



From Zeuxis' *Helen of Troy* to Molière's *Le Misanthrope*: Kant and Artistic Exemplars

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ABSTRACT

The paper claims that, unlike art theorists before him, Kant intentionally refrains from using exemplary artworks in his theorizing about art. The reason for this lies in his commitment to artistic cognitivism and to the autonomy required for the creation and the appreciation of artistic beauty. I claim that such exemplars are well known to him, specifically Zeuxis' *Helene of Troy* and Molière's *Le Misanthrope* – notable exemplars of artistic creation for formalists (in the former case) and cognitivists (in the latter). I tie Kant's exclusion of exemplars to his important rejection of methods in the creation and appreciation of fine art. In sum, I aim to explain why Kant speaks so little about actual artworks.

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Disjunctivist readings of Immanuel Kant's 'Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgement' view his distinction between pure and adherent or dependent judgements of taste as key to understanding his aesthetic theory. The distinction aims to account for our different pleasurable experiences of beauty. Reflection in pure aesthetic judgements is attentive to the spatial (or spatiotemporal) *form* or configuration of a given representation. Reflection in dependent judgements of taste attends to embodied discursive function, content, or meaning. Thus, adherent judgements are concept-dependent and in an important respect partly cognitive. In § 16 and § 48 (and elsewhere), Kant associates each type of judgement with a characteristic type of object. Pure judgements of taste paradigmatically respond to the spatial form alone of *natural beings*. Adherent judgements of taste respond primarily to *human-made objects* – namely, to functional artifacts and to works of most artforms – for their creation and appreciation depend upon the concepts or ends these objects are intended to realize. The general, innovative premise relevant here is that the productive powers of human beings, unlike those of nature, are not without thought or reason. The intentional creation of art, and consequently its appreciation, are never cognitively blind.¹

According to the disjunctivist view, this essential Kantian distinction between pure and dependent judgements of taste marks the end of an era. Indeed, from a historical perspective, Kant can be seen as making this crucial distinction with a twofold motivation in mind: one is to explicate the pressing terminological need to distinguish natural from human-made beauty – first and foremost, artistic beauty – and the second, a result of this distinction, is to offer a new understanding of beauty distinctive of art. In essence, through these two philosophical achievements, Kant expressly rejects the principle of imitation, a time-honoured understanding of *artistic beauty as the imitation of beautiful nature*. What hitherto had been united by this principle of imitation – namely, beautiful art with beautiful nature – Kant sets apart and redefines as independent experiences of beauty. This is Kant's turn from a formalist to a cognitivist understanding of artistic beauty, according to which art is concerned with the embodiment of the discursive content of human thought, rather than with the presentation of the beautiful forms of natural bodies.

The main aim of this paper is not to unfold again Kant's modern turn from a formalist to a cognitivist understanding of artistic beauty. Rather, my aim is to show why Kant, owing to his philosophical commitment to aesthetic cognitivism, does not express his conception of fine art through the use of particular artworks as examples of beauty, though (as I will claim below) he does mention works in discussing various artistic means and their significance for artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, he excludes all use of artworks as exemplars of an artistic method. The absence is particularly striking in light of the fact that eminent philosophical writings of the time – including texts known and referred to by Kant – often use artworks to brighten and vivify their idea of artistic beauty (examples) or to drive home their conception of

1 I side with the disjunctivist rather than unitary conception of Kant's aesthetics; but I do not defend it in this paper. The issue obviously has implications concerning many specific claims I make below. For recent work on the question see Aviv Reiter and Ido Geiger, 'Natural Beauty, Fine Art and the Relation between Them', *Kant-Studien* 109 (2018): 72–100; 'Kant's Missing Analytic of Artistic Beauty', *European Journal of Philosophy* 32 (2024): 360–77; Aaron Halper, 'Rethinking Kant's Distinction between the Beauty of Art and the Beauty of Nature', *European Journal of Philosophy* 28 (2020): 857–75; Jiaxian Liu, 'Kant on the Aesthetic Idea in Judgment and Creation', *European Journal of Philosophy*, published ahead of print, 13 March 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.13063>.

the highest artistic creation (exemplars). In these texts, artistic exemplars or models provide principles of beauty for artists, while also serving (alongside other examples) to develop and refine the taste of the public.

In order to understand the philosophical reason behind the exclusion of artistic exemplars from Kant's cognitivist conception of artistic beauty, I will begin with the converse theoretical approach. In the first part of the paper, I present two works of fine art that were considered to be artistic exemplars or models. Each artwork served a distinct theoretical view. Zeuxis' *Helen of Troy* served for centuries as the ancient and fundamental model for the predominant formalist understanding of artistic beauty; Molière's *Le Misanthrope ou l'Atrabilaire amoureux* (*The Misanthrope, or the Cantankerous Lover*, 1666) was offered by Charles Batteux as a modern model for artistic cognitivism.

Focusing on these two works is of great significance for understanding the modern shift of ideas from formalism to cognitivism. Each of these artworks is accompanied by a tale that describes the creative process resulting in the work and serves as an illustration of the method for attaining artistic beauty. The two stories are found side-by-side in Batteux's influential work *Les Beaux-arts réduits à un même principe* (*The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*, 1746). While the accompanying stories share some very important features, the works themselves are quite different. Zeuxis' *Helen of Troy* is a lost ancient painting depicting the venerable figure of Helen – the most beautiful woman of all. *Le Misanthrope*, on the other hand, is a modern masterpiece of theatre, which portrays the morally hateful idea of misanthropy. Equally important is that Zeuxis' method, for a work no formalist thinker saw, was well known and accepted by all, while Molière's method failed to affect contemporary thinkers. This failure, however, may be seen as disclosing the modern complexity of using artworks as exemplars of beauty – or so I will claim.

Interestingly, however, upon close examination, both stories present a peculiar notion of method. They cannot really guide the creation of others, for they do not provide a practical abstract formula or precept that can actually guide artistic activity. This is by no means a coincidence, but very intimately connected to the vision of artists of genius as singularly original. The would-be method *describes* the intuitive process of artists of genius – an alluring myth for the public but quite useless for those who possess the gift of *creating* art. Consequently, the use of these artworks in theoretical writing as artistic methods is nothing more than an ineffective, even misleading appendage – one that Kant incisively removes.

Crucially, as we will see in the second part of the paper, this claim does not conflict with Kant's theory of fine art. Indeed, Kant's description of the artistic process closely resembles that of Batteux. But, unlike Batteux, Kant does not base his description on a particular masterpiece. Indeed, he does not even mention one in this context. This exclusion of exemplars should be seen, I suggest, as Kant's understanding of these stories as merely illustrations of abstract thoughts and ideas that can and should be formulated discursively using philosophically clear language.

