair, the simplicity of the piece. I guess what I like about it are, first of all, the simplicity of his lines, the way that the bust is cut very sharply around the torso . . . and the sharp turn of the head against the bust. . . . The delicacy of the eyebrows, the very subtle lines and the way they catch the light. . . . We're still interested in the beauty of the object. (109)

[The work] would also stimulate someone who had any kind of eye for proportion and beauty and . . . symmetry. [The] nuances of surface and the play of the heavily lidded eyes and the strong nose. . . . [T]he almond-shaped eyes and the arms shaped like elephant trunks and . . . the egg-shaped head. The image is so beautiful that you could worship that thing . . . because of the inherent beauty that has been created by the artist. (114)

Beauty was sometimes strictly formal or compositional, present even in objects that depicted unpleasant subject matter: "Many people would think that this is a repulsive painting, but I think I see [it] almost as a beautiful painting, because of the relationship of forms and colors, and I can get quite excited about it on a lyrical level" (135). There was often a related concern with the appreciation of the quality of the work, with "how well [the object] was made" (109), and with how one is drawn to objects that are "the finest examples of their type" (108), reflecting a "purity or excellence in their specific category" (114).

A classical orientation toward beauty was present in slightly less than a quarter of the responses and did not seem to be a predominant mode of considering works of art. Overall, it appears that this notion of beauty is employed by those whose attention is devoted principally to the art of earlier centuries; those whose specialty is contemporary art do not spontaneously construe works according to the classical conception of beauty, and in some cases, they even repudiate the utility of this notion in regard to the art they appreciate most.

SPECIFIC PERCEPTUAL QUALITIES OF THE OBJECT · Without invoking or alluding to any classical notion of the beautiful, a number of respondents made statements about being especially drawn to and engaged by specifically aesthetic aspects of the work's composition. Prolific among these were appreciation of the form, color, and textural quality of the object.

I responded to the painting because of its color and forms, they were musical forms; it's called *Guitar on a Table*, and it had all the strength and beauty of a perfect Cubist picture. It also had all of the variety of paint manipulation that you associate with Cubist paintings. Some dry, chalky lines across the surface, that were just laid on as if with a piece of chalk. Other stuccolike surfaces where ashes or sand might have been added with paint to make it really crusty, and other areas of dead black, where you think the artist has collaged a piece of paper to it, it is so flat. (129)

Across the face of that painting were many surfaces. There were thin dry surfaces. There were lusciously worked areas in the painting. There were thinly washed areas that were not dry, that still had a shine to them that allowed a transparency looking through to a certain depth within the painting. (105)

Perceptual qualities extended beyond the visual to the other senses. The following quote gives an idea of the sensual nature of this dimension, the appeal to the senses that goes beyond what is easy to see, and far beyond what it is possible to relate verbally:

You can't really appreciate them [Greek vases] without touching them. You don't understand half of a Greek vase without picking it up. There's the balance, and the way that you move the piece if you're going to drink out of a cup, how the foot reacts with the bowl. I think that's all-important in really appreciating ceramics. And the same with jewelry. I mean, what do you know about a piece of gold that was in-

tended to go around someone's neck if you don't realize how heavy it is, or how beautifully the chain works? (408)

Although passages such as these were numerous, we encountered a much wider spectrum, understandably, where perceptual responses were intermediaries, vehicles, for other kinds of concerns. One of the more frequent of these was where the primary concern focused on the activity of the artist making the work, on which features within the work provided a direct access to the art-making process. Comments such as "Those are exciting pieces, the way you can see the artist's hand" (113) or "Look, look there, I see his hand moving. Look how quickly!" (115) were far from unusual. The following quote embodies the immediacy of this kind of interaction:

It had a certain crudity which is actually enormously appealing. You can almost see the wood carver, you know, attacking that piece of wood with the kind of fervor and creativity of the moment. . . . You can see the cut marks of the chisel and the knife on the torso. (114)

Even given the breadth of the categories used to group the responses, it is apparent from these limited excerpts that the perceptual dimension of the aesthetic encounter is as varied as it is central. Were we to have refined further, there would have been even more categories. But running through all the quotes as well as the categories is the admission of the affective and interactive power of the form and the surface of a work of art. But as the above quotes illustrate, the perceptual aspects of a work often shape and express the less tangible aspects of an object. The other dimensions of the aesthetic encounter we describe explore those intangible aspects. We turn now to the one most frequently discussed, emotion.

THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSION

Museum professionals spend a great deal of time looking at and living among great works of art. And although one might hypothesize that

constant exposure might hinder their ability to respond to art on an emotional level, this was far from the case. In fact, an appreciable level of emotional involvement was reported by over 90 percent of the respondents. The emotional mode was, moreover, the primary kind of response for nearly a quarter of them. One individual's discussion of the ability of a work to create an emotion in the viewer helps to explain the importance of this mode of interaction:

I may look at it very closely to see . . . whether I can understand that one passage in the lower left-hand corner. And that feeling comes to me . . . I guess that's what all great works of art should do. They should create some emotion. So I can feel it so often here, and that is why, as I said earlier, when we first started to talk, that after all these years I've been here, I can say one thing, I've never been bored. How could you be bored? (115)

The respondents reported a broad variety of emotional responses, including positive emotions such as joy, delight, inspiration, and love, and negative responses such as anger, hate, and frustration. A good number of respondents were most affected by works that surprised them, while others preferred familiar works evoking comfort or even nostalgia. In the latter cases, there was almost always some connection to personal feelings, to past associations and experiences:

One of the period rooms was a very large room that was Scottish, and my father's family is Scottish. I'm not saying that this was a wonderful aesthetic experience, because I certainly wouldn't want it in my living room, but there was a couch in which the legs and everything were stag horns, really, a gruesome sort of object, actually. And a painting by Landseer hung above it, of a deer. I mean, I had tears in my eyes. I was really emotionally moved because it just reminded me of a lot of things, actual experiences from my childhood, or things I've read about or things I know. But

also, it was partly because I knew that all these things would be so significant to my parents and to other people in my family, and it was a way of making a connection. (401)

Some works produced tension, excitement, or intrigue. Other works were valued for their ability to bring about a composed, contemplative state. In a few instances a completely visceral or physical reaction was reported:

They were so laden with the thought that created them . . . so much involvement and so perfectly tailored, that it just literally reached out and I could almost feel something grabbing me. It was just this sort of [snatches at the air] physical feeling from the form that it took. (106)

More often it was the case that people used less dramatic phrases, such as "I was struck by the work" or "it grabbed me," and then went on to describe a more intellectual mode of apprehending the work. In a few instances respondents described emotions that are usually associated with people rather than with physical objects, such as, "you get kind of passionate about some of these things, . . . lustful might be the right word" (108) or "there is a kind of seductiveness to a work of art that I think people do feel" (120).

