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aesthetic, *adj.* and *n.*

Pronunciation: (/ɛs'θɛtɪk/ : see below)

Forms: Also **esthetic**.

Etymology: mod. < Greek *αισθητικ-ός*, of or pertaining to *αισθητά*, things perceptible by the senses, things material (as opposed to *νοητά* things thinkable or immaterial), also 'perceptive, sharp in the senses'; < vb. stem *αισθε-* 'feel, apprehend by the senses'. Applied in German by Baumgarten (1750–58, *Æsthetica*) to 'criticism of taste' considered as a science or philosophy; against which, as a misuse of the word found in German only, protest was made by Kant (1781, *Crit. R.V.* 21), who applied the name, in accordance with the ancient distinction of *αισθητά* and *νοητά*, to 'the science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception,' a sense retained in the Kantian philosophy, and found in English c1800. But Baumgarten's use of *æsthetik* found popular acceptance, and appeared in English after 1830, though its adoption was long opposed. (See below.) Recent extravagances in the adoption of a sentimental archaism as the ideal of beauty have still further removed *æsthetic* and its derivatives from their etymological and purely philosophical meaning. 'The pronunciations /ɛs'θɛtɪk/ , /i:s'θɛtɪk/ , /ɛs'θi:tɪk/ , /i:s'θi:tɪk/ , are all in use; the second is at present most common in London' (*N.E.D.*, 1884).

The following quotations illustrate the history of the word:

- 1832 *Penny Cycl.* I. 156 *Æsthetics* (*Æsthetik*) is the designation given by German writers to a branch of philosophical inquiry, the object of which is a philosophical theory of the beautiful.
- 1832 *Philol. Museum* 1 369 Beautiful and ugly depend on principles of taste, which it would be very convenient to designate by an adjective ·· Some English writers have adopted the term *esthetical*. This has not however yet become an established English word ·· Perception in general is something very different from that peculiar and complex modification of it which takes cognizance of the beauties of poetry and art. *Esthetics* would naturally designate the doctrine of perception in general, and might be wanted as a technical term for that purpose. By the Kantian school, indeed, esthetic is used to denote that branch of metaphysics which contains the laws of perception ·· As an additional reason for hesitating before we adopt *esthetic*, it may be noticed that even in Germany it is not yet established beyond contest.
- 1842 J. GWILT *Encycl. Archit.* III. i. 673 There has lately grown into use in the arts a silly pedantic term under the name of *Æsthetics* ·· it is, however, one of the metaphysical and useless

additions to nomenclature in the arts, in which the German writers abound.

a1856 W. HAMILTON *Lect. Metaphysics* (1859) I. vii. 124 It is ·· nearly a century since Baumgarten ·· first applied the term *Æsthetic* to the doctrine which we vaguely and periphrastically denominate the Philosophy of Taste, the theory of the Fine Arts, the Science of the Beautiful ·· etc.,—and this term is now in general acceptance, not only in Germany, but throughout the other countries of Europe. The term *Apolaustic* would have been a more appropriate designation.

A. *adj.*

†**1.** Of or pertaining to sensuous perception, received by the senses. *Obs.*

1798 W. TAYLOR in *Monthly Rev.* **25** 585 In the dialect peculiar to Professor Kant ·· his *receptivity* for *aesthetic* gratification [is] not delicate.

2. Of or pertaining to the appreciation or criticism of the beautiful.

1821 S. T. COLERIDGE in *Blackwood's Edinb. Mag.* **10** 254, I wish I could find a more familiar word than *æsthetic*, for works of taste and criticism.

1831 T. CARLYLE *Sartor Resartus* (1858) 77 In answer to a cry for solid pudding ·· comes, epigrammatically enough, the invitation to a wash of quite fluid *Æsthetic* Tea!

1855 A. BAIN *Senses & Intellect* II. iv. 607 The first object of an artist is to gratify the feelings of taste, or the proper *æsthetic* emotions.

1872 H. SPENCER *Princ. Psychol.* (ed. 2) II. VIII. ix. 627 The *æsthetic* sentiments originate from the play-impulse.

1872 H. SPENCER *Princ. Psychol.* (ed. 2) II. VIII. ix. 632 The *æsthetic* character of a feeling is habitually associated with separateness from life-serving function.

3. Of persons, animals: Having or showing an appreciation of the beautiful or pleasing; tasteful, of refined taste. Of things: In accordance with the principles of good taste (or what is conventionally

regarded as such).

- 1871 C. DARWIN *Descent of Man* II. xiii. 39 Birds appear to be the most æsthetic of all animals, excepting of course, man, and they have nearly the same taste for the beautiful as we have.
- 1875 F. W. FARRAR *Silence & Voices* III. 62 A corrupt Hellenism, which regards sin forsooth with æsthetic toleration.
- 1881 W. S. GILBERT *Patience* I. 22, I am a broken-hearted troubadour, Whose mind's æsthetic, and whose tastes are pure.
- 1884 *N.E.D.* at *Aesthetic*, *Mod. Colloq.* He must have æsthetic wall-paper and a dado.