The final part of the paper examines Kant's cognitivist view and his claim that there are no predetermined principles for attaining artistic beauty, nor for judging such beauty. In other words, there is no method for fine art. Although finding the definitive method for artistic beauty is a fundamental aim of the writings of the time, Kant argues that doing so risks conforming artistic representation to fixed standards, thereby undermining the uniqueness and originality of genius. Kant explicitly criticizes

Batteux, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and ‘older and more famous critics of taste’ for offering exactly that – misleadingly constructing a method for artistic beauty and thereby narrowing and ossifying public taste.² According to Kant, appreciating beautiful artworks requires ongoing autonomous reflection. This ongoing process allows viewers to explore new interpretations and insights, highlighting that taste itself is also subject to constant change. In sum, for Kant the presence of a canon entails a threat to the distinct autonomies that characterize both the creation and the appreciation of art.³

I. TWO METHODS FOR ARTISTIC BEAUTY: FORMALISM AND COGNITIVISM

Until Kant’s philosophical treatment of artistic beauty, the theoretical discourse on art looked very different. Art theorists exhibited a broad and profound knowledge of concrete artworks in their writings. Many works, both ancient and modern, were mentioned by name. Often, they focused on a particular scene or character. Other works were described in their most varied details, analysed, and compared to others. Literary works, alongside sculptures and paintings, were used to support authors’ lines of thought. In essence, artworks were viewed as illustrations or aesthetic aids for theoretical arguments. Exemplary works or masterpieces, such as Zeuxis’ *Helen of Troy*, *Laocoon and His Sons*, and Molière’s *Le Misanthrope*, were seen as providing general principles for artistic beauty.⁴

During the eighteenth century, art theorists began to question the predominant principle of the imitation of nature. This principle, in its formalist formulation, states that fine art is the imitation of beautiful nature. This understanding originated within the idealist tradition in the visual arts and is mainly associated with Giorgio Vasari, Giovanni Pietro Bellori, and Winckelmann. According to this formalist principle of imitation, the subject matter of artistic representation are the perfect or idealized forms of natural objects, such as flowers, animals, or human beings. The focus is on extracting accurately the universal proportions or forms of natural bodies found in external experience. The aim of artistic imitation is to depict these forms in three-dimensional outlines and thus represent these natural bodies not as existing individuals but as exemplary of natural kinds. On this view, the beauty of both art and nature is purely formal. There is, in principle, no aesthetic hierarchy between natural objects, because, as presentations of pure forms they carry no meaning. No natural object, not even man, woman, or child, has precedence in artistic representation – formally construed.

It is important to emphasize that the lack of hierarchy does not imply that there are not, for example, religious, mythological, or historical themes that are of particular importance in art. From a formalist perspective, however, their importance does not

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:284. Hereafter: *CJ*

3 For defence of these claims see, Aviv Reiter, ‘Artistic Manner as Autonomy: Creative Freedom and the Constraint of Rules in Vasari, Bellori and Kant’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 82 (2024): 45–60.

4 Lessing in his *Laocoon* (1767) criticizes Johann Joachim Winckelmann and claims: ‘Criticism based solely upon general principles may lead to conceits which sooner or later we find to our shame refuted in works on art.’ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (Boston: Roberts, 1887), 168.

make their successful depiction more beautiful. Indeed, it is useful to think of the importance of certain themes as decided precisely by such religious, mythological, or historical rather than aesthetic or art-theoretical criteria. The latter alone are concerned with beauty. Filippo Brunelleschi's crucified figure of Christ is superior to Donatello's, because of 'the ingeniousness and artistic style Fillipo had employed in the legs, torso and arms of the figure'.⁵ But obviously they are of equal religious importance in depicting the same figure and scene. Moreover, incorporating such considerations into the theory of art, perhaps only obliquely, transforms the theory, at least partly, into a cognitivist view. Consequently, from a purely formalist art-theoretical perspective, all natural beings are equally worthy of artistic depiction. *Beautiful nature* is thus not the reality we encounter but rather the formal archetypes of everything that exists. Significantly, this formalist 'imitation' of *beautiful nature* signifies the triumph of art over nature. Thus, Bellori claims that Helen 'herself was not so beautiful as they [Zeuxis and Guido Reni] made her, for there were imperfections and faults to be found in her; rather, it is believed that she never did sail to Troy but that her statue was taken there in her place, and for its beauty the war fought for ten years'.⁶ Indeed, for the idealist tradition, it is in artworks alone that the true design of nature – untouched by the harm and wear of time and place – is unveiled.

However, a new non-formalist understanding of artistic beauty gradually began to gain prominence – namely, the modern cognitivist view. According to it, the value of an artwork depends on the conceptual content it conveys aesthetically. This understanding of artistic beauty receives clear and rigorous articulation in Kant's philosophy of art, where the shift is manifest. For Kant, artistic beauty is the aesthetic expression of rich cognitive or discursive content.⁷ Before the language of aesthetic cognitivism had been clearly formulated by Kant, it was difficult to identify this significant shift.⁸ In retrospect, though, we can see its first clues in the change in artistic exemplars employed and descriptions of the method they supposedly provide.

Such a perspective reveals that Batteux is in fact an early proponent of aesthetic cognitivism.⁹ In his work *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*, Batteux endorses Aristotle's 'principle of imitation [...] as the mark of the fine arts'.¹⁰ In Batteux's modern

5 Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 115.

6 Giovan Pietro Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl, Hellmut Wohl, and Tomaso Montanari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 59.

7 Within the category of adherent judgments of taste, Kant implicitly draws a distinction between dependence on ideas of reason and on concepts of determinate human ends. The horse (and the dog) as an animal bred to serve particular functions (CJ, 5:230, 234), or functional objects such as architectural works as mechanical art (CJ, 5:230), are examples of the latter; see Reiter and Geiger, 'Natural Beauty'. There are also adherent judgements of the beauty of natural objects that are appreciated as possessing certain natural functions or 'a determinate internal end' (CJ, 5:231). My focus in this paper is on art and aesthetic judgements dependent on ideas of reason.

8 Thus, Danto takes the conception of artworks as embodied meaning to be a stunning discovery of Kant's, one he enthusiastically endorses. See, Arthur C. Danto, 'Embodied Meanings, Isotypes, and Aesthetical Ideas', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007): 126–28.

9 See the exchange on this question and the influence on Kant's conception of artistic beauty in James O. Young, 'Kant's Musical Antiformalism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78 (2020): 171–82; Aviv Reiter, 'What Makes Kant an Aesthetic Cognitivist about Fine Art? A Response to Young', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 79 (2021): 108–11.

10 Charles Batteux, *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*, trans. James O. Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), lxxix. Hereafter: FAR.

formulation, the common aim of the fine arts 'is the imitation of *belle nature*' (FAR, p. 19). He is thus often seen as a late adherent of the idealist tradition. Indeed, the term *belle nature* invites alignment with the understanding of idealized nature, making Batteux a formalist about artistic beauty as well: 'This [*belle nature*] is not the reality that is; rather it is the reality that could be, the truly beautiful, which is represented as if it actually existed, with all of the perfections which it could have' (FAR, p. 13).