More than a few of the respondents described a development over time, from an initial reaction (which was usually an emotional impact) to the involvement of thought—and sometimes to different emotions as well:

When I see works that come close to my heart, that I think are really fine, I have the strangest reaction, which is not always exhilaration, it is sort of like being hit in the stomach. Feeling a little nauseous. It's just this completely overwhelming feeling, which then I have to grope my way out of, calm myself down, and try and approach it scientifically, not with all of my antennae vulnerable, open. . . . What comes to you after looking at it calmly, after you've really digested

every nuance and every little thread, is the total impact. When you encounter a very great work of art, you just know it and it thrills you in all of your senses, not just visually, but sensually and intellectually. (131)

It's the portrait of a woman and her little boy and a dog, and it appealed to me because it's very attractive, because I have a little boy about the age of the little boy in the painting who looks a little bit similar, and so, having been attracted to this painting, thinking, "God, how corny." I saw all these great paintings, and what do I do? I go and look at a painting of a mother with a little boy and a dog. So I started to try and analyze why—other than the sort of direct appeal to subject matter—why it was so attractive and appealing. And although the painting is a regular square format, it essentially forms a circle. The figures in the center form a circle. The way they are arranged and the way the colors are arranged, make a circle so that you're constantly pulled back into the center, and particularly to the little boy's head. It's just a very effective format. (401)

For another person, a positive emotional reaction to a work was a prerequisite for any professional involvement with it:

I always start everything with the art work. A lot of times there's this pressure just to do something because it will sell or because it's chic or whatever, but I always have to start with being inspired or excited by a work of art. You know, I've never done a show that hasn't come directly out of my being very intrigued by, or excited by, a piece of art. (106)

An initially positive reaction was not reported by all the museum professionals regarding their significant experiences with art. An

equal number of respondents were frustrated or disappointed at first, or actually hated the works they talked about at length. One curator recounted her interaction with Jackson Pollock's *Number One* as just such an encounter:

I was just indignant, furious. And my reaction was very strong—I really was quite convinced that this was a joke. But it was interesting enough that I kept seeing it over time, and by the time I had gone through part of college I was quite enthusiastic about it and I found it very exciting. (126)

Another respondent stressed that the positive or negative aspect is unimportant; instead, it's the spark that counts:

For a certain individual, there will be a reaction in some way. Either you like it or you don't. But you might be taken in by something, it's enough to hold your interest and get you rooted there for a while and start [you] thinking about some other things, places you might be led to from this starting point. (105)

When she described her own experience she defended her initial dislike of an artist's work:

When I first saw it I hated it [laugh] and I thought to myself, "Hmm, that's interesting. Why do you dislike it?" . . . And so that's a good reaction to have. To not like something, it's a real reaction. And so I took that reaction and I brought myself—I remember going back to the gallery probably three times during that visit to New York, and forcing myself to look at that work. And the more I looked, the more I found, the more I liked, and the more I wanted to see more of that work. (105)

The converse was sometimes true as well: "Once in a while I make a bad mistake. I've bought something I thought was beautiful, and

then I begin to see an emptiness in it that doesn't get better, it only gets worse" (134).

A number of respondents believed that the intellect could interfere with a significant interaction with a work of art. They tended to emphasize the emotional dimension of experience over the intellectual: "It seems that . . . the most important thing is to be honest with your own feelings, to trust your own feelings. So the first approach is without any ideological background" (110).

There were others, however, who saw these two dimensions as complementary. One curator began by saying that viewing art used to be merely an intellectually enriching experience for her. Yet as she grew older, her experiential range expanded and with it her emotional range. She can now go back to her earlier experiences and feel enriched both intellectually and emotionally:

I am able to go back and translate. I remember [that] the first time I saw Yves Klein's work, it was a very intellectual thing. But now I can go back and translate that experience, filter it through what I know now and recall that experience and get more out of it just through my own memory . . . by applying it to that greater range of emotion that I feel I have now. (106)

EMOTION AS THE PRIMARY MODE · Although emotional reactions were mentioned by nearly every respondent, some valued this aspect more than any other. It can be said that for them the feelings art produced were the central aspect of the aesthetic experience. One of these people was quoted at the beginning of this section as saying that every great work of art must have the power to produce an emotion in the viewer. As he recounted his interactions with art the most frequent feelings he described were awe and inspiration at the ability or genius of an artist:

Truly great works of art, no matter how familiar you become with them, never fail to mean something. How often have I

picked up something like Rembrandt's *Three Crosses*? You might do it automatically once or twice, and then you give it a look again, and you say, "My God! . . . How did he? . . . What? . . . How wonderful this is!" . . . I've always felt that, I've never articulated it except to you. But I think that that's truly what is rewarding. No matter what. (115)

Other respondents had a different conception of how works affected them emotionally. For example, while the first individual emphasized the power of the work of art to produce an emotion, another spoke of the artist's ability to portray feelings that she could share. "We did an exhibition of drawings by three Austrian artists. One of them had an ability to get down to the most primal feelings, and to portray those feelings via a line that I've never experienced. And that to me was wonderful to live with" (105). Still another was most impressed by the ability of the work to evoke an awareness of the emotional being of the artist:

Kiefer was not *making* art, was not *making* pictures, his work came absolutely directly and strongly out of his whole being, there was no artifice—you don't feel, however beautiful, if we may use that word, a painting might be, that it is contrived. (135)

When she was asked about why she wanted to own a particular work, the curator previously quoted responded:

It hits me on some emotional level, it's very personal. I understand in a very profound way, more so than the next one. I think that it relates to some feeling states that I've had along the way, that are in sync, for sure, with what the artist is trying to portray. And then, technically, they're handled beautifully, color-wise they're done well, formally they're done well. So it all just falls in together, and you think that's something that you'd like to look at a lot in life, because it evokes those feeling states that are pleasurable. (105)

Finally, there was one respondent, with over twenty years of experience, who described an encounter with a work that bespoke the power of this dimension to affect one's whole conception of art:

I remember standing there looking at that, and saying to myself, "That's not art, I know what art is, art is composition and order and structure, and art isn't all this melodrama and stuff—this is all playing on the emotions and this is dealing with subject matter and this isn't art." And I sat there for a while looking at it, and then I thought, "Wait a minute, you're very moved by this, you're moved almost to tears by this thing you're looking at, and you're standing here arguing with yourself about whether it's art or not!" Well, if it isn't art, then your definition of art is awfully narrow and is keeping you from some kinds of experience that obviously are important, so either art isn't important as a category of experience, or else your notion of what art is is too limited. And I'm sure it was the latter. So it was a kind of breakthrough experience where I was forced by something unfamiliar to revise my notions of what it was I was dealing with. (416)

There are of course many implications to be drawn from such a statement. As we will see, this opening up of possibility is inherent in any dimension, not just the emotional. However, this passage makes it clear that the emotional dimension, like the perceptual, lurks behind every encounter with a work of art, and if one is open to it, it can transform the experience in important ways.

In summary, this section has presented evidence that the emotional apprehension of a work of art constitutes a highly salient feature of the overall aesthetic experience. Furthermore, the comments of our respondents indicate that the emotional reactions to art objects are not homogeneous. We have seen that considerable variation exists with respect to the positive or negative valence of feelings produced and in the general level of intensity or excitation. We have also seen that the quality of emotional response may vary depending on how much time is spent with the work. Lastly, it became evident that this

variance of emotional response was related to the interplay of affective and intellectual modes of construing the art object. At this point we will turn to a direct consideration of the way in which the respondents discussed the intellectual dimension of aesthetic appreciation.

