Introduction

This book forms part of a larger project on the origins and evolution of ancient aesthetic inquiry, which will appear in three loosely connected and progressively narrowing installments. In the first and present volume, I trace the origins of this inquiry in its broadest manifestations across a range of art forms and discourses as these evolved from before Homer down to the fourth century and then into later antiquity, albeit with an emphasis on Greece in its earlier phases. A second installment, *Literary Aesthetics after Aristotle*, will cover the history of this development after Aristotle down to the Augustan age, again mainly in the Greek world, but with a special emphasis on literary criticism, theory, and aesthetics. A third volume will examine the emergence of the sublime in antiquity and its eventual theoretical expression in Longinus' treatise, *On the Sublime*.[1]

The accent in the present study is emphatically placed on sensualism and materialism, as opposed to the formalism and idealism that were enshrined by Plato and Aristotle, and through whose lens most subsequent views of ancient art and aesthetics have typically been filtered, including our own today. One aim of my approach, then, is corrective. Aesthetics as a term and in its root meanings points us to the sensuous experience of art. Treating aesthetics in this way can help us perceive the commonly shared basis of the diverse arts of antiquity, namely their common foundation in a shared set of experiences, which the various languages of the day sought to capture in different ways and in different disciplines or pre-disciplines. And so too, reorienting our view of the ancient vocabularies of art and experience can dramatically change how we look upon the ancient achievements in these same areas.

[1] A separate study, tentatively titled *Atomistic Aesthetics: A Speculation*, will have to wait for another occasion, though to be sure the spirit of atomism may be felt in various places below.

Existing accounts of ancient art and its theory are ill equipped to analyze these phenomena in their manifold expressions for a simple reason: they follow a modern division of the senses and the labors of form. Art history is equated with visual art; musical history and theory exclude poetry; history of philology excludes all of these; philosophy is a sideline occupation at best; and so on. Aesthetics as a unifying disciplinary marker is rarely invoked. Larger categories like beauty, the sublime, the sensuous, the palpable, or the rhythmic occur adjectivally, but only rarely do they occur as legitimate nouns in modern studies. Finally, contemporary perspectives on ancient art and aesthetics are dominated by those that attained canonical status in the fourth century BCE with Plato and Aristotle and then were enshrined in subsequent millennia, first at Alexandria and later during the Italian Renaissance. Contemporary perspectives – not simply on aesthetics, but also governing the very way the disciplines of classics are conceived and carried out – are dominated, in other words, by two mutually reinforcing views: formalism, which may provisionally be defined as any attention to the purity or ideality of form, structure, or design (principles which are thought to organize matter or material); and a kind of Platonism, which for present purposes may be defined as a repudiation of the senses.[2] This is the perspective that reigns whenever the capacity for higher-order reflection on art and aesthetics is not being denied altogether to the ancients, a denial that is represented above all by Paul Oskar Kristeller and by others in his wake, but that (thankfully) is a minority position within classical studies, though not outside the discipline.[3]

The aim of this study, in contrast, is to furnish a new and I hope in ways revisionist account of the development of aesthetic theories in

[2] One need only recall Plato's admiration for "the beauty of forms" or "figures" in the *Philebus* (σχημάτων κάλλος, 51c1) – forms that are explicitly denied any phenomenal richness (for instance, color or mass), and that ultimately stand in for Forms that elude sensation altogether. See further Ch. 2 below. On aesthetic form in the sense defined here and on Plato's contribution to it, see Eldridge 1992; further, Bruns 2008, 226, on form "in the classic Aristotelian sense of an artifact reposing in the unity, integrity, and harmony of its disparate elements," and what Adorno, for example, refers to as "the arrangement of sensuous elements" (ibid.), where the accent lies on arrangement, not sensuousness. For a useful critique of form and formalism in aesthetics, see Summers 1989. For some examples of the linkage of Platonism, formalism of design, and classical Greek art in contemporary art history, see Ch. 1, n. 62 below. *Formalism* is often used to signify something further, namely, an "exclu[sion] of the cognitive from the realm of the aesthetic" (Saito 2007, 10, n. 1). I do not use *formalism* in that sense here, as it too easily ends up being conflated with the materialist positions I wish to discuss. Finally, on the exclusion of materiality from the conduct of classical studies, see my essay, "The Materiality of Classical Studies" (Porter 2010b).

