

ResearchSpace@Auckland

Version

This is the Accepted Manuscript version. This version is defined in the NISO recommended practice RP-8-2008 <http://www.niso.org/publications/rp/>

Suggested Reference

Davies, S. (1997). First art and art's definition. *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 35(1), 19-34. doi: [10.1111/j.2041-6962.1997.tb00823.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1997.tb00823.x)

Copyright

Items in ResearchSpace are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated. Previously published items are made available in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Davies, S. (1997). First art and art's definition. *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 35(1), 19-34, which has been published in final form at [10.1111/j.2041-6962.1997.tb00823.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1997.tb00823.x)

This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.

<http://olabout.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-820227.html>

<http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/issn/0038-4283/>

<https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/docs/uoa-docs/rights.htm>

Stephen Davies, Philosophy, University of Auckland

Important note: This is a final draft and differs from the definitive version, which is published in the **Southern Journal of Philosophy**, 35 (1997): 19-34. I have been assured by the University of Auckland's research office that if they have made this publicly available then it does not violate the publisher's copyright rules.

First Art and Art's Definition

Some of the current definitions of art share a recursive form and thereby acknowledge the historical reflexivity of our current concept. Something is an artwork if and only if it stands in a certain relation guaranteeing its continuity with past artworks. Proponents of these theories differ about the defining relation that, through reference, repetition, amplification, or repudiation, ties the current piece to its artistic predecessors. According to Jerrold Levinson,¹ it is one in which the artist intends that his work be regarded in one of the ways past art has been regarded. James D. Carney² holds that it is in terms of its style that the present candidate is united with prior artworks. Robert Stecker³ considers the connection to depend on functions the piece shares with previous art, while allowing that the functions served by art might alter through time. Noël Carroll⁴ sees the link between the present piece and past art as residing in a true historical narrative (subject to various constraints) that encompasses the two.⁵

This chronologically retrogressive chain must have a beginning. Its initial member is the first artwork,⁶ which is art not because it stands in the relevant relation to its artistic predecessors (since it has none) but for some other reason.

In this paper I discuss first art. Though the theorists mentioned above have addressed the topic, I find their discussions to be unsatisfying.⁷ To the extent

that they fail to account for first art, their definitions are inadequate and incomplete.

I

To provide a suitable starting point for the recursive chains highlighted in the definitions mentioned, first art must have a particular character. It must be art at the time or period of its creation and, at the same time or period, no prior artworks, ones made to be art at the time of their creation, can exist. The second wave of artworks, those that are the first to become art by satisfying the defining relation that connects them to first art, come next.

First art should be distinguished from two things with which it could be confused: (a) It must be distinct from the progenitors from which it sprang. The first art-making practices probably arose from others with which they were historically and culturally continuous, rather than appearing from “thin air,” but these other practices could not have been art-making ones, whatever similarities they shared with those generating first art. (b) First art should be distinguished from “mid-life” art. Items that were not art when they were created might have art-status conferred on them retrospectively. That is, from the perspective of an art tradition established long after the creation of certain pieces, we might decide that those pieces merit art-status and treat them accordingly. Works that acquire their art-status in mid-life might have been created (as pieces, not art) prior to the appearance of first art. Mid-life art could not fulfill the role assigned to first art in the definitions mentioned above, because mid-life artworks attained art-status after the appearance of the second wave of artworks; that is, after artworks became art at their creation as a result of their realizing the art-defining relation to prior artworks. The distinction between first and mid-life art should be kept in mind, for there is a tendency to

refer to things in terms of their present status while describing their pasts, as when one says “Mary’s husband ate a slug when he was four.”

There is another factor that would easily lead us to forget the distinction between first and mid-life art. First art could be recognized as art only after the practice of art-making developed and the term was coined. Those who made first art could not have thought of themselves as doing so; not, at least, in the way that a contemporary artist can describe herself as an art-maker and conceive of her actions under that description. The art-status of first art could have become apparent only with the passage of time. This is also the case, of course, for mid-life art, that is, for pieces that came to be art as a result of decisions made within the artworld subsequent to their initial creation. The difference between first and mid-life art could be put this way: Pieces enfranchised as art retrospectively were not artworks prior to their being accorded art-status, whereas first art, when later it was acknowledged as such, was revealed to have been art all along. First art was art from its inception. Recognizing first art as art is a matter of discovering what it is (and was), not of deciding what it will be from now on.