THE INTELLECTUAL DIMENSION

In the very structure of our cultural and academic institutions we tend to distinguish the arts from the sciences and to assume that our reasons for doing so stem from the relative play of emotion and intellect within them. Sophisticated members of either realm, however, tend to recognize the broad overlap between the two disciplines and to acknowledge that the two human capacities through which these disciplines have been created, emotion and intellect, are not only compatible but perhaps in certain respects indistinguishable. Given the structure of the modern museum and the importance of art historical scholarship within that world, it is not particularly surprising that 95 percent of the museum professionals made references to the intellectual or cognitive dimensions of the experience. Just over half saw the intellectual aspect as primary. Yet to a degree greater than was evident in either the emotional or the perceptual aspects, the variability in the uses to which this cognitive approach was put, in the extent to which it constituted a process that was open-ended, and in the frequency with which it was employed, was remarkable.

The extent to which these intellectual processes played a part varied greatly. Thus, while some respondents exclusively limited their discussion to aspects of the work that reflected their intellectual understanding of it, others found such an approach to be secondary, either in terms of the value they placed upon it or in terms of the order in which they employed it. One curator stressed the secondary importance she placed upon intellect by commenting:

Sometimes I think it gets in the way, in all honesty, because when you see something and you're immediately thrown into thinking of parallels and dates and all that kind of thing,

it stops you from just having this incredible reaction to it as an object. (408)

Or, as another put the same point, "Every system that you layer on top of it is removing something from the work" (132). As noted in the preceding section, even those who gave a prominent place to the intellectual experience often stressed the fact that cognitive processes tended to come into play for them only after the work had made its impact on a perceptual, emotional, or even decidedly visceral level.

The majority, however, felt that without knowledge, more was lost in the encounter than a kind of naivete could possibly provide:

Maybe it's too strong a statement to say that people who are totally untrained can't have an aesthetic experience, but generally, I think developing knowledge of technique and knowledge of the subject matter [is necessary]. For most modern people, mythological subject matter is completely lost. So they have very few grounds upon which they respond. I suppose people can have a kind of visceral response to a Gothic cathedral or the Sistine ceiling. But to proceed from that to a deeper understanding of technique, of the intellect behind the work of art, is for the most part learned. So awe is a more general response, but to really have the object hold for long periods of time, that's more a learned thing. You only see what you are taught to see. You have to be taught to see a certain amount before you can go from that and develop a more sustained and creative process of seeing. (417)

CLOSURE AND OPENNESS · Among those museum professionals who placed relatively equal emphasis on the intellectual dimension, vast differences in what we might call intellectual style were apparent. Certain individuals, for example, employed intellect in the service of achieving a kind of closure, while others used cognitive means to open up works to more varied interpretations. Those curators who were most concerned with closure seemed to stress the deliberate,

problem-solving aspects of coming to terms with a work, of understanding it completely and thoroughly, while those at the other end of the spectrum were enthralled by the number of new and unexpected ideas and insights arising from the significant aesthetic encounter.

Some of the curators for whom closure played an important role described what they sought from a work as meaning or understanding, broadly construed: "My reaction generally when I look at a work of art probably depends on whether I understand it" (113). Others were searching for information far more specific than that which can be described in terms of a generalized meaning or significance. "It's like solving a problem," another respondent noted, "an intellectual problem. Coming to a gratifying, operable solution" (104).

In such responses a desire is expressed "to get to the bottom" of something, to figure out a puzzle, a problem, a specific question. One curator aptly referred to such a process as "sleuthing" (108), another as "cracking the code" (106). Whatever the term, it constitutes an approach to a work of art that aims at the discovery not only of an artist's unexpressed meanings but of the work's own history, its place in the culture that produced it, and its function. Just as one can sleuth out secret messages hidden in the work, so one can sleuth out a work's history or nature. One curator, in discussing an Art Nouveau ewer, described such a mission:

You can see that the object tells you all about itself. It's a ewer form, it's a pitcher. We know that it's made in a mold. You can see the mold marks under here, there, and right there. You can see it even coming through the glaze. When you think about what a pitcher is for, you can see how [in]efficient and [in]effective this would be as a pitcher. The lip is all curled up. Obviously it would pour in three different directions if you tried to pour anything. So it's not meant to be a pitcher to use in the conventional sense. It is a cabinet piece, a piece meant to be a decoration, meant to be looked at. So that suggests that it's not a conventional object, not

mass-produced in the sense of pitchers of the porcelain works. There probably aren't going to be lots of these around. (108)

The stress here is upon categorizing a work, attempting to attach a label to it, to place it within a historical, art historical, or biographical context. While such an accomplishment was often in the service of developing a broader understanding or appreciation of a work, the satisfactions that the completion of such a task held in itself appeared to be as various as they were frequent. Some curators mentioned the importance of such discoveries for the field as a whole, and even more referred primarily to the collections with which they worked:

R: It's extremely gratifying to get a beautiful object.

I: In what way is that gratifying?

R: Greed! [laugh] That's what you *want*, you want it, and you get it.

It makes the collection better, the collection needs it. (124)

Others relished their experiences of mastery and accomplishment: "It's conquering the object, having the power over it, not allowing the artist to put something over on you or keep a secret from you. In a certain sense, I hate to admit it, but there is the sense of power, in having an insight, having information" (104).

For some, sleuthing after origins, meanings, or history was crucial to their appreciation of the work as a whole, so much so that if the object did not raise such questions or problems, or yielded up the answers too easily, the interaction with the work was thought to be a less satisfying one:

A lot of pieces that you deal with are very straightforward, and you get them into shape and you don't find anything exciting about them, but there are pieces that have some sort of challenge; [they] are the ones that stay in your mind and are the most interesting. (113)

However, attempts to gain intellectual closure were not the only projects that engaged the intellectual resources of the curators. Many

stressed the importance of approaches leading to an appreciation of the complexity, inexhaustibility, and possibility inherent in the works rather than placing them within the bounds of one or another category. One curator described great works as "bottomless" (130), a sentiment echoed by many.

The following quotation illustrates one instance of how digging further into the history of a work can open it up, even, in this case, when it is not patently a great work of art:

There was a sculpture that I was working on called *Hope Nourishing Love*. It's a three-quarter marble sculpture of a female allegory of Hope nourishing Love, who's this little winged putto hanging at her breast, so it's the allegorical representation of this. It's mid-eighteenth century, and it's real froufrou, and I thought, "Eew, I don't like this." I thought the proportions were a little screwy and this winged putto was hanging in midair—how was he even attached to this breast? It doesn't make any sense at all, I just didn't like it. It is definitely part of this mid-eighteenth-century interest in veiled allegories of sexuality that's veiled into the loftier ideals of hope, that type of business, which I think is a little courtly game. Well, once I'd done a little work on it and understood a little bit more about the artist and the world that he was working in, a world with Madame de Pompadour, the lover of the king of France, Louis XV. What came out was this very human story that she was his lover, and she wasn't "putting out," and he wasn't very happy with her, so she was having allegorical representations made of her, maybe portraying her sexuality, but veiled definitely in the loftier ideals of hope and friendship. And I thought, "Gee, this is great fun, it's like reading the *National Enquirer*." It was human all of a sudden, and this object, it made it real to me somehow. And I got to like it after I did work on it. (407)

It is clear that no hard-and-fast distinctions can be drawn between such activities and the more closure-oriented, problem-solving modes

discussed above. Indeed, in terms of the model developed in the next chapter, it is obvious that a certain degree of closure constitutes the foundation from which questions can be posed, possibilities appreciated, and new elements discovered. Nevertheless, the importance placed upon the uses of intellect for such generative endeavors varied from person to person, as did the procedures, goals, and satisfactions involved.