[3] There are innumerable difficulties with Kristeller's argument, which will be touched on in Chapter 1 below.

antiquity from a more historically and philosophically complete perspective than is currently available, in part by attending to some of the neglected margins of ancient sources of the kind signaled just above. These latter are to be viewed as part of a larger aesthetic discourse that in turn reaches into the very foundational problems of meaning and value in antiquity. And so, while the perspectives offered up by this study are comprehensive, they are not exhaustive, and in some ways they are emphatically partial. It is not my purpose to offer a complete survey of aesthetic criticism in antiquity, its history, or its sources. Rather, my book presents something like a general account of the *missing* history of these fields, and then offers a particular slice (or slices) of this history, which hopefully can serve as a stimulus to future studies in its wake.

The structure of the book follows a simple logic. Foundational and historical questions about larger concepts are treated in Part I: aesthetics, form and formalism, matter and appearances. The belief in matter as a constituent of experience and reality was strongly rooted in Greek thought, but also highly contested. The implications of this belief for art and aesthetics alone were immense, though they remain underestimated. The purpose of Part I, accordingly, is to detail the emergence of the Greek concepts of matter and materiality, their expression in appearances, and their rejection or qualification through the counter-concepts of form and the immaterial. Aesthetics has a unique history in relation to all of this that needs to be told. Indeed, the very possibility of a history of aesthetics, understood in part as a history of the senses and of the thoughtful reflection on their deliverances, hangs in the balance. Part II traces the rise of aesthetic reflection from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE across a variety of fields: rhetoric, philosophy, music, the visual arts.[4] As treated here, these conventional labels quickly give way to less recognizable themes that deliberately cut across familiar boundaries – for example, componential systems of analysis (based on the *stoicheion*, or smallest determinable unit of analysis), the aesthetics of the voice (whether written or heard), pleasure in materials, the roles played by touch and sight, the mutual evocation of sensory experiences (synaesthesia), the vivacity of sensation. The third and final part is a chapter unto itself, and it encompasses a wider mix, but above all a blending and tension, of arts, media, and discourses on art: inscriptions, lapidary metaphors in poetry, actual

[4] Medical writers, while represented in places below, are not investigated in any depth; more work remains to be done to bridge this field with others.

architecture and "verbal architecture," the sublime and "sublime matter." I will have more to say about the specific realignments that come with shifting one's focus from form and idealization to matter and sensation later in this Introduction. Suffice it to say for now that attention to the most basic questions of sensation and perception in aesthetics permits a far more inclusive approach to the commonalities in experience that were shared across media and to the languages that sought to capture these.

This book's argument starts from concepts and problems and moves towards particulars and solutions. It builds slowly, but surely. In historical terms, one could say that my study is about the discovery, as concepts and names, of matter and appearances and then their deployment in the reflection on art in ancient Greece. The aim here is to unearth the materialist and sensualist predecessors to Plato and Aristotle in the theory of art and aesthetics – no easy task, but essential for getting, as it were, behind the back of these two formidable presences in the evolution and transmission of ancient aesthetic thought. The flip side of this approach is to ask who it was that Plato and Aristotle were reacting to when they laid down their influential views. Neither thinker can be fully comprehended except as responding to this somewhat submerged background. Accordingly, one sub-plot of the present study is a re-consideration of aspects of both thinkers' views on aesthetic theory, above all Aristotle's, whether in their own right or as opening a window onto their predecessors. In more elemental terms, my study maps out a theory about how aesthetic encounters must proceed, from the experience of matter (in some form or other) to the assignment of aesthetic values. Thus, to some extent and in places, the study is intended as a contribution to aesthetic theory or its modern history, though this is by no means its primary purpose. In disciplinary terms, the book's contents move from philosophy to art and culture, which is to say, from theory to practice. But, again, these are boundaries whose firm distinctions it is among the book's goals to contest.