The proponents of recursive approaches to art’s definition require first art of the kind just described — actual artworks that are distinct both from their non-artistic progenitors and from mid-life art — even if they claim that first art is similar to what preceded it, even if they insist that first art could be considered to be art only at a later point in the history of the given culture (or artworld), and even if they admit the possibility of mid-life art that predates first art in its creation (as an item, not as art).

II

James D. Carney is sensitive to some of the distinctions I have drawn. His position is as follows:

I find the best option for a historical theory of art is to take first-art as like mid-life art, in both cases some object is not an artwork at its inception. Later, after style-practices get started, they get adopted, so to speak, but in ways different from mid-life art. ... They are objects that later in their existence become art forms and artworks. The past or part of the past is understood in terms of a subsequently emerging present. [Carney's style theory] does not need a first-artwork-unstyled; rather [it] needs a first-object-unstyled which later, [w]hen regarded as linked to art styles causally and culturally, is transformed. (1994, 120)

According to this model, certain (stylistic) features are salient in established artworks. First artworks are such because they possess similar properties. It is only later that they come to possess these properties, being invested with them through their historical and causal connection to the later works in which those properties are significant. If style is emergent from lower-level properties, as seems likely, then first art will possess appropriate lower-level properties from its creation, but these will come to display an art style only later, when that style is entrenched.

This view runs counter to a requirement I specified earlier for first art: that it be art from its genesis (and, hence, that it display some kind of property that is art-status-conferring at the outset). First art must be art already at the time second wave pieces become art, otherwise second wave pieces could not be art as a result of standing to first art in the art-defining relation. The account that Carney offers does not allow first art to anchor the chain on which later art builds.^{viii}

There is another worry. Carney's view implies that ancient items with which we are now familiar might be revealed by the future course of art to be first artworks, though we do not regard them as art now. I find this idea implausible. For instance, if avant-garde artists develop an artistic genre in which cats are mummified, I do not believe this could show that the mummified cats found in Egyptian tombs are among the first artworks. There is bound to be disagreement about where best to draw the line between first art and its immediate predecessors, but that debate is to be settled, if it can be, by considering the objects in question, not by awaiting future developments in Western art.

Jerrold Levinson is less careful of the distinctions to which I have drawn attention. In the first formulation of his theory (in 1979), he allowed that the first artworks might be stipulated as such. By whom and when, I ask. It is unreasonable to suggest that the original makers were in a position to do so, given that this would require of them a conscious awareness of their activity as one of art-making. And, if the stipulation is made later by those possessed of the concept and of an already established art-making tradition, then it is difficult to see how this differs from the conferral of art-status on items in their mid-life. Moreover, and this is a point later acknowledged by Levinson (in 1993), the term "stipulation" seems to suggest an arbitrariness that is ill-suited to his style of definition. The reason why the first artworks qualify as such should not be a matter of whim, otherwise the recursive approach to art's definition will imply that the subsequent development of the concept amounts to the elaboration of an ungrounded fantasy.

One further objection to Levinson's 1979 account is relevant. It is by no means clear, when Levinson mentions the ur-arts, whether he takes himself to be

discussing the first artworks or the progenitors of the first artworks. This ambivalence becomes explicit in the later development of his position. He allows for two possibilities without committing himself to either. We could grant objects of the ur-arts the status of art but admit that they are so in a different sense from what applies to all else subsequently accountable as art, for reasons that are now plain: they are art not being modeled on earlier art but rather because later, unquestioned art has sprung from them. [Or we could] keep objects of the ur-arts as non-art, but then ... acknowledge that products of the first arts, those following the ur-arts, are art in a sense close to but not identical to that applying for all else subsequently accountable as art, in that their arthood consists in being projected for regard that some preceding ur-art object (rather than some preceding art object) was correctly accorded. (1993, 422)

First art, I have maintained, must be art from its outset. Were it otherwise, it could not enter into the art-defining relationship that allows for the creation of second wave art. The definitional chain would collapse at the link between its first and second members. As Levinson puts it: 'If the ur-arts are not strictly art, then these subsequent practices, even if appropriately intentionally related to them, will not be art either, because not aimed at a regard that earlier art was correctly accorded. And so on, for all the would-be art that follows these...' (1993, 421). Moreover, first art cannot be art for the reasons that later art is, as Levinson accepts. For completeness, definitions of the kind under discussion should explain how first art qualifies as such. Neither of Levinson's alternatives succeeds in doing this.