Of the individuals who were oriented toward a search for new ways of thinking about particular works, some found their endeavors leading them to discover aspects of familiar works that they would not have appreciated or even noticed otherwise:

This Rembrandt landscape drawing, just very small and very very delicate and very very refined and the tiniest little dots and strokes and bits of wash, and it's a small drawing to begin with. At first I thought, "Gee, that's a very good drawing," and every time I looked at it for a long time afterwards, I would see something more in it that I hadn't seen before, some element of subtlety, some particular relationship of the forms or the way they're calculated and worked out, the way the light is managed, the way the wind is shown and the way the trees are accentuated, whatever, that I hadn't completely appreciated the last time. It wasn't that I started out thinking "Gee, this is nothing," but I probably didn't start out thinking "Gee, this is a great great drawing." (410)

In addition to noticing more in the work itself, there were other open-ended approaches that stressed either other ways of looking at the whole object or entirely different ways of placing it in an intellectual context:

I think the first time I saw it [a late Roman brooch], the impact was really greater, but now every time I come back and look at it I see it differently. The first time I saw it, I probably said to myself, "What's this?" And then I began to analyze it, the individual elements, "What's that brown material in the

middle? What's the gold? What's the glass?" But then I abstracted myself from that process of looking at the individual elements, and went back to seeing it as a whole, just as an object, focus my concentration on just the surprise or pleasure that something like this has survived, and that it is unique and that it has expanded my knowledge. I know every time I see it I still have a very positive response to it. (413)

So it seemed to me that modern studies were simply taking on the necessary responsibility of approaching art just as Renaissance studies had done, which is to put them [the objects] in the context of meaning and form and history and patronage. That everything that was applicable should be learned. So that's why I went off to do Matisse because I felt there was a lot that wasn't understood. There were a lot of problems. There were a lot of things that were either wrong or just hadn't been dealt with at all that seemed to be very critical. (103)

Several curators described the fruits of their efforts not so much in terms of the quantity of elements understood as in terms of the quality of their interactions. "I became aware of things in a much deeper and more comprehensive way than I had before" (103), one curator said, describing a memorable experience with a work. Another described a "return" to an openness that he had somehow lost along the way. Although the context and work are quite different, this passage deals with very avant-garde twentieth-century work. Note the similarity in form to the encounter in the previous section, where emotional impact was the primary vehicle for opening up different kinds of response:

I was very reluctant to open myself up to this stuff initially. In a way I was kind of worn down over a couple of days. I realized though, that I was playing it real safe in my own mind. I was saying, "Where's the representational art?" and I wasn't going to find it there, and I shouldn't have had the mind-set that I did initially. And I finally found myself really

enjoying it and really listening to the people who were talking about it. I really hadn't been giving it much attention, but I finally realized the potential of this opportunity I was having. I realized that I can't in good conscience say that there is any kind of art (other than cowboy art) that I don't like, or don't appreciate, or that I can't see any sense in, or I can't have a response to. And that I just have to get out there and involve myself to the degree that I can, and form those judgments, ask those questions. And now I get a great deal of enjoyment from that work. It was easy for me to say that what I work with is the best. Well, it was only best in that I'm most familiar with it. So I was kind of put in that position where I was kind of re-turned-on to what it's all about. . . . It kind of reopened that compartment in my thinking, that it isn't all easy, that it shouldn't be. (130)

Others cited the fact that their openness to alternative ways of understanding works had brought home to them a sense of responsibility for their own interpretations, allowing them to choose their accounts of works from among a range of possibilities. They perceived this responsibility as both a freedom and a source of risk, a reminder of the fact that their interpretations could be wrong:

I think that I like the quality of the verdict not being in. That you look at it, and you're entitled to your responses, and there isn't anyone out there telling you this is going to be important and this is not. There's a kind of open-endedness to what's going on in the present that I like. (120)

Another respondent discussed the importance, and difficulty, of communicating this aspect to the public:

I was talking about different metaphorical allusions that could be made to the work, and someone stopped me and said, "Is this what the work means?" and I said, "Absolutely not, this is just what *I'm* saying it means. It is totally up in

the air and no one can ever tell you what this work *means*. I can just hint that there is meaning here, and give illustrations of *possible* meanings." And she said, "Well, no one's ever said that to me before." She had just assumed that there was a way to do it, and that was that. And that it could be gotten wrong somehow. (132)

Regardless of whether the respondents felt that this flexibility enhanced the breadth or the depth of their understanding, their freedom or their responsibility, they often stressed the fact that such an open-ended strategy made them aware of the vast, if not limitless, possibilities for understanding the content and the context of works of art. They described the realization of the inexhaustibility of individual works with eloquence and, often, with great passion:

All those things make it interesting, because you have the object, and you read the object, and you get involved in the process, and you try to fit it into a career, or understand how it fits in a career. You have a larger social and intellectual context. And it's part of traditions, and oh! It never ceases to be fascinating. . . . And that work is incredible—no one's ever going to figure it all out, it's too great. (103)

So far we have examined approaches to art that could be termed intellectual or cognitive in nature, without specifying the range of material constituting the content of their thoughts, ideas, and discoveries. While all of the respondents made use of processes we would not hesitate to term intellectual, there was no consensus as to which intellectual contexts were necessary for understanding or appreciating a work, or even whether these contexts were always employed in an exclusively intellectual manner. While some individuals approached the objects in ways that might best be described as academic, others developed a broad understanding of a work through a sustained dialogue with it. The explicitly communicative aspects of their encounters will be discussed in a later section, but here we will examine a mode of interaction that seems to lie at the intersection of the purely intellec-

tual and the communicative modes. This is the mode we refer to as historical understanding. It groups together three of the most often discussed aspects of the encounter: the appreciation of a work historically, art historically, and biographically.

THE HISTORICALLY ORIENTED ENCOUNTER · Although frequent allusions to history were made by the museum professionals, the ways in which historical issues were woven into the fabric of their discussions varied enormously. One of the greatest sources of variation was that of the value of historical information: whereas some considered the historical context an essential part of their experience, others mentioned the object's historical context as an obstacle. The curator quoted at the beginning of the previous section (105) who considers intellectual information excess baggage was stressing her need to understand the object from her position in the present rather than concerning herself with the task of translating across time. This person showed a clear preference for work that has the capacity to speak to her directly, and she tended to focus upon works with which she shared a sensibility. She stressed her belief that those aspects of a work that give it its status as a work of art are, if not timeless, at least themselves not historically bound.