4. spec. Of or pertaining to a late nineteenth-century movement in England of artists and writers who advocated a doctrine of 'art for art's sake'.

- 1868 W. PATER *Æsthetic Poetry in Appreciations* (1889) 213 The 'æsthetic' poetry is neither a mere reproduction of Greek or medieval poetry, nor only an idealisation of modern life and sentiment.
- ca1882 D. G. ROSSETTI *St. Agnes* in *Coll. Wks.* (1886) I. 410 The journal of the worthy poet-critic ·· was much too æsthetic to permit itself many readers.
- 1882 W. HAMILTON *Aesthetic Movement* 31 The leaders of the Æsthetic School in poetry have been styled fleshly poets, delighting in somewhat sensually-suggestive descriptions of the passions.
- 1950 E. H. GOMBRICH *Story of Art* xxv. 402 Whistler became a leading figure in the so-called 'aesthetic movement' which tried to make out that artistic sensibility is the only thing in life worth taking seriously.

B. n. commonly pl. **æsthetics**, as collect. sing.: but also in sing., after German *æsthetik*, French *esthétique*.

1. The science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception. *Hist.*

- 1798 A. F. M. WILlich *Elem. Crit. Philos.* 139 Aesthetic commonly signifies the Critique of Taste, but with Kant, the science containing the rules of sensation.
- 1803 *Edinb. Rev.* 1 253 If the experimentalists of the Institute had abandoned their physics for ·· the study of transcendental æsthetics and all the refinements and abstractions of pure reason.
- 1825 T. CARLYLE *Life Schiller* III. 174 The only department [of transcendentalism] to which he attached himself with his ordinary zeal was that which relates to the principles of the imitative arts, with their moral influences, and which in the Kantean nomenclature has been designated by the term *Æsthetics*, or the doctrine of sentiments and emotions.
- 1875 *Encycl. Brit.* I. 212/1 Kant ·· under the title Transcendental *Æsthetic*, treats of the *a priori* principles of all sensuous knowledge.

2. The philosophy or theory of taste, or of the perception of the beautiful in nature and art.

a. *pl.*

- 1833 *Penny Cycl.* I. 157/1 Most German writers, who have published systematic treatises on æsthetics, have followed the principles laid down by Baumgarten, Kant, or Schelling.
- 1862 J. SKELTON *Nugæ Crit.* I. 82 John is a man of taste, and knows something of practical æsthetics.
- 1872 H. SPENCER *Princ. Psychol.* (ed. 2) II. VIII. ix. 635 To deal fully with the psychology of æsthetics is out of the question.

b. *sing.*

- 1822 *New Monthly Mag.* 4 149 He accordingly applied himself diligently to study the spirit of classical Tragedy, and the principles of *Æsthetic*.
- 1857 T. E. WEBB *Intellectualism of Locke* v. 84 The two propositions which constitute the *Æsthetic* of the Essay.

- 1864 *Press* 21 May 481 Certes, we English are behind hand in æsthetic.
- 1868 M. PATTISON *Suggestions Acad. Organisation* §5. 196 Two professors of the science [of art] and æsthetic, dealing with Painting, Sculpture, etc.

3. = AESTHETE *n.*; an adherent of the æsthetic movement (see sense A. 4).

- 1883 L. TROUBRIDGE *Life amongst Troubridges* (1966) 164 The great Oscar Wilde ·· is grown enormously fat, ·· not at all the aesthetic he used to look.
- 1894 *Cosmopolitan* May 122 The æsthetics ·· who proclaim the infinite superiority of art to nature.
- 1946 *English Studies* XXVII. 49 It is not unsympathetic to the Aesthetics, for it seeks to understand them.

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aesthetic distance *n.* a sense or degree of emotional detachment considered integral to (and necessary for) dispassionate appreciation of the creative arts: see also *psychical distance n.* at PSYCHICAL *adj.* Special uses.

Some artists (esp. dramatists) have proposed methods designed to engender aesthetic distance in the viewer: see *alienation effect* at ALIENATION *n.* 1d.

- 1911 *Jrnl. Philos., Psychol. & Sci. Methods* **8** 306 While teaching to regard objects in themselves, apart from their practical use, art creates 'æsthetic distance'.
- 1948–9 *Poetry* **73** 155 The direct approach is perilous to the artist ·· . An art is usually ·· a kind of obliquity. ·· Its fixed form proposes to guarantee the round-about of the artistic process, and the 'aesthetic distance'.
- 1960 K. BECKSON & A. GANZ *Reader's Guide Lit. Terms* (1961) 11 This

necessary separation between the observer and the work is called 'psychic' or, especially by the New Critics, 'aesthetic distance.'

- 1991 J. A. CUDDON *Dict. Lit. Terms & Lit. Theory* (ed. 3) 11 In his [sc. Hans Robert Jauss'] theory literary value is measured according to 'aesthetic distance', the degree to which a work departs from the 'horizon of expectations' of its first readers.

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