Levinson's second option (in which the ur-arts are the non-art predecessors of first art) holds that the ur-arts and first art invite similar regards but, whereas first art is projected for these, the ur-arts are not. Two responses might be

offered to this suggestion. The first maintains that the relevant regard is solicited by the item's properties, not by the artist's projection of these. It is as a result of its possessing such qualities that the item attains art-status. In developing this suggestion it might be argued that artworks possess the relevant properties irrespective of whether they are intended to do so. Stecker makes the point in considering first artworks:

No doubt they were deliberately fashioned, but whether they were done so with an eye to aesthetic appeal or expressive power, or whether these characteristics are quite adventitious results of very different intentions, is unknowable. It is certainly not obvious that all artistically functional properties must be intentionally imparted, aesthetic appeal and expressive power being two prime candidates for properties that need not be. (1997, 90)

The second line allows that the relevant properties were deliberately produced to be as they are, but queries the explanatory power Levinson assigns to the notion of "projection." If the ur-arts invite the same regard as the first artworks by displaying through their human creation similar and equally salient qualities, what is the force of the claim that these are projected in the latter case and not the former? In the ur-arts, the relevant qualities are purposefully generated and might refer to similar features in other ur-art pieces. If "projection" differs from intentional production and/or reference, just what does it involve? It is not plain that Levinson's theory provides an acceptable answer to this question. In that case, his talk of "projection" fails to establish a clear distinction between first art and its non-art forbearers.

Levinson's first option appeals to causal (or some other) continuity between the ur-arts (here regarded as first art) and later art. Of course, he is right to think this should exist. But if the ur-arts also arise out of and resemble earlier non-art practices, the link between later art and the non-art predecessors of the ur-arts

will be as strong as that between later art and the ur-arts, so no explanatory progress has been made. What is needed is an account of the crucial differences between first art and the predecessors it resembles in so many respects; namely, an account of why first art is art and its predecessors are not.

Levinson explores his first option in a conditional fashion. According to it, the ur-arts are artworks 'in a sense close to but not identical to that applying for all else subsequently accountable as art' (1993, 422). He stresses that an 'historical and retrospective component' (1993, 421) is ineliminable from the judgment that the ur-arts are art. If we include the ur-arts within art's ambit, there would be a 'double historical justification for doing so; as both the immediate model for later activity whose art status is not in question, and as apparently aimed, judged on fineness of execution or expression achieved, at some of the kinds of reception or experiencing normative for later art' (1993, 421).

I find it difficult to interpret these ideas. Levinson's emphasis on the historicity and retrospection of the decision intimates that the art-significance of "fineness of execution or expression" was apparent only later, when such qualities became central in an established heritage of art's production. In that case his position foreshadows Carney's and is subject to the same objections. On the other hand, if "fineness of execution or expression" confer art-status at the outset, it is difficult to see what is supposed to be retrospective about the acknowledgment of their art-importance by subsequent generations.

If Levinson believes that the first artworks possess "fineness of execution or expression" from their beginning, and that their doing so is what makes them art at the time of their creation, his account is close to the sort that is needed. It identifies properties of a kind that distinguish the first artworks from their non-art predecessors and that were perpetuated in second wave artworks. But I

doubt that the particular properties mentioned are up to the job. I suspect that fineness of execution and expression were found in non-art activities that preceded the first artworks (for instance, in rituals concerned with hunting, social initiation, marriage, medicine, magic, and religion), and that they occurred after the appearance of first art in practices that were not regarded at the time as art-making ones.