The majority of the museum professionals (nearly three-quarters of them) felt that achieving an understanding of a piece's place in the culture that produced it constituted an obstacle to a pure appreciation of a work, but an obstacle worth surmounting. While the struggle to understand a work's context offered certain satisfactions, the power of the timeless message inherent in a work constituted the end for which historical understanding was the means. A number of the curators lamented the general unwillingness of most people to attempt to understand a work in the context of its own language:

People look at things and don't even recognize what's there. Certainly, they recognize that there is a cow and a farmhouse, if that's what it is. And so they see that in a sixteenth-century painting, and they think they know all about that

without knowing what that might have symbolized, or how that fit into the society, or how that was culturally significant at that time, and how that looked completely different—and meant something different—to the sixteenth-century peasant who might have had the chance to have seen the painting. But we have an immediate recognition, and we go, "Oh, that's a farmhouse. That's a cow." And we think we know about it, and we feel very self-satisfied. (112)

Perhaps the extreme version of the historical attitude is best represented in the following passage:

From an emotional point of view it's very satisfying to know that, first of all, you are holding the past, basically. As I've always said, I deal with dead people. I don't want to know about living artists. From a purely academic point of view, it's much easier if they're dead because they can't talk back to you. So, everything that I deal with, the people who have created it, are gone. So this is what remains of them. They might have descendants, but what I have is the physical proof of their existence in my hand. Not only do you have an aesthetic reaction to it, but you have a sort of just a human reaction to it. This is someone who once lived, and they made this. (409)

The social and cultural context in which a work was created is an integral part of it, one that cannot and should not be slighted in apprehending the work at a later time. As one respondent noted, "The art history is just as relevant, but for me, I think the social history might be even more so" (129).

The majority of those who discussed the historical aspects of works of art took this insistence one step further. For them, their encounter with the work is significant precisely because of the historical dimension involved. They valued the work's historicity for many different reasons and in many different ways, but all began with the premise that art was an integrative activity in which the aesthetic dimension



Drug Jar (Albarello).
Italian (Faenza), circa
1520–1530.
Tin-glazed earthenware,
H: 37 cm (14½ in.).
Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum
84.DE.105.

Objects that were initially utilitarian, such as this sixteenth-century drug jar, can provide what many of our respondents characterized as "communication with the past." Knowing that the subtle indentations were meant to facilitate grasping the jars when they were lined up next to one another on an apothecary's shelves helps the viewer not only to visualize the object in its initial context but also to grasp something about the culture from which it comes with an immediacy not usually evoked by simple descriptions.

either was not an end in itself or was in some sense inseparable from other factors that could be discussed and appreciated independently.

Some valued the work they discussed because of its power to evoke a time or a cultural context that was attractive, alluring, or fascinating. Several people spoke of valuing art for its ability to evoke the flavor of an era with which they identified:

Actually, I love the nineteenth century because . . . it has the romantic appeal of the past, it's a very different kind of . . . experience. My involvement in nineteenth-century art history has a lot more to do with a broad range of things, from reading the literature, to imagining yourself romantically into the past. It's like being a young girl in high school who's a French major and wants to marry a French nobleman. It has some of that same kind of romantic appeal, which is very satisfying. (123)

A slightly different sentiment was expressed by those people whose fascination with the work's history was not so much based upon its ability to evoke the atmosphere of an era as to offer information from the past that was considered valuable in its own right, above and beyond the viewer's immediate experience. In such cases, the work of art was considered an artifact, a tool to assist in the development of a body of knowledge in the service of which the object took on its significance. As one individual put it:

You can interact with a painting in the same way that you can interact with a document from the Florentine archives; you can use it as a source of information about life in Italy in the fifteenth century. And it's valid and it's a worthwhile and important and useful intellectual thing to do. I think there is a difference though; the difference between the archival document and the painting, which is also an archival document of a kind, is [that] the painting has the potential to jump the gap of time and offer these kinds of special experiences that to get from the archival document you'd have to look at

it in the same way that you look at a sunset; in other words, you would have to become the artist, making it into art yourself. (416)

Another respondent agreed, in that he valued the historicity of the object not merely for the aesthetic reaction it created in him, but also because of what such works had to teach him about history. In his case, though, it was not for the sake of historical knowledge per se that the object's testimony was valued. Rather, he looked to the relationship between the object and its historical context to provide a model for his own personal understanding and growth. Here, the development of art became a model for and a microcosm of a particular personal mission, and hence the lessons of history took on a specifically personal application:

I became more interested [in] ideas which were behind the objects—ideology, theory. And then the object became alive in a very different way. And today it is very much so that my own personality is being developed through my interest in history and trying to understand the historical development of certain social ideas, and specifically social reform movements . . . which today makes sense again because you can very much relate what's happening today to what happened in 1900. (110)

For some of the respondents, both of these processes were involved. For them, there was a circular, almost hermeneutic, process, wherein the work offered some key into the past, which led to a rethinking of the context of the work, which in turn reopened the work itself:

I remember being just tremendously impressed by Claude Lorrain. And because I had been thinking about the question of installation and context, I was trying to think of those pictures in a seventeenth-century context. How would these pictures have been seen in the seventeenth century? I was saying, "Well, I know how I look at them, and I'm respond-

ing in terms of form and color, and I'm seeing these against a background of art history and all." But then I started thinking, "Well, gee, these works were never installed like this as a monograph. They were always there with dozens of other works. People would have a few of these things rather than a lot of them." And when I began to think of them in those terms, to me, the works came alive in a curious sort of way. It's a . . . it's a hard process to describe. (127)

A number of the above quotations highlight the fact that most respondents concerned with the historical context of the object conceptualized this context in terms of the broad sweep of an era rather than in terms of the narrower arena of art history in particular. When they did make specific reference to the work's cultural or artistic context, they often did so by way of the assumption that history in general was at least representable by the history of culture, or else was not distinguishable from aesthetic history along any firm lines. Some individuals, however, did stress the object's ability to represent the pinnacle of a particular art historical style or period:

This piece is just terrifying. The Kouros is somehow approachable, and this piece is one of these things that you really feel like you have to stand a distance away to really begin to take in what you're looking at. It's like looking at the Parthenon sculpture. This was created in such a short period of time, and for just that period of time, they were able to bring together everything. (408)

Such observations are reminders that an art capable of embodying a given set of values, conventions, or techniques also is able to propagate or to transform those values and conventions and to make its mark within both the world of art and the larger society. It is this transformational aspect of the work of art that seems, at least for a number of the people we interviewed, to stimulate the historical aspect of the aesthetic encounter.

In conjunction with a concern with either the procession of history

in general or the partially independent trajectory of art history in particular is the concern with the personal history of the artist. While this aspect shares many features with the previously discussed forms of the historically oriented encounter, it is also distinct enough to warrant separate discussion.