But closer scrutiny suggests that this terminology serves only as a starting point for his thinking. In fact, it is Batteux's rich understanding of nature that marks the beginning of a substantial shift in thinking: 'Nature – that is, all of reality plus all that we can readily conceive to be possible – is the prototype or model for the arts' (FAR, p. 6). In contrast to the idealist tradition, Batteux considers nature to encompass not only the reality experienced externally but also what is present for us internally such as sentiments, passions, or values – essentially the formless content of human thought (FAR, p. 41). After all, what is the characteristic form of envy, fear, or compassion? Succinctly, and very importantly, Batteux thinks that the subject matter of the arts can be anything in reality as long as it is presented 'in relation to us' as human beings (FAR, p. 30).¹¹ Therefore, not every object holds equal importance to art. Art is thus concerned with the portrayal of the inner life of human beings and what holds significance to us in the realm we inhabit.

However, according to Batteux, *fine art* is the imitation of *beautiful nature*. This means that nature, whether its internal or external elements, provides art with its most fundamental materials or motifs – and that in *fine art* nature must somehow be perfected or beautified. Batteux defines beauty as follows: 'It [*belle nature* represented in the arts] must delight the mind by presenting objects perfect in themselves, which extend and perfect our ideas. This is beauty' (FAR, p. 43). For Batteux, fine art is a representation 'or a perspective on, reality, not as it is in itself, but as the mind conceives it ought to be' (FAR, p. 12). In accordance with the alternative formalist view, Batteux claims that fine art is not the representation of nature in its individuality. It is not an actual existing flower or animal that is depicted, or an embodiment of a particular case of envy. In contrast to the formalist view, Batteux thinks of this oughtness or perfection in conceptual terms. In fine art the internal and external elements of nature are presented with the full complexity of the related ideas conveyed to the human mind. In this conceptual perfection, the materials nature provides are presented in a way that is deeply meaningful for us as humans and, especially for Batteux, morally significant. Herein lies Batteux's distinction between reality or nature *as it is in itself*, which is independent of human conceptualization, and fine art.

Artistic beauty results from the aesthetic presentation of this conceptual perfection *as if it exists*: 'Ultimately, the masterpieces of art are those that imitate nature so well that they are taken for nature itself' (FAR, p. 7).¹² It is the aesthetic composition of a seamless whole conveying conceptual perfection that creates an illusion that what is presented in a work might exist and evokes aesthetic pleasure. This stands in contrast

11 This idea seems to echo the famous verse from the ancient Greek comedy *Heauton Timorumenos* (*The Self-Tormentor*, 163 BCE): *homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*. Literally this verse means 'I am a human being; nothing that is human is alien to me'. In the context of the play, it has a slightly positive sense: 'I am a human being; everything that is human concerns me.' For detailed discussion of the various interpretations of this verse see, Henry David Jocelyn, '*Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto* (Terence, *Heauton timorumenos* 77)', *Antichthon* 7 (1973): 14–46.

12 Batteux highlights that this perspective on art is common in ancient thought; see FAR, pp. 8–9.

to a purely intellectual or philosophical grasp of conceptual perfection. The aim of the fine arts is thus to make the depth of human thought accessible through aesthetic presentation that feels genuinely lifelike and natural.

According to Batteux, artists, though principally concerned with humanity, take the matter they fashion from what is given to them in reality.¹³ The claim here is that the artistic presentation of conceptual perfection is never independent from real-life experiences. All the aesthetic characteristics of a work are drawn from experience, assembled and composed into a beautiful finite representation that, nevertheless, appears real.

This view is most clearly evident where Batteux offers what seems to be a method for the imitation of *belle nature*. This method is applicable for both the external and internal elements of nature. Very significantly, however, Batteux derives this single method from two very different exemplary artworks to account separately for the internal and external aspects of human existence. Equally important, I suggest, is that this derivation is presented in the form of a story and not as a set of formal instructions.¹⁴ The first is the well-known ancient story of Zeuxis' *Helen of Troy*, in which Batteux accounts for imitating external experiences of natural bodies. The second story is his own interpretation of the creation of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*. Significantly, this story is actually a modification of Zeuxis' tale, indeed modified to contend with the challenge of presenting inner elements of human thinking – in this case of the morally hateful idea of misanthropy.¹⁵

The story of Zeuxis, which was echoed by the idealist tradition throughout the Renaissance and to the eighteenth century in Winckelmann, tells of the Greek painter commissioned to paint *Helen of Troy*.¹⁶ Zeuxis searched among the young women of his town and selected those whose separate physical features might together serve as a model of the perfect female form – woman as she ought to be. For the formalist view, Zeuxis' story describes the appropriate artistic method required to attain perfection in the imitation of natural forms. It involves extracting the perfect forms from a variety of natural bodies given in experience. Generalized, it was considered by the formalist view to be the formula for artistic beauty. However, this extraction can only be executed by an artist of genius and therefore it is a method for those who do not in fact need it.

13 Indeed, Batteux claims that as 'the most discerning critics have recognized,' 'the true object of the arts [...] has been the same in all periods': 'Homer, Virgil, Terence, Raphael, Corneille, Le Brun, and Racine, despite differences of time, tastes, governments, climates, customs and languages are all in agreement on the essential point, which is to select from and depict nature' (FAR, p. 43).

14 Say in mathematical or geometrical terms that anyone can follow, as Kant will later claim (CJ, 5:234–35); see note 18.

15 Furthermore, Batteux seems to provide two stories because one (the ancient) is particularly suited to painting and sculpture and the other (the modern) to poetry. This thought can be reinforced by Lessing's later distinction between the two forms of art in his *Laocoon*. It is, however, clear from the text that Batteux takes them to describe a single method.

16 This is the story of Zeuxis told by Pliny the Elder (ca. 24–79 CE) in his *Natural History*: 'when he [Zeuxis] was going to produce a picture for the city of Girgenti to dedicate at the public cost in the temple of Lacinian Hera he held an inspection of maidens of the palace paraded naked and chose five, for the purpose of reproducing in the picture the most admirable points in the form of each.' Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. Harris Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), Book 35, § 64, 309. For an illuminating discussion of the myth of Zeuxis and other founding myths in art see Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

Upon initial reading, it appears that Batteux is presenting a familiar version of the story of Zeuxis. However, recalling his definition of nature, it is incumbent upon us to assume that Batteux thinks here of the figure of Helen 'as the mind conceives it ought to be' (FAR, p. 12). Thus, Zeuxis' search, selection, and composition of Helen might be guided by the conceptual combination of her irresistible and unattainable beauty and all of the conceptual perfection with which she is associated in the human mind. Her seductive figure embodies the contradiction of divinity and mortality; she inspires lust and greed, posing a threat of destruction, violence, and inevitable death. The emphasis is on deciphering the meaning of being the Helen of Homer or Euripides, searching for independent characteristics in real life that aesthetically meet this perfection, combining and manipulating them to form a compelling whole that depicts her perfection. This can be viewed as Batteux's subtle but decisive modification of the well-known formalist method into his new cognitivist view. This is how I propose we should read the following passage:

What did Zeuxis do when he wanted to depict perfect beauty? Did he make the portrait of some particular woman, whose portrait was drawn from life? [No,] he collected the various features of several living beautiful women. He then formed in his mind a fabricated idea that resulted from the combination of these features. This idea was the prototype or model on which he based his picture which, taken as a whole, was realist and *poetical* even though none of the component parts depicted anything actual. This is the example to the artists. This is the course that they must pursue, and it has been the practice of all great artists without exception. (FAR, p. 12; my emphasis)

In moving to describe Molière's method for the creation of *Le Misanthrope*, he employs the same storyline but focuses on the distinctly human notion of misanthropy in its broadest moral significance. Indeed, in this tale, Batteux's cognitive framing of the method is made perfectly explicit:

When Molière wanted to represent misanthropy, he did not search Paris for an exemplar of which his play was an exact copy. This would only have been a history or a portrait. Half of his point would have been lost. Instead, he collected all of the characteristics of a bleak disposition that he was able to find in people and combined them with all the characteristics of the same type that his imagination could produce. From these combined and matching characteristics he drew an individual person, who was not a representation of someone real but who seemed to be real. His comedy was not a biography of Alceste. Rather, the depiction of Alceste was an account of misanthropy in general. In this manner, he has taught us more than a careful historian who recorded the many characteristics of a real misanthrope would have done. (FAR, pp. 12–13)

According to Batteux, Molière aims to present misanthropy. Misanthropy, as hatred of human nature, is a concept that only exists within a conception of human life and, as such, holds significant cognitive value. Its visible expression is, therefore, meaningful for us as human beings. In his story, Batteux presents Alceste as the embodiment of misanthropy, mirroring the diverse range of perspectives that misanthropy can encompass.

Significantly, Batteux uses Aristotle's distinction in the *Poetics* between history and art, distinguishing 'the thing that has been' and 'a kind of thing that might be'.¹⁷ This is done to explain the substantial conceptual potential represented by the character of Alceste and to define perfection as encompassing everything that could be.

Aristotle compared poetry to history. They differ, he believed, not in form or in style, but in the extent of their choices. How is that? History depicts what has happened, poetry what can happen. The one is tied to the truth and invents neither events nor agents. The other is only required to seem true. It invents, it imagines what it pleases, and depicts freely. The historian provides examples of things such as they are, which is often imperfect. The poet presents things as they ought to be. (*FAR*, p. 11)

The similarities between the two stories are evident. Like Zeuxis, Molière's creative process starts with observation and draws from real-life experiences. The aim is to capture human characteristics, behaviours, and interactions that align with what we know of or associate with the concept that is to be conveyed. This process yields a cohesive particular representation, which is an aesthetic expression of cognitive perfection. Indeed, Batteux derives a single set of fundamental principles from these two different stories, which constitute a fully cognitivist formulation of the method for fine art:

The treasures of nature include all of the features of which the most beautiful imitations can be composed. They are like studies in the notebook of a painter. The artist, who is essentially an observer, recognizes them, singles them out, and arranges them. In his mind, the artist forms a whole object from these elements in accordance with a vivid conception that unites them. (*FAR*, p. 16)

This brings us to the last and very important point. Despite the differences between the formalist and cognitivist approaches to beauty, they have something in common when it comes to the notion of method. They both provide a method for creating artistic beauty without determinate principles to follow. The formalist view sees beautiful nature as a product of the reduction and purification of concrete natural bodies into a single fabricated ideal form. However, Zeuxis' method does not provide instructions for distinguishing the perfect parts from the malformed.¹⁸ A similar problem also arises for the opposed cognitive approach. Artistic beauty is an aesthetic presentation of the valuable wealth of conceptual perfection, which reflects the complexity of human thought. As Batteux states, '[n]ature contains an infinite variety of objects, and each of these objects can be considered in an infinite number of manners' (*FAR*, p. 51). However, Molière's method provides no instructions how to distinguish the adequate from the inadequate characteristics or perspectives of this infinite wealth, or what aspects will cohere in a unified whole.

In the following section, we will see that Kant emphasizes the lack of a method guiding artistic activity. The final part will focus on the risks involved in grounding artistic principles for artists and artistic standards for viewers on an existing masterpiece.

17 Aristotle, *De Poetica (Poetics)*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Basic Works by Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1451b.

18 And there is certainly no indication here that the idea is nothing but an average size that can be attained mathematically, as Kant will claim (*CJ*, 5:234–35).

This theoretical shift is to be viewed as the foundation of Kant's aesthetic cognitivism about the fine arts. Indeed, Kant should be seen as amplifying Batteux's demand for cognitive value in art. Kant characterizes beautiful art as the aesthetic representation of complex yet unified configurations of human thought or 'kinds of cognition' (CJ, 5:305). However, not every mode of thought is applicable to the fine arts. Artistic representations are pleasingly valuable, for they are 'combined, whether closely or at a distance, with moral ideas' (CJ, 5:326). Fine art is thus connected with the moral sphere, for it characterizes human reason, the ultimate vocation of which is morality. Like Batteux, Kant thinks artistic representations are considered 'in relation to us' as human beings and indeed as moral beings. Art is thus uniquely qualified to present humanity in its rational and sensual complexity.¹⁹ In contrast to Batteux, for Kant art does not present rational ideas with the higher aim of moral improvement. For Kant, didactic or pragmatic aims of any kind stand in opposition to the practical disinterestedness of artistic pleasure.²⁰

To be clear, the valuable conceptual content that art affords does not belong to the understanding alone. Art does not consider its represented materials or motifs as having merely empirical origins. The representation of a basket of slowly decaying fruit is never about grapes or peaches, or about the biological process depicted. An artwork is the concrete embodiment of a profoundly complex thought or, in Kant's terminology, a sensuous expression of an idea of reason – hence, the appreciation of art is concept-dependent, and specifically idea-dependent.²¹ Significantly, this means that the content does not concern concepts in their entirely intellectual or theoretical relation to pure reason either, for they must have an immediate sensuous existence or presentation. In beautiful art, rational ideas find aesthetic counterparts that possess sensible wealth to match the discursive wealth of an idea of reason; this indeed is why Kant names them aesthetic ideas. Their expression in an artwork yields representations that vivify rational ideas, making them manifest as part of the human world. But what kinds of ideas of reason do artworks present? And what is the artistic process that brings them forth?