I have a similar objection to the views of Noël Carroll, though I see his position as coming yet nearer to what is required. He writes:

Of course, to admit that a practice starts ill-defined does not mean that its cluster of originating activities are arbitrarily united. For a certain sense can be discerned in the way in which they coalesce. In the case of art, supposing that representation, expression, decoration and communication, broadly characterized, were, from the production side, the initial core activities of the practice of art, a certain functional logic appears to ground their cohesion. ... This is not said in order to demand that artworks be representative, expressive and/or communicative, but only to note that when these activities are combined, their logical interconnections would indicate that their coalescence as deep-rooted activities of the practice is not sheerly arbitrary. ... [W]hen we reach the boundaries of the tradition, our characterization of its intelligibility tends toward considerations of function. (1988, 153)

There are two potential problems with the kinds of properties — representation, expression, decoration, and communication — Carroll sees as characteristic of first art. In the first place, they are often structured by arbitrary conventions, so that their significance is opaque to cultural outsiders. I wonder if we know enough about the lives and cultural conventions of those who made first art to be secure in our recognition and appreciation of such qualities in first

art. The second point is that the practices identified by Carroll as marking first art as such are too general to be distinctive in the required fashion. All these might be found in non-art activities both prior and subsequent to the creation of the first arts.

The position advocated by Robert Stecker suffers from being somewhat underdeveloped. Stecker (in 1997) regards first art pieces as art by virtue of their functional success. He argues for this position mainly by criticizing the alternative presented by Levinson, which sees artists' intentions as more important than artistic functions. As a result, it is far from evident what Stecker's positive account of first art is supposed to entail. Though he has quite a lot to say about aesthetic properties, aesthetic experience, and the function of art, most of this concerns works presented in the context of an established art-making tradition. Here is a summary of Stecker's general account: The more significant functions of art are experience-causing ones. The relevant experiences can be aesthetic, cognitive, emotion-centered, and interpretation-centered. The relative importance of these kinds of experiences varies from artform to artform; particular sets of functions are standard or correctly recognized for the central artforms. Artworks fulfill the functions appropriate to their type in virtue of presenting artistically valuable properties. These include expressiveness, representationality, patterned organization, and imaginative narratives. Such properties give rise to aesthetic experience when the artwork is contemplated for its own sake (or for the sake of appreciatively experiencing it). While Stecker's account of aesthetic experience draws on the traditional model, he rejects some aspects of this. In particular, he denies both that aesthetic experience must be founded solely on perception and that it must be "disinterested." He does not think that only sensuous features of artworks are relevant to their power to provide aesthetic experience, because such a view would exclude the appreciation of literature from the realm of aesthetics. Also,

he holds that more or less practical functions need not be non-artistic, so that an interest in an item's practical utility could be compatible with — indeed, might require — a concern with its art-relevant features.

The difficulty of applying this general account to first art is readily apparent. If first artworks are art from their inception, and are so because they are functionally successful, then one cannot analyse their function as one that is standard or correctly recognized for central artforms, since no artforms were established as central at this time. Neither can one characterize the function as primarily that of providing its contemplator with aesthetic experience, given that first art probably was made to serve socially useful functions, not mainly for aesthetic delectation. But if one weakens the analysis, specifying only that such items be capable of affording aesthetic experience while allowing that doing so is not their primary purpose, it no longer seem stringent enough to separate first art from all the other, non-art items that might be viewed aesthetically. In addition, it is not clear that we should admit as relevant to the art-status of first art so wide a range of aesthetic properties as that listed by Stecker for central artforms, such as those of painting or literature, for reasons already outlined in discussing Carroll's view. Either these would be too dependent on arbitrary conventions and local contexts of which we now are ignorant, so that we could not recognize their significance, or they would be shared with non-art items that ante-date and post-date first art.

III

When it comes to the ontology of art, I favor contextualism. I believe, that is, that a work's artistically significant properties depend for their existence and character as much on circumstances surrounding the work's creation as on its material features. Two physically identical artworks can differ in their artistic

properties as a result of their divergent cultural origins. For instance, while one is innovative, highly expressive, and dramatic, a look-alike produced at a later time might be derivative, clichéd, and banal. Also, an artwork can be materially identical with another item that is not an artwork. A sculpture might consist of a pile of bricks just like that found on a building site. Through its invocation of artistic traditions and conventions of presentation, the sculpture has properties (for example, referential ones) lacked by its mundane equivalent.

