

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

ACQUIRED TASTE

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It. *Gusto acquisito*; Fr. *Goût acquis*; Germ. *Erworbener Geschmack*; Span. *Gusto adquirido*. An acquired taste is a liking of something that is usually not appreciated at first, but that slowly develops as a result of learning, experience, or effort. The notion usually refers to a taste for foods, but it may also refer to any kind of aesthetic preference. For example, children do not tend to appreciate classical music or jazz spontaneously, yet adults can learn to appreciate these genres. The main points at issue are the real possibility and the authenticity of acquired preferences: can we really come to appreciate something we originally don't like? Are these preferences stable and true to our nature? On one side of the debate, an acquired taste may be the product of aesthetic education, on the other, it could be driven by a self-serving desire for social recognition or by mere conformism toward what one is "supposed to like".

ORIGIN AND MEANING

The notion of acquired taste can be interpreted in two main ways: the first "weak" interpretation sees acquisition as *discovering* a taste or *learning* to appreciate something. Examples include when we discover that we like something we have just encountered for the first time and have never experienced previously, or when we become knowledgeable enough through education and exercise to be able to understand and appreciate something. On the contrary, the second "strong" interpretation sees taste acquisition as *constructing* and *moulding* one's own preferences, in some cases even forcing ourselves into getting to like something we did not like before by changing our personal inclination through habituation, adaptation to cultural habits, or conformism, both unconsciously or intentionally.

The distinction between "natural" and "acquired taste" appears in many works on aesthetics from the 18th century, an age of debates on the degree of naturalness and universality of our aesthetic judgment. Aesthetic judgment was no longer considered to be based on the idea of objective beauty, as was the case in the past, but based instead on our "internal sense" and on the constitution of our senses. According to Edmund Burke (1759) the presence of acquired tastes for things we originally find distasteful ("like tobacco, opium, or garlic", in the *Introduction on Taste*) does not detract from

the fact that we are anyway able to tell apart “the acquired from the natural relish” and consider the latter to be the true standard.

On the contrary, Montesquieu (1757) saw a relationship of mutual enrichment between natural and acquired tastes: “Acquired taste affects, changes, increases, and diminishes natural taste, just as natural taste affects, changes, increases, and diminishes acquired taste”. According to this view, taste acquisition means the development and the refinement of our natural and uneducated senses. Similarly, David Hume (1757) acknowledged that everyone has unique preferences, but “men of taste” can acquire good judgment and reach a general consensus both through their natural sensibility (imagination and “good sense”), and through education, practice, and cultivation.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

If the traditional debate was focused on the relationship between acquired taste and natural taste, today the attention has shifted to the causes and reasons of taste formation and acquisition, both from the physiological and developmental points of view, and from the perspective of social and cultural factors steering the formation of our likings. For example, a wealth of empirical research has been devoted to investigating the genetic, developmental, and social factors of the formation and differentiation of food preferences and aversions (Rozin and Fallon 1981; Logue *et al.* 1981; Ventura and Worobey 2013).

In aesthetics, empirical approaches (→ *empirical aesthetics*) have investigated some principles of taste formation, such as the *mere exposure* phenomenon (Zajonc 1968; Cutting 2006), which is defined as the fact that repeated exposure to something contributes to building familiarity with it through habit formation. This is the basic process of acculturation, through which taste and aesthetic preferences are moulded by continuous exposition to customs and traditions.

Seeing acquired taste as a product of acculturation brings into play the role of sociological factors in the formation of personal taste. In particular, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1984), taste is the product of a *habitus*, the person’s social upbringing and, at the same time, is a tool of preservation of class identity. If taste defines a person’s social belonging, then deliberate cultivation of certain cultural preferences (for instance, listening to a specific music genre) is a way to assert one’s own cultural capital and status by means of “distinction” with other classes that do not have the same taste. Bourdieu’s analysis assumes that preferences and taste are often the product of subtly hypocritical attitudes and opportunistic adaptations, in which acquired tastes meant to symbolize a specific cultural status are passed off as natural and spontaneous.

As a consequence, if discussions in the past focused on the correct acquisition process (the cultivation of good taste, the education of an aesthetic sensibility), the question now concerns the authenticity or inauthenticity of acquired taste, and this determination partially depends on a person’s reasons and motivations behind her taste acquisition. On one side, a simple reason could

be the person's passive exposure to social and cultural influences and her unconscious tendency to adapt to dominant trends and fashions. On the other side, a person could also be motivated to intentionally modify and adapt her own preferences. This is a crucial point in the contemporary discussion about acquired taste (Melchionne 2007; Irvin 2007; Kieran 2010; Arielli 2016), since intentionally "willing to like" something by moulding one's taste requires a self-constructing effort that is not only hard to accomplish, but also requires that a person often acts "as if" she already has the taste she would like to enjoy, even if this is not yet the case. This kind of "aesthetic bootstrapping" (Goldie 2011) could be grounded in the person's sincere desire to gain new areas of aesthetic appreciation, but it could also be an opportunistic pretence and even lead to self-deception, like, for instance, when someone believes that she appreciates contemporary art, but actually is only following her desire to appear culturally sophisticated.

In this regard, we should distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The first includes all those situations in which we are driven by a sincere desire to cultivate a taste in domains with which we are not familiar. The second case, on the other hand, includes all external and instrumental purposes, like those discussed by Bourdieu (displaying a taste as a status symbol). An external motivation is also the conformist desire to belong to a social group and to fit in. When the acquired taste is only a means and not an end in itself, then we have a lack of authenticity or even deceitfulness. A further criticism is that an externally motivated acquired taste is unstable and volatile, since aesthetic preferences were not produced by a deep-seated interest and would probably be readjusted every time the circumstances to obtain one's purpose change. Furthermore, tastes acquired for social opportunism may be inconsistent with the person's overall preferences and character. The debated point here is whether a fleeting and unstable taste is necessarily inauthentic and illegitimate, since this variability is typical of certain forms of aesthetic consumption, for instance fashion. It is possible to argue that a real and legitimate aesthetic experience takes place even if, through efforts and exposure, a person really comes to take pleasure in something, no matter how unstable this taste is and how distant it is from the person's other preferences.

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