19 For detailed defence of the claim that the subject matter of art is human freedom in its broadest extent, framed by consideration of humanity's moral vocation see Ido Geiger, 'Kant on Aesthetic Ideas, Rational Ideas and the Subject-Matter of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 79 (2021): 186–99. For a different, but similarly broad conception of the subject matter of art, see Samantha M. Matherne, 'The Inclusive Interpretation of Kant's Aesthetic Ideas', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53 (2013): 21–39. For discussions of the connection between art and morality in Kant's aesthetics, see David E. Cooper, 'Beautiful People, Beautiful Things', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 247–60; Lara Ostaric, 'Works of Genius as Sensible Exhibitions of the Idea of the Highest Good', *Kant-Studien* 101 (2010): 22–39. The issue is not of central importance to the main line of argument of this paper. But I do take Kant to hold that the content expressed by artworks has to do with our practical lives and moral vocation rather than our purely theoretical capacities.

20 For more on this matter, see Aviv Reiter and Ido Geiger, 'Batteux, Kant and Schiller on Fine Art and Moral Education', *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 55 (2021): 1142–1158.

21 According to Allison, when Kant says that judging an artwork presupposes knowing 'what sort of thing the object is supposed [to] be' (CJ, 5:311) he means knowing the 'art-form or genre of a work'; Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgment'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 295. This is problematic. I think the end Kant is speaking about is typically far more complex than Allison seems to grant. Second, and more importantly, Kant is speaking about the content expressed by a work.

Kant's terminological affinity with Batteux is even more patent in § 49, where he describes the creative process of the rational ideas that fine art aesthetically conveys. Kant speaks of poetry specifically, but presumably the rational ideas he mentions can be presented by other artforms as well. In accord with Batteux's narrative of *Helen of Troy* and *Le Misanthrope*, Kant claims that a concept of reason structures the creative process as the main theme of a work. The artist, Kant argues, 'ventures to make sensible rational ideas' (CJ, 5:314). Ideas of reason, as universal concepts of infinite yet interconnected conceptual wealth, are Batteux's conceptual perfections.

According to Kant, the ideas of reason art is concerned with are of two kinds. Some lie 'beyond the bounds of experience', such as 'the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation'. Like the poetic idea of *Helen*, these ideas have no actual existence or presence; thus, it is not possible to encounter them directly in reality. But an artwork can give them 'the appearance of an objective reality' (ibid.), make them unfold into the human world.

On the other hand, there are ideas of which there are 'examples in experience' such as 'death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame' (ibid.). Like the idea of misanthropy in *Le Misanthrope*, art aims to make these ideas 'sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature' (ibid.), that is, to unveil the profound complexity these ideas hold for the human mind and sensuously represent them as particulars in an aesthetic whole like *Alceste*. The aesthetic representation exceeds the combined concrete experiences of misanthropy that any person has. A beautiful artwork is the representation of rational ideas, rendering aesthetically and thus reflecting a shared human conceptual web.

In both cases, art represents and expresses aesthetically rational ideas. Where do the materials for these representations come from? Again, here too Kant is close to his predecessor. The source of all artistic materials is nature, or reality more broadly:

The imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely, very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it. We entertain ourselves with it when experience seems too mundane to us; we transform the latter, no doubt always in accordance with analogous laws, but also *in accordance with principles that lie higher in reason* (and which are every bit as natural to us as those in accordance with which the understanding apprehends empirical nature); in this we feel our freedom from the law of association (which applies to the empirical use of that faculty), in accordance with which material can certainly be lent to us by nature, but the latter can be *transformed by us into something entirely different, namely into that which steps beyond nature*. (ibid.; my emphasis)

Nature provides art with its most fundamental materials. These materials exist independently of art. Yet, even if their depiction seems compatible with their external appearance as natural phenomena, they are imbued with deeper meaning. The way these materials are bound in a work result from the aptitude of a singular human mind of genius that modifies and forges them into something else – into sensible representations of rational ideas.

The idea worth dwelling upon is that according to Kant the artistic conjunctions between the materials that are drawn from our world and the meaning they represent are of a higher rational nature. Therefore, as Kant states, 'we feel our freedom from the law of

association'. These conjunctions are not bounded by necessary empirical connections. Outside the work the two can even be complete strangers to one another. A still-life painting presenting an unstable basket of slowly decaying fruit can be taken as challenging the very notion of life being still, possibly representing the vain struggle with our mortality – while in reality there is no apparent connection between fruit baskets and our inevitable and inevitably approaching death. When this conjunction involves the human figure as expressing our morality, we are presented with the ideal of beauty:

The visible expression of moral ideas, which inwardly govern human beings, can of course be drawn only from experience; but as it were to make visible in bodily manifestation (as the effect of what is inward) their combination with everything that our understanding connects with the morally good in the idea of the highest purposiveness – goodness of soul, or purity, or strength, or repose, etc. – this requires pure ideas of reason and great force of imagination united in anyone who would merely judge them, let alone anyone who would present them. (CJ, 5:235)

The claim that art uses materials available to human experience in reality echoes thoughts expressed in Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798). There he makes clear reference to the behaviour of Molière's characters and asserts that plays and novels can provide valuable insights into human nature:

For although the latter two [plays and novels] are not actually based on experience and truth, but only on invention, and while here the exaggeration of characters and situations in which human beings are placed is allowed, as if in a dream, thus appearing to show us nothing concerning knowledge of human beings – yet even so, in such characters as are sketched by a Richardson or a Molière, the *main features* must have been taken from the observation of the real actions of human beings: for while they are exaggerated in degree, they must nevertheless correspond to human nature in kind.²²

Kant refrains from specifying who those characters are and which plays he has in mind. Based on earlier writings, though, it is evident that Kant knew at least some of Molière's plays – and knew specifically who Alceste was.²³ Even more striking is the fact that in his 'General Remark' on aesthetic reflective judgements Kant includes a comment on misanthropy, in which he formulates theoretically Alceste's agony and last words at the end of *Le Misanthrope*. Compare the following passages:

Alceste: And may you ever taste of true contentment, by keeping, each for each, such sentiments. For me, betrayed on all sides, crushed by injustice, I leave a pit where vices triumph, to seek somewhere on earth a lonely spot where I am free to be a man of honor.²⁴

22 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7:121.

23 In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) Kant refers directly to *Le Misanthrope* by paraphrasing Alceste and comparing him to Adraste, a character in *Le Sicilien ou l'Amour peintre* (*The Sicilian, or Love the Painter*, 1667) another play by Molière. See Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. Paul Guyer, in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2:220.