As I said, the thesis of contextualism is an ontological one. It concerns the identity conditions for works of art, not solely interpretational considerations. Artistic properties of the kind mentioned are constitutive of the work's identity. Where two pieces differ in their artistic properties, they are distinct artworks. Someone without appropriate knowledge of the work's background is not solely in danger of misinterpreting or under-interpreting it. More importantly, she is not able to identify the artwork that is there. She is in no position to find the artwork in its material substrate. In order to interpret a work of art as such, one must first be able to locate it and, if contextualism is true, this cannot be achieved by the person who is oblivious to the relevant background context.^{ix}

We are deeply ignorant of the social circumstances within which first art was created. If contextualism is correct, we could deduce the existence of first art and go so far as to pick out plausible candidates by tracing the artistic trends of the present back into the past, but all this would be a matter of inference. If contextualism is right, we could not directly perceive the true artistic nature of first art, though we might identify the material items in which first art is instantiated. Our ignorance should prevent us not only from appreciating its properties correctly but also from perceiving it as art at all. In light of this, we might be more likely to reject the antecedent of the preceding conditionals — that is, to question the credentials of contextualism — than to affirm their

consequents, for our acknowledgment of certain items as first art seems to rest on our direct recognition of them as such, not on abstract reasoning. I am impressed by the fact that the artistic character of first art is apparent to us, despite our chronological and cultural distance from the setting in which it was created.^x

We can work out what kinds of properties confer art-status on first art in view of the fact that first art can be seen to be art by those ignorant of the context in which it is produced. The relevant properties cannot be ones generated by culturally arbitrary conventions, as semiotic systems usually are. Rather, their artistic import must be apparent to humans in general, whatever their cultural and temporal location. As it happens, traditional philosophical aesthetics has accorded a central place to a class of properties that fits the bill; namely, aesthetic properties such as beauty, grace, vivacity, internal unity, sensuous vibrancy, tension, serenity, spikiness, and so on.

Talk of aesthetic qualities has become less popular in the recent philosophy of art, which has concentrated on cognitively complex, relation-dependent, artistic properties. There are several reasons for this trend. Many contemporary artists appear to have abandoned or side-lined aesthetic properties. The interest and importance of their artworks must be explained in terms of the sophisticated artistic features these works display. Moreover, traditional aesthetic theory frequently coupled its discussion of aesthetic qualities with a psychologistic account of aesthetic experience and of the conditions under which it could be produced. Aesthetic experience was said to require distanced contemplation of the object for its own sake and to depend on one's putting aside all knowledge of "external" matters. Aesthetic appreciation was regarded as purely perceptual and as adversely affected when tainted with cognition. These ideas have been challenged and rejected by many contemporary philosophers, who

emphasize the role of social conventions and contextual knowledge in the appreciation and interpretation of art.^{vi}

Despite the current philosophical trend, our awareness of the artiness of first artworks suggests that the traditional notion of aesthetic properties is deserving of notice and respect, for it is hard to see how we could be aware of any other kind of quality as art-making in this case.^{vii} By all accounts, aesthetic properties can be recognized and appreciated without a detailed knowledge of the cultural setting in which their bearers are created. They are intrinsically interesting in that they are accessible and enjoyable to humans across a wide spread of cultures and historical periods.

Now, as is widely observed, aesthetic qualities are not confined to artworks; they are also apparent in sunsets. If their presence in first art is to account for the art-status of such pieces, more needs to be said. A promising emendation specifies that, in artworks, the relevant properties must be humanly produced (or deliberately appropriated for their aesthetic significance). This qualification is not as arbitrary as it might seem at first; it is not merely an ad hoc insistence that the works of nature cannot be art. This is because talk of human creation provides for a new significance to the occurrence in art of aesthetic properties. Where things are created to display them, those features are being used, and this opens the door to the idea that the items made to possess them invite interpretation, as do all human actions and their products.

Levinson, it will be recalled, regards as definitional the maker's intention that his work be regarded as past artworks have properly been viewed. As previously noted, Stecker responds by arguing that the first artworks might display aesthetic or expressive properties without being intended to do so. It seems to me that neither of these authors strikes the right note. Levinson is

correct to assume that human creations take on a kind of significance that is absent from unanthropomorphized natural items, but mistaken if he thinks that only features produced self-consciously assume this import. Stecker is right to insist that a humanly-produced object can display significant properties that are not directly attributable to its maker as the outcome of his intentions, but wrong to imply that the importance of these does not depend on the wider context of human creation. The products of human action invite interpretation not only in terms of what was intended but also with reference to what they might symptomize, indicate, or betray as a result of proceeding from the intellect, emotions, and point of view of a social, human creator. In this they are unlike natural items (unless it is assumed that these were made by an intelligent super-being not entirely unlike ourselves). What matters is not that the maker can claim all the features of what he produces for his own, having intended them, but that the audience might find in the work properties that depend on the human element for their existence. So, to insist that the aesthetic properties that mark first art should result from human action is to indicate not only their having one causal source as against another but also that the properties in question are invested with a distinctive character as potential bearers of interpretive significance.