THE AESTHETICS OF EXPERIENCE

The starting point of my project is the intuition, which ought to be uncontroversial, that a productive way to approach ancient art, or any art for that matter, is through the realm of experience. Focusing on experience helps bring attention back to the root meanings of aesthetics, and therefore to the root experiences of *aisthēsis*, or sensation and perception. Driving aesthetics back to the level of sensation, but without

halting there, has the virtue of putting the act of attending back in touch with matter and materiality, the senses, and experience. Seen in this light, the terms of my title map out a logical *progressus* for ancient aesthetic subjects that corresponds to one of the guiding assumptions in this study: a subject confronts *matter* (hard and resistant bodies, objects, things, their materials, or their properties); he or she has a perceptual *sensation*; the *experience* of matter (and in particular, of matter's materiality[5]) gives rise to *aesthetic* perceptions, whether pleasure or pain, beauty or sublimity, or else some smaller-scale qualitative apprehension concerning an object's sensuous features, be this its roughness or smoothness, its mass or dimensional qualities, and so on; these aesthetic perceptions or experiences, in turn, give rise to some larger, categorical judgment that often engulfs the whole of the object in question: "This thing is [aesthetically speaking] X," where the bracketed expression need only be implied and X expresses some kind of aesthetic evaluative labeling.

To describe the process in this way is not to presume that a confrontation with bare matter can give rise, as if by magic, to aesthetic experience. Bare matter (if such a thing ever existed; this will be discussed in Chapter 3 below) is transformed *in its very apprehension* – first when it is apprehended *as* (bare) matter or material, and then again when it is apprehended as capable of containing, releasing, or just triggering aesthetic properties, perceptions, or experiences. The not-so-hidden premise of my argument, in other words, is that to have an aesthetic perception is to have an empirical – phenomenal, material, sensual – encounter with that object, the experience of which *can never be shed* subsequently.[6] To think along

[5] Roughly understood as the material nature of matter or the subjective sense or feeling one has of this. By contrast, matter can be said to have non-material (formal) properties, such as shape, contour, or arrangement. Whether these are truly non-material remains to be seen. (I doubt it.) One can also appeal to the (formal construction of the) idea of matter as its "materiality," which is, however, not what I have in mind by the term.

[6] See the similar premise of Frank Sibley in a well-known article from the 1960s, "Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic": "It is of importance to note first that, broadly speaking, aesthetics deals with a kind of perception. People have to *see* the grace or unity of a work, *hear* the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, *notice* the gaudiness of a color scheme, *feel* the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone.... Unless they do perceive [these qualities] for themselves, aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgment are beyond them. Merely to learn from others, on good authority, that the music is serene, the play moving, or the picture unbalanced is of little aesthetic value; the crucial thing is to see, hear, or feel" (Sibley 1965, 137; emphasis in original). This view is common enough today among theorists of art and aesthetics (see, e.g., Arnheim 1986, esp. 678), perhaps because it speaks to an inevitable component of all aesthetic activity. I would only qualify Sibley's remark by adding that the qualities in question need not be objectively part of the work, but only objectively part of the experience. The music need not be really frenzied; I need only hear it that way for the perception to be "mine," while social conditions will more or less guarantee that my perception is (more or less) shared.

such lines is to enhance one's view of aesthetic experience; and it is to enlarge the scope of lived experience, thereby enriching it, drawing it out, extending its dimensions. Indeed, aesthetic and empirical experience go hand in hand, as they only can. Recognizing that they do helps enlarge the scope of inquiry to anyone interested in broadening the frames of reference concerning aesthetic questions in antiquity on offer today.

Currently, approaches to aesthetics as a legitimate domain of thought and inquiry in antiquity are virtually non-existent, and the reason has to do with the limitations of modern perspectives alone, not with the ancient capacities for art and reflection on art. Access to the domain of aesthetics is restricted by pre-established routes of entry that inhibit a more encompassing vision. In place of wide-angled views, one finds piecemeal visions, determined and overdetermined by disciplinary sightlines. History of art (understood by convention to mean plastic and visual arts), music, poetry, philosophy (which can include theories of art but also analyses of the senses), history of philology, studies of popular and other views of pleasure and pain, not to mention cosmological, natural, or antiquarian description, barely come into contact with one another. The question of how these various fields of study interact is rarely addressed, let alone the equally decisive issue of how the *spheres of experience* they variously encompass interact. As a result, the charge that ancient vocabularies for discussing or appreciating art are impoverished is frequently heard, nor is the blame laid only on the lack of source materials (an admittedly lamentable but not insuperable handicap).