24 Molière, *The Misanthrope*, in *Molière*, vol. 1, trans. Katharine Prescott Wormeley (Boston: Little, 1912), 52.

Nevertheless there is a kind of misanthropy (very improperly so called), the predisposition to which is often found in the mind of many well-thinking people as they get older, which is certainly philanthropic enough as far as their *benevolence* is concerned, but is because of long, sad experience far removed from any *pleasure* in human beings; evidence of this is to be found in the tendency to withdraw from society, the fantastic wish for an isolated country seat, or even (in young people) the dream of happiness in being able to pass their life on an island unknown to the rest of the world with a small family, which the novelists or poets who write Robinsonades know so well how to exploit. Falsehood, ingratitude, injustice, the childishness in ends that we ourselves hold to be important and great, in the pursuit of which people do every conceivable evil to each other, so contradict the idea of what they could be if they wanted to, and are so opposed to the lively wish to take a better view of them that, in order not to hate them, since one cannot love them, doing without all social joys seems to be only a small sacrifice. (CJ, 5:275–76)²⁵

Alceste laments the dishonesty and hypocrisy that he sees as inherent flaws of human nature.²⁶ For Kant too, misanthropy arises out of a deep disappointment in humanity. In Kant's terms, the misanthrope sees every individual as bearing within themselves the capacity to be what they ought to be – but choosing not to realize their moral vocation. In both cases, the misanthrope prefers to distance themselves from human society.²⁷

25 Comparable passages can be found in works of Kant's practical philosophy. Thus, the third part of his 'On the Common Saying' essays, entitled 'On the Relation of Theory to Practice in the Right of Nations Considered from a Universally Philanthropic, that is, Cosmopolitan Point of View (Against Moses Mendelssohn)', begins: 'Is the human race as a whole to be loved, or is it an object such that one must regard it with vexation, for which one indeed wishes everything good (so as not to become misanthropic) but of which one must never expect this, so that one must prefer to avert one's eyes from it?' Immanuel Kant, 'On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice', in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8:307. In 'On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy', we read: '[I]t must be that sincerity is the property farthest removed from human nature – a sad comment, since all the remaining properties, to the extent that they rest on principles, can have a true inner value only through that one. None but a contemplative misanthrope (who wishes evil to nobody, yet is inclined to believe every evil of all) can hesitate whether to find human beings to deserve *hatred* or rather *contempt*.' Immanuel Kant, 'On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy', in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8:270. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant says: 'But someone who avoids other human beings because he can find no *delight* in them, though he indeed *wishes* all of them *well*, would be shy of them (a misanthropist in terms of his sensibility), and his turning away from them could be called anthropophobia.' Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, 6:450. Needless to say, notions of love of human beings, pathological and rational, are ubiquitous in Kant's moral philosophy.

26 Alceste is famous for his saying: 'No, it is universal; I hate all men: some because they are wicked and evil-doers; others because they fawn upon the wicked, and dare not show that vigorous hatred which virtuous souls should feel to vice' (Molière, *Misanthrope*, 52). Rousseau, in *The Letter to D'Alembert on the Theater* (1758) adds that Alceste's resentment actually reveals his philanthropy: 'Hence, it is not of men that he is the enemy, but of the viciousness of some and of the support this viciousness finds in the others. If there were neither knaves nor flatterers, he would love all human kind. There is no good man who is not a misanthrope in this sense; or, rather, the real misanthropes are those who do not think as he does.' Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and Arts: The Letter to D'Alembert on the Theater*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Cornell University Press, 1960), 38.

27 In the *Anthropology* Kant talks about the timeless characteristics of misanthropy in human behaviour: 'Nevertheless, anyone who takes a look at human behavior not only in ancient history but also in recent history will often be tempted to take the part of Timon

Despite Kant's great similarity to Batteux, and the fact that Molière's work and characters made a notable impression on him, Kant's 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgement' never singles out *Le Misanthrope* – neither as an example nor as an exemplar.

At this juncture and before proceeding, it is important to claim in more detail than I did in the introduction to the paper that Kant does use examples of artworks or refers to such works, but he does so sporadically and, more importantly, they come up in discussing different kinds of aesthetic means such as the symbolism of aesthetic attributes, metaphors, and canons of proportions for the pictorial arts.

Specifically, in discussing painting and sculpture as artforms, Kant highlights the rules for the correct proportions of natural species, exemplified by the Doryphoros and Myron's cow (*CJ*, 5:235). The works are not treated properly as artworks but as canons or aesthetic presentations of rules that can also be given mathematically. Symbols, exemplified by the attributes of the eagle and the peacock, are 'supplementary representations' and external signs conventionally ascribed to Jupiter and Juno and associated with their personification as 'the powerful king' and 'the splendid queen of heaven' (*CJ*, 5:315). Note that there is no reference here to a particular work. Kant also states that ideas of reason such as 'the spirit of war (in the person of Mars)' can be represented in an indirect manner through 'an allegory or attributes' (*CJ*, 5:312). The point made here is explaining how sculpture presents beautifully what is hateful and displeasing.

In poetry, the attributes are merely internal images, metaphorically associated with 'a determinate linguistic expression' (*CJ*, 5:315). Such metaphorical expressions are exemplified by the analogy of sunlight with 'good deeds' or with 'virtue' in the poems of Friedrich the Great and Johann Philipp Lorenz Withof, and the veil of Isis is associated with human limitation and thus humility in the study of nature (*CJ*, 5:315–16). It is worth underscoring that here as well Kant is not in fact pointing to whole artworks as examples but to metaphors as means. He refers to the last lines only of a much longer poem by Friedrich the Great, as well as to a single line from a longer poem by Withof (presumably quoting from memory and replacing good [*Güte*] with virtue [*Tugend*]). The quote attributed to Isis as mother nature is an inscription over a temple devoted to her and thus a single element in the architectural work.

Finally, ancient works are mentioned in the context of emphasizing the importance of creative autonomy. Knowledge of 'the works of the ancients [...] rightly praised as models, and their authors called classical' must be gained 'not in order to make their successors into mere imitators, but rather by means of their method to put others on the right path for seeking out the principles in themselves and thus for following their own, often better, course' (*CJ*, 5:282–83); indeed, this is the context in which Kant claims that

the misanthropist in his judgment; but far more often, and more to the point, that of Momus, and find foolishness rather than malice the most striking characteristic mark of our species' (Kant, *Anthropology*, 7:332–33). Timon of Athens is a well-known ancient misanthrope, mentioned in Aristophanes' *Birds* and *Lysistrata*, as well as by Plutarch in his *Life of Antony*. Additionally, Lucian wrote a dialogue titled *Timon, or the Misanthrope*, which appears to have inspired William Shakespeare's play *Timon of Athens*. Momus, on the other hand, is the god of mockery and criticism in Greek mythology. He appears in Hesiod's *Theogony* (ca. 700 BCE). Momus is portrayed in Aesop's fable 'Momus and the Gods' (620–564 BCE), where he identifies dishonesty as humanity's flaw. He also appears in the writings of Apuleius, Lucian, Leon Battista Alberti, and Giordano Bruno. Owing to his critical nature, Momus' insights sometimes prompt deeper reflections and considerations among the gods, indicating that he serves not only to challenge but also to refine their judgements; see, Giordano Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, trans. William Morehead (London: Tohn 1713), 120. It is interesting to think of Alceste as the comic combination of Timon, the enemy of humankind, and Momus, the fault-finder.

among all the faculties and talents, taste is precisely the one which, *because its judgment is not determinable by means of concepts and precepts*, is most in need of examples of what in the progress of culture has longest enjoyed approval if it is not quickly to fall back into barbarism and sink back into the crudity of its first attempts. (CJ, 5:283; my emphasis)

I take these claims to reflect back on the status of all rules and examples in Kant's theory. This is just the point I will make in more detail in the following section.