More needs to be added if we are to explain how it is possible that we recognize first art as such. Stecker notes that human actions or their products often display aesthetic properties without qualifying as artworks. In this connection he mentions sexual pleasure, fine food, and wine (1997, 37). If we are to deny that these also qualify as art, a further qualification is in order. The one I recommend insists that the item, when treated as a whole, displays aesthetic features that are essential to its realizing its prime function (or one of its prime functions). Where the possession of such properties is inessential or non-

integral, even if the piece is deliberately created to have them, it will not be an artwork.^{xiii}

Where the main function of an object is to provide enjoyment through the contemplation of its aesthetic properties as these are revealed when it is approached for its own sake, my account corresponds to that of traditional aesthetic theory. Works with that function have been made since the eighteenth-century within the Fine Arts of the West, as well as within the court heritages of Japan, China, India, and Indonesia. It is when we consider pieces that are not offered solely for aesthetic inspection but, also and more importantly, for use in practical circumstances (such as public ritual or the organization of one's private environment) that the difference becomes plain. In my view, art need not be designed for contemplation, but its aesthetic character must be relevant to its serving the main purpose at which it is aimed, so that judgments concerning its functional success cannot be indifferent to the aesthetic achievements it displays. An item buried with the dead to propitiate the denizens of the afterworld might be an artwork so long as (the maker's society believed that) it would succeed only by possessing the relevant aesthetic properties.^{xiv} By contrast, if a knife is not a better knife in having a decorated blade, though it might then be acknowledged as a more beautiful one, it is not an artwork.^{xv} Also, a knife with an ornately carved handle might be superior because it provides the user with a better grip, but if the same improvement could be achieved by scouring the handle in a manner that showed no aesthetically redeeming qualities, the knife is not an artwork. Notice that, in the case of artworks, the aesthetic attributes must apply to the whole viewed as such. A tiny carving on an otherwise blank expanse could qualify as art, but it does so in terms of the appropriate frame. It does not artify the remainder of the space with which it is contiguous unless the blankness of the wider surface is crucial to its aesthetic character.

I incline toward this account not as the result of a close study of first art but from a general awareness of the functionality apparent in the majority of artworks. Many paradigms of Western art — Michelangelo's statues, Masaccio's paintings, Josquin's masses, and Greek tragedies — were produced not solely for contemplation but for a more direct and vital intervention in the lives of those who experienced them. Such works glorified patrons, brought the characters of myth to life, revealed the face or voice of God, offered moral education or communicated personal feelings and ideas. They established a setting in which certain public or private rituals and actions could be executed.^{xvi} I do not doubt that, in its primary functions, first art was similar. First artworks were deeply embedded within other cultural practices. They were props to be used in religious services, in the education of the young, in marriage ceremonies, in the humanization of the individual's living space, and so on. What made them art was the way in which they harnessed aesthetic effects, ones generated by the whole, to the realization of their various utilitarian functions.

An obvious objection to the above is that we are no less ignorant of the function of first art than of other contextual matters. If this is so, my view cannot explain, as it sets out to, how we are able to recognize first art as such. I reply with two points.

(a) I concede that our lack of knowledge might sometimes make us unsure whether an item counts as first art. I have emphasized that often we can recognize the artiness of first art, but I have not claimed that we can always do so. Where we are uncertain, it would count for my theory if, sometimes, this is because we cannot imagine a role for the piece in question in the lives of the people who made it, or cannot be confident for some other reason that its

aesthetic properties were relevant to its purpose. Though I do not know how to support it, this suggestion strikes me as a plausible explanation of the source of the puzzlement we feel in assessing the artistic status of some ancient items.