Just as no clear line could be drawn between historical and art historical considerations, so too no firm boundary separates the artist's personal history from the influence of his or her cultural milieu. Indeed, many museum professionals valued an artist's work precisely because of the artist's ability to act as an interpreter of a given time or social climate:

[The painting] evoked an interesting sense of that culture through a more sophisticated, educated individual. . . . I think it's that ability of artists to relay their own personal experiences, or to relay, through their experience, some more general stand as an example or a part of society—contemporary, or humanity over a longer period of time or forever—which makes the most compelling and important work. (112)

In a slightly different vein, one respondent stressed not simply the artist's ability to be a skillful, refined, or insightful spokesperson for the issues of an age but stressed the artist's capacity to transform current social and historical ideas into a cohesive and innovative system. In this case, the artist was admired as much for breadth of involvement and integrative skills as for a sensitivity to the issues of the time:

Art that I personally respond to . . . tends to be things that are visual representations, but have behind them a lot of conceptual and political and intellectual activity. And that the visual representations are really signposts to this beautiful machine that has been constructed that is unique on the earth and is not just a rehashing of visual elements but is really a new thought machine that an artist, through visual means and combining his eyes with his perceptions, has created. (106)

While several respondents noted these relations of the artist to history, others found the work to be significant within the context of the artist's own set of values and desires, that is, his or her intentions. Some indicated that their appreciation of works of art was enhanced when they sensed the artist's mission and the decisions that were made to create it. One curator spoke at length about how a knowledge of the artist's thought processes allowed her to see a whole new dimension in the object; her valuation of the work was at least partly a function of her understanding of the creative process itself:

As you see that much of someone's work, you can see what they keep and what they leave out as they progress from one work to the other. And so, in a way, you learn about the process of selection, and you learn about what becomes very tiresome. I suppose in that way, it was learning about what you envision the artist's process to be, from what they told you about it. (125)

For some, the intention of the artist represented not only the key to particular works but to the aesthetic experience itself:

I think the first issue is what was the aesthetic experience that was intended? See, all experiences aren't equally valid, and I think as the example of the Van Meegerens and the Vermeers pointed out, no matter whether we think we have independent aesthetic experiences or not, we don't. And it's important to know what Vermeer intended, it's important to know what Van Meegeren intended. If you don't know that, then I don't think you'll get an honest reading of what you're looking at. And for that reason I think it is important to understand the context, the purpose, why a person used a pen as opposed to a piece of chalk, and all of that. (410)

Many others, however, downplayed the issue of intention, and one person went so far as to suggest that such information was irrelevant for her approach:

Can things take on meaning that transcends individual intention? Ultimately, that's what art should do, and that's what art history teaches you. You also ask the question: "What does the artist, what did the artist intend?" Very often you can't reconstruct that for past eras. Even if you can, you often discard, or take with a grain of salt, what the artist's original intention was, because a good art object . . . has to mean new things, it takes on new meaning with each generation. (123)

Emphasis here is placed upon the possibilities for interpretation that can be opened up to those who are willing to discard the sometimes rigid parameters to which a search after intentions can often be reduced—an idea to which we will turn in a later chapter. Nevertheless, some of the testimony suggests that an approach taking into account the intentions of the artist can yield interpretive insights.

Most of the references to a particular artist focused not upon the artist's intentions or thoughts about the works but upon his or her biography as the source for a meaningful context against which a given work could be better understood: "You become involved in the quirks and the overriding concerns of a great genius; it's very exciting" (126). Interviewees who shared this orientation were interested in a given object because of the appearance in the work of aspects of the artist's personality, or because of its ability to give them insight into the artist's life story. In instances such as these, creative activity represented one element within a larger narrative. Interestingly, this type of interaction was not only evoked by representational works but by the works of the great abstract painters as well:

If you stand in that room upstairs with the Pollock and the de Kooning and the Rothko, and you think about the fact that all those people knew each other, had dinner together, drank together, and believed that each work of art was the expression of their own independent personality—you look at those pictures and they don't any of them look alike, none

of them have any subject matter, and yet, you get a sense of personality. (120)

At times, the emphasis was placed on outside knowledge of a given artist's concerns and character or on a facility in reading the more obscure iconography present in certain works. In the following extended passage, we see quite clearly how a dialectic develops between the perceptual and iconographic aspects of the work, and the insights this curator derived from knowledge of this particular artist's biography:

The first thing that appealed to me was the figural style, the strange pose of the man, who is Stanley Spencer, courting Hilda, his first wife. I knew from the title that it had to do with Stanley Spencer and Hilda, but again, the rather eccentric figuration, the compacting of the space, the fact that it's all chock-full of objects and bric-a-brac and these little ancillary figures [aroused] my curiosity about what it's all about. Why he's down on his knees to her, what exactly he's offering or proposing. It looks like a marriage proposal, but that doesn't quite work either, since they were married in the early twenties, and this is a painting from 1954. And then there's this curious present, in addition to the flowers, that he seems to be offering her, which looks a bit like a wedding dress. . . . As it turns out, what the picture is, really, is a recollection of Stanley Spencer's. They married in the early twenties and remained together for ten or twelve years. And then divorced and he married someone else. As it happens, however, he always remained, at least in his mind, married to Hilda. The other marriage didn't work out. . . . So, all of that I think made it richer and fuller as a consequence of knowing that. (122)

Some curators even supplied for themselves the details necessary to make a biographical reading possible:

R: So, I'm always attracted to paintings that tell stories.

I: Mm, hmm. If there isn't a story provided . . . ?

R: Then I make one up. [Laugh] I make one up. A lot of times it has to do with the artist's biography. Why was he interested in this particular image at this time? (104)

Some of the respondents recounted instances in which they became acquainted with a living artist before they developed a familiarity or sympathy with the artist's work. In these cases their interest in the lives, personalities, or potentialities of the artists came first and provided a ground for their later aesthetic interests, or their appreciation for a given body of work was enhanced by personal contact with the artist.

Such mentions of the artist stand in contrast to discussions by those who looked to the biographical elements in the work *per se* in order to learn about the artist's life and to evolve a richer understanding of the work. Some of those people who expressed a particular interest in the biographical aspects of artistic production went so far as to suggest that they found it necessary to view a given object in biographical terms in order to sustain an interest in it. The curator quoted below was most interested in observing the myriad ways in which artists portray themselves—their thoughts, emotions, and histories—through the visual arts. This task, she notes, constitutes a challenge:

There is a lot of masking that goes on, evasive tactics taken by artists who want only to deal with their work on the formal level. I don't know if they're afraid of being discovered, or afraid of exposing themselves to criticism, but they tend not to talk about their works. They like to talk about paint application and scale—and things like that don't interest me at all; it's a very safe way of discussing a picture, you're not exposing or attempting to expose anything about the artist. I see it as a dead end. A real dead-end kind of approach. (104)

The result of meeting this challenge is an increased knowledge not only of an artist's life but of the complex patterns of disguise and distortion that act upon personal experience as it is translated into an artistic work. The insights thus gained bear upon the understanding of

the artist's personality, either in its own right or as a model of human character. Here, aesthetic criteria are of secondary importance and are viewed as the means through which the artist's personal concerns are expressed. The viewer's ultimate task is to understand the painting in its role as a manifestation of the artist's psyche.

In the above instance, and in many others, biographical elements were presumed to be represented in some form in the work itself, and the curator's job was to discover them, and, through them, the meaning of the work. The artist's life is seen primarily as a resource to be used in understanding the work. Here, the intermingling of the various approaches is evident. Another curator described a process that is virtually the mirror image of this one, in which the work helped to develop an understanding of the life. The latter approach constitutes perhaps the most truly biographical one, for the work's content is considered to be secondary to the facts that the artist painted it at a certain time and place and that undertaking such a task had a given effect upon the course of his or her life:

I think of that wonderful letter he [Vincent van Gogh] wrote to his brother. He is in the hospital, he says, "I look out of my window and I see this field with this tree in the middle of it. I'm doing a few drawings of that scene that I see." And then you think of the artist in the hospital. You think of this, you think of the hot sun pouring on that field. And all those things come together. It is a masterly work of art. (115)

This passage reveals that the respondent's primary interest is van Gogh's life and struggle to create art, which the work under discussion powerfully illustrates. It is the artist himself who matters here, who moves the curator to speak. Yet his appreciation of the work need not stop at the biographical level. In this case, the poignancy of the artist's life, as he looks out the window from his hospital bed, only enriches a viewing of the work.