III. KANT'S EXCLUSION OF ARTISTIC EXEMPLARS

Broadly stated, the claim is that the presence of an exemplar or masterpiece as a timeless rule-giver, or even just as a rigid artistic rule to be followed without exception within the confines of a school or period – a narrowly defined method for fine art – inevitably compromises the freedom essential to the creation of beautiful art. In other words, artists of genius do not, by definition, follow a rigid method, for the work of genius is the original product of *autonomous* artistic choices. It is crucial to understand that Kant does explicitly claim that rules are abstracted from beautiful artworks or masterpieces (see CJ, 5:309–10, 318) and that these rules serve as means of expression for apprentices and give 'rise to a school' (CJ, 5:318). However, in the creation of true art these rules are never followed blindly but only to the extent that they serve the aesthetic expression of its original content. Succinctly, originality, and rigid method are, for Kant, mutually exclusive.

In more detail, Kant offers two justifications for excluding exemplars in this sense from his theory of beautiful art. Both arise from his cognitivist understanding of artistic beauty. The first, as I have just suggested, pertains to the unique creative process undertaken by a genius artist, highlighting the originality that characterizes their work. The second relates to the act of appreciation by the public, evoked by the innovative cognitive value brought aesthetically before its vision.

The creative perspective focuses on the artist of genius. According to Kant, the fundamental materials for artistic representation are taken from experience, mechanical academic rules are given (CJ, 5:304, 310, 355), and ideas of reason are universal and shared.²⁸ This raises an important question: on what does the original value of an artwork rest?

Positively framed, it is the autonomy of the artist of genius to lay in abeyance everything known, fixed, and so limited to create an originally beautiful artwork. Indeed, originality requires extending artistic choices beyond those given and to manipulate materials (whether of art or nature) in order to convey successfully an original vision. Kant proclaims that this 'courage is a merit only in a genius, and a certain **boldness** in expression and in general some deviation from the common rule is well suited to him' (CJ, 5:318). Significantly, as long as artistic choices are guided

28 Kant distinguishes permanent or unchanging mechanical rules in the different arts from historical rules characteristic of an artistic school. In both cases, the rules are formulated as 'determinate **principles**' (CJ, 5:319) and thus constitute a method. This 'scientific element in any art' (CJ, 5:355) is not, however, a method for the production of artistic beauty. It supplies technical means only, which moreover must be modified by genius to express aesthetically an idea of reason.

and structured by a rational idea, they are ‘in accordance with principles that lie higher in reason’ (CJ, 5:314); therefore, it is befitting to speak here of artistic autonomy or self-legislation.²⁹

Kant reinforces this claim in the *Anthropology*, characterizing genius as ‘the talent for inventing’.³⁰ This echoes Batteux’s reference to Aristotle (FAR, p. 11). Indeed, Kant adds, genius is ‘conferred on an artist [...] who is disposed to produce his works *originally*’.³¹ But what is it that artists of genius actually invent in their representations? Kant’s answer is: what ‘was not yet known at all before the artist who made it’.³² In general terms, the product of the creative process is an aesthetic expression of a new way of thinking envisioned by the artist. This in contrast to Batteux, who appears to think of conceptual perfection as already given, though perhaps not yet portrayed artistically. Therefore, according to Kant, ‘[g]enius, however, is originality in the generation of products of the faculty of cognition; the faculty of thinking and acting in an exemplary manner independently of any other exemplar’.³³ The negative framing clarifies Kant’s refusal to use exemplars or masterpieces in his theorizing of artistic beauty. Kant emphasizes the absence of methods for beautiful art. In § 60, he clearly states: ‘[f]or beautiful art there is only a **manner** (*modus*), not a **way of teaching it** (*methodus*)’ (CJ, 5:355). The emphasis here is that the production of a beautiful artwork is not based on following a given set of ‘determinate **principles**’ (CJ, 5:319).³⁴ Artistic beauty always goes beyond simply following established artistic rules and given guidelines; rather, it involves challenging the boundaries they impose and deviating from them, in order to express successfully an original vision.

This bold individual aesthetic expression of an idea of reason is just what Kant thinks of as artistic manner. The product of an artist of genius is thus an aesthetic presentation of autonomy, and it is only as the presentation of autonomy that the work can serve other artists of genius as an exemplar without prescribing any artistic method ‘that would put them in a position to produce similar products’ (CJ, 5:308):

[G]enius is the exemplary originality of the natural endowment of a subject for the **free** use of his cognitive faculties. In this way the product of a genius (in respect of that in it which is to be ascribed to genius, not to possible learning or schooling) is an example [...] for emulation by another genius, who is thereby awakened to the feeling of his own originality, to exercise freedom from coercion in his art [...] by which the talent shows itself as exemplary. (CJ, 5:318)

29 There is a growing interest in aesthetic autonomy generally and in Kant’s aesthetics specifically; see Samantha M. Matherne, ‘Kant on Aesthetic Autonomy and Common Sense’, *Philosophers’ Imprint* 19 (2019): 1–22; Reiter, ‘Artistic Manner as Autonomy’. Kant usually employs the terms ‘autonomy’ and ‘heautonomy’ in relation to judgements of taste (CJ, 5:185–86, 196–97, 241, 281, 350) but he suggests that the term is applicable to artistic creation (CJ, 5:282). The analogy between moral and creative artistic autonomy invites more detailed discussion.

30 Kant, *Anthropology*, 7:224.

31 Kant, *Anthropology*, 7:224.

32 Ibid., 7:224.

33 Ibid., 7:220.

34 On the influence of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Georg Friedrich Meier on Kant’s rejection of a science of aesthetics, for ‘the beautiful and the judgment of taste is not determinable by principles’ (CJ, 5:355), see J. Colin McQuillan, ‘Kant on the Science of Aesthetics and the Critique of Taste’, *Kant Yearbook* 9 (2017): 113–32.