(b) While I have noted that first art presents a challenge to contextualism, I think it is possible to rehabilitate contextualism to a degree that allows us to meet the current objection. Whereas aesthetic properties were traditionally described as intrinsic and non-relational, I regard them as contextual. The context to which they are relativized is a broad one. It arises not from features distinctive to particular societies and epochs, but, rather, from features of the public world and of the natural history that is everyone's common inheritance.

The aesthetic properties present in a humanly created piece are never indifferent to the character of the medium through which they are displayed. The integration of content and form, on which the generation of such qualities depends, is itself a function of the nature of the medium and its treatment. Different things make for beauty (or energy, grace, etc.) in melodies and carvings, and those differences depend on the media involved. If a beautiful artwork is one that is done beautifully, its medium must be relevant to its beauty, for the doing is both constrained and stimulated by the material on which the maker works. Now, despite our ignorance of other matters, we can know a great deal about the possibilities and difficulties presented by the various media in which first art are made (and we also know what kinds of tools would have been available to the original artist in working his chosen materials). Cultures have changed over time but the properties of marble have not. Our familiarity with the media employed in first art makes us conversant with a crucial aspect of the context in which such works were created.

We know yet more about the setting in which first art was produced because we share the human condition with the makers of first art. Despite many differences of detail, the lives of human beings, both as individuals and as members of communities, have much in common. There are tasks and difficulties, along with many experiences, beliefs, emotions, desires, and fears, that are the stuff of human existence when and wherever it is lived. To acknowledge this is also to allow that the physical and social world occupied by the makers of first art is not so foreign to us as to be irredeemably impenetrable. Even if we have only a general idea about the function for which something was made, we may be able to infer from its character which of its aspects was thought to be important. In particular, we can often tell from the salience of a thing's aesthetic features and the painstaking care manifest in their creation that its possessing these properties was regarded as essential to its being what it was, to its serving its intended purpose, whatever that was. This enables us to identify first art as such, despite deficiencies in our understanding of the context of creation.

None of the above implies that first art is "primitive," that it wears its meaning on its face. It might have had, probably did have, symbolic and referential properties that were no less important than its aesthetic ones in fulfilling its purpose. Our unawareness of the full context of creation denies us access to such properties. I have not suggested that we can fully comprehend first art solely on the basis of our perception of its aesthetic features. Our ignorance of potentially relevant considerations is a barrier to our appreciation of first art. Instead, I have claimed that we can often know enough to recognize first art for what it is, even when we are frustrated in the attempt to fathom the depths of its artistic character.

IV

I have contended that our ability to identify some instances of first art presumes that their art-status depends on their displaying a certain kind of property; namely, the sort that is traditionally characterized as aesthetic. That is, first art can be seen as such because it possesses aesthetic qualities that are perceptible to the person who is aware of the medium used and is sensitive to the human context of creation, even if that person is uninformed concerning other details of the setting within which first art was generated. Also required in acknowledging the art aspect of a thing, I have argued, is a realization that its humanly produced aesthetic properties must have been regarded as essential and integral to the piece's function by the maker and his community. Typically, the relevant function would not have been to produce something solely for aesthetic contemplation, though we might not be sure what the purpose was.

Suppose my argument succeeds. What does it tell us about the definition of art and the theories with which I began? Does it imply, for instance, that the production of aesthetic properties and the evocation of aesthetic experiences goes to the heart of our present notion of art, so that "aesthetic" definitions are to be preferred to the available alternatives? Or, rather, is it the case that what is historically foundational is, nevertheless, only incidental to the concept's essence?

I suspect that the truth lies between these extremes. There is no reason to assume that the originary character of art will be its most significant and persistent feature. The functions played by art might have changed over time, and the properties its works required in order to satisfy these various functions might have altered accordingly. But if the production of aesthetic properties and experiences has been revealed as not sufficient for the achievement of art-

status in works of more recent times, this need not mean that the impulses that gave first art its aesthetic character are of no special importance. It could be that art could not have existed had it not begun as it did. That is, the human creation and appreciation of aesthetic qualities might be historically essential to the concept we have, though mention of such properties is not required in a philosophically acceptable definition of what makes any particular artwork (created after first art) what it is.

Acknowledgment is due to the historical necessity of art's concerning itself with aesthetic properties, even if a definition must focus on different matters because the evolution of the practice has taken a course that has highlighted other interests. One way of making this acknowledgment, I have been suggesting, is by giving due attention to the philosophical analysis of first art. And my complaint against the theorists whose views I have been discussing is that, though their definitions commit them to providing such an analysis, they have not offered one that address perspicuously the puzzles and issues raised by first art.