The two approaches—searching for manifestations of the artist in the work and searching for the impact of the work upon the artist—can of course be undertaken independently, although they seem to offer

the richest understanding when seen as two sides of the same coin. Yet not all the museum professionals found these biographical dimensions to be important; indeed, one lamented the ease with which such approaches could be exploited for ends antagonistic to that of aesthetic understanding:

Museums continue to perpetuate mythology, they tend to hype everything. So the artist is incredibly mad or incredibly gifted or the most influential or the friend of popes and kings. And in the process, people tend to mythologize the artist. Again, it's a mixing up of the two different kinds of experiences. And they can't see the painting for the artist. (112)

This curator's cautionary insight is well taken. Nevertheless, the respondents interviewed—herself included—have discovered numerous ways to turn the biographical context into a source of insight not only as an end in itself but as a tool to enhance aesthetic appreciation.

COMMUNICATION AS A DIMENSION OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Many of the respondents, reflecting on the events that took place when they encountered a work of art, described it as a process of communication. For example, one curator tried to emphasize the difference between the instantaneous reactions he had to specific aspects of a work and the continual exchange of thoughts and feelings that occurred over time upon exposure to the work. He summed this up by saying, "It's not just a blast, it's a dialogue" (115). He brought something to the work just as the work brought something to him. Another curator made the same point: "At least in my experience it isn't just this object that sits there, but it does have something to give to you" (101).

Communication with a work of art is, of course, often a multidimensional experience, one that integrates the visual with the emotional and the intellectual:

I base things on what communication comes from the piece, whether it really communicates to me, whether there's a feeling coming from the piece. And that's very difficult to explain, it's just your eye really that tells you. Your eye tells you what you feel about a piece and that determines the value you put on that piece. It's a very personal choice. (134)

For some curators the inability to establish this kind of rapport with a work made the encounter challenging, and therefore significant. When one woman felt that an artist was denying information, she felt the artist meant to do this, which for her reopened the lines of communication and she could reestablish rapport with the work. The dialogues that were described most often fell into three general categories: communication with an era or culture; communication with an artist; and communication within the viewer. Even when respondents did not explicitly refer to the process of communication or dialogue, most of them used metaphors such as "the work spoke to me," "it tells me about . . . , or even "the museum absolutely sang to me." There were also many instances of referring to the intention of the artist by saying, "he was trying to make a statement about . . ." The prevalence of this metaphorical language throughout the interviews indicates that the process of communication is an important part of the aesthetic experience.

Two modes of communication with an era or culture were distinguishable: one emphasized the differences between the past and the present, while the other emphasized the continuities. The first mode is exemplified by a woman in talking about her reaction to the "femaleness" of eighteenth-century art and the communication that takes place between herself and the artist:

The nineteenth century is a very male century, and I was responding to the femaleness of the eighteenth century. So what we [she and a male colleague] were fighting about had nothing to do with the works of art really, except that there were certain things there that were in the work, which presumably were in the mind of the painter as well. Let's as-

sume that the picture is an expression of him, as your response to it is an expression of yourself . . . and there's a kind of conversation through the ages. (120)

In this case an era or culture was embodied by a particular artist. As her elaborations later in the interview made clear, her “conversation” with this artist made it possible for her to span the real time that separated them. This particular curator used the communicative process in order to appreciate eras that were very different from her own, and perhaps it also enabled her to see the present era in a new light.

While the difficulties of communicating across the boundaries of time are evident when considering the differences between certain eras, other aspects of communication across the ages are based on similarities, whether of symbolic intention and usage or on the simple facts of its humanity:

It is such a dynamic portrait that you know that that man really existed, you know that this is his likeness. The artist's work in cutting the die was so fine and so sensitive, you can see the contours of the face so well. You almost feel the portrait breathe, the man is there and you'd love to be able to put it on show for people to see. (420)

Similarities at the symbolic level were emphasized by those respondents who used mythological stories as vehicles of communication. One person sustained a dialogue through the ages by investigating and interpreting an artist's use of a particular iconography. Her knowledge of mythology, iconography, and a specific artist's biography allowed her to create stories that communicate the intentions of the artist (though the artist may have existed in another era). Her storytelling links together symbols from various cultures in an effort to maintain a dialogue across the centuries. For this curator, an apple took on not only those meanings we ascribe to it today but significances that have been left behind by even the most distant cultures: “You know, an artist takes an apple and paints it because it's round and it's a volume and

it's red, and all that. No. Apples, too, have meaning, you know. And, since Genesis [laugh], it's true” (123).

The second kind of dialogue did not necessarily cross the boundaries of time, but it did cross the boundaries of space. Several curators who described their interactions with modern works emphasized the sharing of feeling states or an understanding of an artist's work that could be achieved only through the process of communication. One woman described “the joy of sharing an experience . . . sharing some feeling states that have to be, that just have to be similar. But it's entering into communication with an artist and being there together in some way. It's wonderful!” (105). For her, as for many others, sharing did not always happen instantaneously. In fact, it was a challenge that required a lot of work.

The challenge is to communicate, to put yourself in front of a work of art you've never seen before, and it's work, it's a lot of work to be able to enter into a dialogue with the artist, and to ferret out those things that you think that the artist is speaking about, and trying to get out to the public, and to know that you have some success in that, via this dialogue, is very rewarding. (105)

Another person who talked about communication was less concerned with the rewards and challenges of understanding a work. She described the process as one of “finding a soul I could communicate with in a world where people are so very different, and it's difficult to feel totally comfortable with very many people” (106). This woman was more interested in the quality of the dialogue.

It is an experience of finding something that I can respond to at my most profound level, as a human being. And it's always the *quality* of the communication rather than what is being said, because, often, what is being said is really different. But the most direct quality of communication that this person has, either through luck or skill or intelligence or whatever—a combination of all those things—managed to embed

himself or herself into an object or a structure or work of art, to the extent that he is, he has divided himself into a person and a network of art. (106)

Certain people responded to works of art without viewing the artist as mediator. For some of them the most important aspect of encountering an object was relating to the world that was portrayed by the artist rather than to the fact that a particular artist was making a statement. In these cases the artist's intentions were bypassed as the work was viewed as a reality that could pull you inside:

[This still life is] just a wonderful painting, you can taste the oysters, you can smell the lemons, see that that eel is probably just right out of the river. You can get a sense of that kind of a metallic, coppery taste of oysters. It's a very, well, I guess it's a *sensual* painting. (133)

One woman was fascinated by the possibility of substituting one reality for another. Another spoke of using paintings "to dream with." A third spoke of Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks*: "I want to know what those people are doing next; I want to know where they came from and where they're going" (120). At another point the same woman stated that certain works make her feel that she would like to inhabit the world depicted. These three respondents seem to be viewing the work of art, at least partially, as a vehicle for stimulating fantasy and imagination.