Indeed, both in the third *Critique* and in lectures Kant names artists of genius, emphasizing that they present examples precisely of artistic autonomy. Genius such as that of Homer or Wieland, says Kant, ‘cannot be communicated, but is apportioned to each immediately from the hand of nature, and thus dies with him, until nature one day similarly endows another, who needs nothing more than an example in order to let the talent of which he is aware operate in a similar way’ (CJ, 5:309).³⁵

Exemplary masterpieces, however, are often used in the writing of contemporary thinkers as supreme or ideal models, and therefore it is tempting to think of them as proper *concrete sources* for the extraction of a self-standing artistic method. For this reason, Kant warns against doing so and emphasizes that artists must blaze their own trail autonomously and avoid imitation for the sake of originality. However well a play may present misanthropy, for example, it is but one rich perspective on the idea and does not exhaust the subject:

Only by stimulating the imagination of the student toward suitability for a given concept [...] and through severe criticism, can one prevent the examples that are set before him from being immediately taken by him *as prototypes and models for imitation, as it were not subject to any higher norm and to his own judging thus smothering the genius and together with it also the freedom of the imagination* even in its lawfulness, without which no beautiful art nor even a correct personal taste for judging of it is possible. (CJ, 5:355; my emphasis)

The last argument regarding ‘taste for judging’ will be developed below. For now, it is crucial to understand the cognitivist reasoning behind Kant’s warning. In the *Anthropology*, Kant states explicitly that the innovation of an artwork stems from the artist’s ‘originality of thought’:

For a work that is made according to precepts and rules turns out to be spiritless (slavish), however a product of beautiful art requires not merely taste, which can be grounded on imitation, but also originality of thought, which, as self-inspired, is called *spirit*. – The *painter of nature* with paintbrush or pen (in the latter case it is prose or verse) is not the beautiful spirit, because he only imitates; *the painter of ideas* alone is the master of beautiful art.³⁶

It is with the artistic aim of representing ideas of reason in a way that is ‘not yet known’ that the artist of genius makes their artistic choices, forging a new aesthetic language and offering an original perspective on an idea. This perspective aesthetically enriches the idea in a way that has not yet been done:

In an aesthetic respect, however, the imagination [of the artist of genius] is free to provide, beyond that concord with the concept, unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding, *of which the latter took no*

35 See also Kant’s mention of Leonardo da Vinci in *Anthropology*, 7:224, and Michelangelo in *Anthropology* *Mrongovius*, trans Robert R. Clewis, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 25:1311; and see, Reiter, ‘Artistic Manner as Autonomy’.

36 Kant, *Anthropology*, 7:248.

regard in its concept, but which it applies, not so much objectively, for cognition, as subjectively, for the animation of the cognitive powers, and thus also indirectly to cognitions. (CJ, 5:317; my emphasis)

This brings us to Kant's cognitivist justification of the exclusion of masterpieces as models for successful judgements, or, in other words, as models for the strict determination of rules of good taste. To be clear, the cognitive value of a beautiful artwork is that it captures aesthetically a rich new form of thought. However, if a work is regarded as a masterpiece and as such is taken as a fixed standard for artistic beauty, reflective taste becomes ossified and limited to the given – as though what is excellent in a masterpiece must be excellent for all time. In Kantian terms (echoing Aristotle), 'for these [empirical laws] allow us to cognize only how things are judged, but never to prescribe how they ought to be judged' (CJ, 5:278). In other words, to regard a beautiful artwork as an exemplar would contradict the very act of appreciation of artistic beauty – the judgment would not be reflective but 'determinable in accordance with concepts' (CJ, 5:309). Judgements of artistic beauty do express an expectation of universal agreement, at least within an artistic tradition and culture; and such agreement does build on the cultivation of taste and requires examples from the classical works of the ancients and from more recent masters (see again, CJ, 5:282). However, be it in creating art or in its appreciation, taste 'makes claim merely [*bloß*] to autonomy. To make the judgments of others into the determining ground of one's own would be heteronomy' (CJ, 5:282). To reach agreement in judging a particular artwork is thus always an achievement that requires contending autonomously with what is novel in the work and its expressive means.³⁷

Kant criticizes prominent philosophical writings of his time that propose methods for judging artistic beauty, methods extracted from masterpieces. Indeed, he rejects methods that not only invite but demand everyone's consent, and with it the passivity of the public's mind:

[A]n *a priori* proof in accordance with determinate rules can determine the judgment on beauty even less. If someone reads me his poem or takes me to a play that in the end fails to please my taste, then he can adduce **Batteux** or **Lessing**, or even older and more famous critics of taste, and adduce all the rules they established as proofs that his poem is beautiful; certain passages, which are the very ones that displease me, may even agree with rules of beauty (as they have been given there and have been universally recognized): I will stop my ears, listen to no reasons and arguments, and would rather believe that those rules of the critics are false or at least that this is not a case for their application *than allow that my judgment should be determined by means of a priori grounds of proof*, since it is supposed to be a judgment of taste and not of the understanding or of reason. (CJ, 5:284–85; my emphasis)

Reflecting on an artwork broadens and deepens our grasp of an idea of reason. It is an edifying experience; it 'stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept, hence [...] aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an

37 For discussion of the expectation of universal assent in the context of art see Halper, 'Rethinking Kant's Distinction', 865; Susan Meld Shell, *The Politics of Beauty: A Study of Kant's Critique of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 26–27; Reiter and Geiger, 'Kant's Missing Analytic', 370–71.

unbounded way' (CJ, 5:314). Poetry, Kant clearly states, 'expands the mind' (CJ, 5:326) and provides 'nourishment to the understanding, [...] giving life to its concepts through the imagination' (CJ, 5:321). A work of art provides aesthetic access to the wealth held in store in an idea of reason. But the highest cognitive value art affords is in freeing us from set patterns of thought, in recognizing and trying out new ways of constructing and developing our ideas.

The ongoing cultivation of taste through exemplary artworks that provide standards for judging artistic beauty reveals a complication formulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. There is always a risk that a work will fail in the eye of the public. For the public might not be willing or ready for a shift of thought. Indeed, Rousseau, in his discussion of Molière, emphasizes the great importance of public opinion and the formation of public taste for the success of an artwork: 'An author who would brave the general taste would soon write for himself alone. When Molière transformed the comic stage, he attacked modes and ridiculous traits. But, for all of that, he did not shock the public's taste. He followed or expanded on it.'³⁸ In the note to this paragraph, Rousseau adds that, despite all its refinement, *Le Misanthrope* was Molière's stillborn masterpiece. Although the play 'did not shock the public's taste,' the public was not ready for it either:

Although he anticipated public taste by only a bit, Molière himself had difficulty in succeeding; the most perfect of his works failed at its birth because he presented it too soon and the public was not yet ripe for the *Misanthrope*. [...] But the constant tastes of a people, its customs, its old prejudices, ought to be respected on the stage. Never has a poet come off well who violated this law.³⁹

IV. CONCLUSION

My concluding claim is that the presence of exemplars confines the originality of the artist and narrows the public's ways of thinking and judging. A way of putting Kant's deep insight is that the notion of a masterpiece is an object of art history, for it refers to something 'that has been'. The exclusion of artistic exemplars from Kant's text should be understood as the rhetorical realization of the thought that a great artwork of the past should not be treated as an exemplary object that provides rigid principles for the creation and standards for the appreciation of new beauty.

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³⁸ Rousseau, *Politics and Arts*, 19.

³⁹ Ibid.

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