Stephen Davies,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Auckland,
Private Bag 92019,
Auckland, NEW ZEALAND.
sj.davies@auckland.ac.nz

ENDNOTES

-
- i “Defining Art Historically,” British Journal of Aesthetics, 19 (1979): 232-250, “Refining Art Historically,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 47 (1989): 21-33, and “Extending Art Historically,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 51 (1993): 411-423.
- ii “Style Theory of Art,” Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, 72 (1991): 272-289 and “Defining Art Externally,” British Journal of Aesthetics, 34 (1994): 114-123.
- iii “Historical Functionalism and the Four Factor Theory,” British Journal of Aesthetics, 34 (1994): 255-265 and Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).
- iv “Art, Practice, and Narrative,” Monist, 71 (1988): 140-156, “Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of Art,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 51 (1993): 313-326, and “Identifying Art,” in Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie’s Philosophy, ed. Robert J. Yanal, (University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 3-39.
- v I admit to playing fast and loose with what are sophisticated theories. I intend to concentrate on first art rather than the defining relation, so the crude characterization I have adopted will serve my purpose. For the record: Levinson aims to specify the extension, not the intension, of “art.” Carroll is analyzing how art is identified as such; that is, he is concerned

with an epistemic, rather than an ontological, issue. Stecker allows that something might be art as a result of belonging to an established artform, even where that thing does not serve an artistic function, and he suggests that his own theory is not “essentially historical” in the way that others’ are.

- vi If art developed independently in many cultures and if definitions of this kind are artworld-specific, there will be more than one first artwork. Even within a single artistic tradition, there are likely to be many first artworks and the period of first art might cover, say, a millenium. The earliest art-making practices developed gradually, no doubt. As I see it, these points do not affect the arguments that follow. However liberal we may be in identifying the extension of “first art” and its period, some works must count as “first” since they did not become art as a result of standing in the appropriate relation to chronologically prior artworks.
- vii I feel the same about the account presented in my Definitions of Art, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 13, 106. At that time I was sanguine about the prospects for an analysis of first art, regarding the historically murky origins of artistic traditions as providing no grounding for strongly characterized philosophical positions.
- viii An equivalent criticism is made by Stecker in 1997, 102-103.
- ix This is not to deny that artworks admit of multiple interpretations. Instead, it is to hold that interpretations give significance to the artistic properties present in the work and must take those properties as given. There often is more than one way of construing their significance.

-
- x I do not claim that all instances of first art will be identifiable as such. Neither do I assume that we are never mistaken in identifying items as examples of first art. What impresses me is that we can recognize anything at all as first art.
- xi A useful account of the recent history of aesthetics in these terms is George Dickie's "Two Trends in Recent Western Aesthetics: Art and Its Experience," The Trends of Contemporary Eastern and Western Aesthetics: Their Issues and Solutions, '94 International Symposium of Aesthetics, June 18, Museum Auditorium, Seoul National University, 1994, 1-29.
- xii The same point applies to our capacity to recognize the art of non-Western cultures (that is, to appreciate that these cultures produce their own kinds of artworks), but that is a subject for another paper. See my "Non-Western Art and Art's Definition," forthcoming in Noël Carroll (ed), Theories of Art, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming).
- xiii Such an item might later be accorded the status of art by virtue of its aesthetic character, but in that case it is mid-life art. Alternatively, if it falls within an established artform, it might qualify as art from its creation, but then could not be an example of first art.
- xiv To return to Stecker's example, fine food would be art if it were prepared as an offering to gods who would accept or be nourished only by dishes with the appropriate aesthetic qualities. If the food in most restaurants does not qualify as art, that is because, as food, we require less of it, much

as we might admire the aesthetic bonus its appearance and flavor provides.

- ^{xv} An Indonesian kris might be an artwork, however, since the magical qualities that give it social significance depend on its possessing such decorations. And the prime purpose of some kinds of knives might become that of serving as wall decoration, in which case they might then qualify as artworks.
- ^{xvi} See Susan L. Feagin's "Paintings and Their Place," Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 73 (1995): 260-268.