Others experienced a twofold process in which they allowed the object to stimulate their imagination but then reflected upon themselves as viewers. For example, one woman described her reaction to Cindy Sherman's photography by simulating the internal dialogue that took place as she viewed the work. This woman wondered, "What is she, what is she doing? What is she about? But also, How am I? What's my relationship to this? What role do I play as a viewer in this?" (107).

Such self-conscious reflection was also described by a man who saw his interactions with works of art as important to the development of his personality. Interacting with art had become for him a means of

questioning himself and his surroundings in order to obtain a greater understanding of different values. Here he describes this process of self-definition:

I'm going more and more away from buying in a way. I'm more and more interested, for example, in showing, in relating different objects to each other so that you can understand an object by looking at the same object in different [contexts]. . . . in cheap/expensive, in good taste/bad taste, fun/not fun. So, and through making that clear to a person, those different values . . . this person starts getting to know things about, . . . themselves, because you're evaluating yourself—also you're defining yourself. (110)

It was also possible for works of art to stimulate the process of reminiscence or visual association. Although this type of experience was not reported frequently, it was a very important mode of experiencing for at least four of the respondents. Specific colors, shapes, or scenes could evoke certain feelings in them that were associated with memorable experiences. They were able to bring these associations into the dialogue they had with a work of art, thereby enriching their apprehension of the work.

The feeling when you see that first robin in the snow, sitting in that hawthorn tree, the feeling of hope that might be generated by some little area in some painting just by the colors it might have. . . . Now if I stood in front of that painting, I might remember some sensation of that joy that I felt at seeing that tree of that color. But as living individuals we have so many experiences, so our possibilities, our potential, is so great for having those feelings. You know, the vocabulary is in there, the visual vocabulary, or the sensory vocabulary. Practically, you would almost think without end, hmm? (105)

The dialogue this woman just described does not take place at a verbal level, although she did find words for it. Throughout the interview she emphasized that her world was a *visual* world and her means

of communication was the visual/sensory vocabulary that she had developed in her lifetime. This sense of a visual, explicitly nonverbal, interaction with works of art was most forcefully stated by another interviewee:

There is a certain danger in being too articulate about these things, which may have a certain satisfaction to it all of itself and may remove the art experience, the aesthetic response, from what the real aesthetic response is, which is, of course, silent. It has nothing to do with words at all. (129)

For a few respondents the process of visually experiencing a work of art led to a heightened awareness sometimes described as a loss of self or transportation outside the self. However, these people did not report being transported into the captivating reality depicted within the work as was the case with the woman who wanted to enter the world of Hopper's *Nighthawks*. "Where" they went is difficult to determine. Perhaps it is best to let them speak for themselves on this point:

I think it absorbs, it involves all of the senses in a unifying manner. Art is primarily visual, but it heightens your sense of the other, the outside, the thing experienced, and in the process, heightens your awareness of yourself, and even though you're being fully absorbed and transported by an object perceived by the senses, you're losing yourself at the same time you become yourself. (123)

The loss of self described by this curator was expressed in different terms by one who spoke of being put on "a plane above things," where a work of art could give him "a sense of the absolute." Only great works of art could convince him in this way, however:

There are [artists] who seem to raise the experience to some kind of—well, I'll use the word—spiritual [realm]. I'm not ashamed of it. Some kind of spiritual [realm], so that there is conviction in what they depict, whether it be landscape,

mythology, gods, goddesses, heroes. It's just like Wagner . . . there are some times, especially during bad performances, you think "Oh, oh, oh, how silly it all looks," . . . and then you realize that these are gods, heroes, and he has, somehow his genius has surpassed all that funny make-believe and so forth and has reached this plane. It convinces you. Yes, this is the realm of spirit and conviction. (115)

The feeling of transcendence was also mentioned in relation to works that could completely engross the viewer. One curator relates that the sense of transport she feels with art parallels her experiences in nature. She contrasts works that can be intellectually, emotionally, and culturally interesting with works that have the quality of providing that transcendence to another level.

I know that I am committed to art as much as I am, and I appreciate good art works because I put it in this context of something transcendent, although that's impossible to describe. It does have to do with this affirmation of a higher experience, or a high order. That's all I can say. (123)

It is difficult to say whether the "high order" this woman speaks of is the same as the earlier "realm of spirit and conviction." Although one curator does not mention where this transcendent experience takes him, he is quite sure that it is out of the realm of everyday life:

Very great objects give one a sort of a transcendent experience. It takes you out of the realm of everyday life. You lose the sense of where you are and become absorbed in the object. When that happens, whether it's theater, or looking at art pictures, or reading a beautiful piece of prose, it moves you and transcends you. I think that's part of what art is. It's not common experience, it doesn't happen that often, but it does happen with regularity. (109)

These transcendent or outside-of-self experiences were not reported by every respondent. They were reported only by those people

who talked about very great works of art. Others explicitly stated that they never had experiences of a transcendent quality. These experiences must therefore be contrasted with another view of art that is encapsulated by the following passage:

I don't think that I have religious experiences in front of works of art very much. I get very excited about things, but what I've found is that when you know a field, or know a group of objects, and have a certain interest in them, and one that you don't know comes along, that's really good, that's exciting. To see it for the first time and to know it for the first time extends your picture of possibilities within a given medium, or a way of making objects, or whatever. But then once you've incorporated that, it becomes part of your knowledge of the field, not that it's going to get worse as a work of art in your mind, but it maybe isn't going to be as exciting. I think this is a constant experience that I have or that any curator has. (402)

A middle ground between these two views is expressed by the following respondent, indicating that the two may not be utterly irreconcilable:

The art world is not an ivory-tower world. I mean there's nothing in the art world that isn't somehow a reflection or a variation on what people consider to be the real world—politics and whatnot. So it's no escape. It's just a . . . I think a very . . . it's essentially a positive way of focusing on the world. (103)

The communicative aspects of the aesthetic experience have thus come full circle. We began with communication across the boundaries of time, from era to era or culture to culture. From there we looked at communication across interpersonal boundaries, that is, from artist to viewer or vice versa. Communication within personal boundaries took us into the minds of the viewers as they contemplated fantasy, past experiences, or their own development through time. Finally, we

concluded with the transcendent experience, which is as much an immersion of the self as it is a loss of the self in an ageless, perhaps timeless, realm of the absolute.

A literal-minded positivist critic might object that none of these experiences actually involves real communication, since they all take place only in the minds of viewers as they focus attention on the art object. But the fact that this interaction is purely intrapsychic does not make it any less real. That such experiences do exist provides convincing evidence for the capacity of human consciousness to transcend the limitations imposed upon it by objective conditions. With the help of information, imagination, and empathy, the viewer can in fact share the dreams, the emotions, and the ideas that artists of different times and places have encoded in their work.

SUMMARY

A welter of differing, complementary, and sometimes contradictory views on the aesthetic experience has been presented in this chapter, and that is as should be. Our attempt has not been to pigeonhole the exact nature of the aesthetic encounter but to point out some of the consistencies within the variation and to describe the crucial dimensions along which these encounters seem to vary. In the following chapter we briefly explore our findings a bit further, attempting to test this conception against a somewhat broader population.

The Art of Seeing

An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter

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