

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-06683-9 - Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art

Edited by Paul Mattick

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Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art is a collection of essays exploring the rise of aesthetics as a response to, and a part of, the reshaping of the arts in modern society. The theories of art that were developed under the name of "aesthetics" in the later eighteenth century have traditionally been understood as contributions to a field of study in existence at least since the time of Plato. If art is a practice to be found in all human societies, then the philosophy of art is the search for universal features of that practice, storable in definitions of art and beauty. Despite appearances to the contrary, however, art as we know it – the system of "fine arts" – is largely peculiar to modern society. Aesthetics, far from being a perennial discipline, emerged when it did in the effort both to understand and to shape this new social practice.

The essays included in this volume share the conviction that aesthetic ideas can be fully understood when seen not only in relation to intellectual and social contexts but as themselves constructed in history. This is relevant to the concept of art itself, which acquired its current meaning in relation to actual changes in the social uses made of painting, writing, and the other media. Ranging widely in method, with allegiance to no particular theoretical outlook, these studies are both grounded in the history of philosophy and drawn from recent developments in literary theory, art history, and social history, and seek to clarify philosophical issues by taking their historical content into account.

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