But the charge can be turned around if we begin to notice that the languages for expressing pain, pleasure, form, shape, surfaces, luminosity, hues and colors, rhythm, sounds, aromas, palpability, the very sense of time, or any aesthetic category you please (the beautiful, shapely, pleasing, ugly, or sublime) are both in good supply in the ancient world and found in places where art is not directly discussed. What *is* being discussed whenever such topics are on the table is, on the other hand, a matter of experience, which is to say, *what passes through the mind and senses in the face of vivid phenomena – the primary features of sentience*. As it turns out, these same features mark the languages of art in antiquity, and not only those of everyday experience. And here, there is no trace of impoverishment, but only a richly shared vocabulary of languages that cut across boundaries, defying narrow scholastic categories and enabling a richer analysis by us today. In broadening our view of what counts as evidence for aesthetic experience, we are at the same time acknowledging that aesthetics is fundamentally a question of experience, which is to say, of

sensation and perception. In a word, we are acknowledging that *arts are genres of experience*, while at the same time expanding our conception of what I occasionally refer to below as the – ever-changing and ever-adapting – *aesthetic public sphere* of antiquity.

In sum, my study is conceived as a plea in the name of aesthetics. By *aesthetics* I understand everything that can conceivably fall under this term, from sensation and perception to all imaginable forms of art in antiquity. But by the study of aesthetics I also understand something more, namely a unifying approach to the various realms of ancient art by way of the commonalities of experience (and not only vocabularies) those arts can be shown to have shared. Secondly, this study proposes a reconstruction of ancient aesthetic thought and inquiry that lies outside the mainstream of Platonic and Aristotelian speculation on art, with roots traceable to fifth-century BCE phenomenalism and materialism and the nascent languages of aesthetic criticism in poetics, music, and the visual arts, but also earlier, in the reflexive statements of poets and other artists. In a sense, the study constitutes an extended commentary on and a historical critique of Aristotle's (eventually canonical) formalistic aesthetic theory (by tracking, as it were, anti-Aristotelianism before and after Aristotle), as well as what might be termed an anti-Platonic aesthetics that originates prior to Plato and persists long after him. It also constitutes a reflection on the ideological shapes that aesthetic value assumes in antiquity. Thirdly, this study hopes to offer, by way of an alternative, a glimpse of the materialist traditions in aesthetics which originated in ancient Greece. In doing so, I will be inverting the standard biases of histories of art and aesthetics which have reigned supreme since Winckelmann (who was, however, himself of two minds on the subject).[7]

AESTHETIC MATERIALISM

Any book that sets out to discuss the relationships between matter, sensation, experience, and aesthetics in antiquity immediately begs several large and probably unanswerable questions about the meaning of its own terms. Accordingly, I must begin with a disclaimer. I have no intention of defining in some final way these concepts in the pages that follow, though

[7] On Winckelmann's ambivalences, see esp. Potts 1994. On the suppressed Epicureanism (viz., materialism) behind Winckelmann's apparent Platonizing aesthetics, see Porter 2007a, 109–10. Modern biases in art often reflect this vacillation in their double endorsement of idealism and sensuality, though their approaches tend, I would hazard to guess, towards a formalistic analysis of their objects.

I will be providing some frameworks by which one may grasp the presence and values of these terms, or what they point to, across a relatively wide sampling of aesthetic reflection in Greek and (to a lesser extent) Roman antiquity. Nor, as I said earlier, is it my intention to provide an exhaustive account, historical or otherwise, of the aesthetic traditions of Greece or Rome.

The more modest aim of this study lies somewhere between the goals of suggestion and remapping. I doubt that any reliable understanding of ancient aesthetics can be possible in the absence of a thorough treatment of either materiality or sensuous experience, even if this is not the standard view. And so, one of my aims in what follows will be to stake out the presence of these notions (even more than the terms that roughly name them) in the ancient traditions. Another aim is to offer, within a limited compass, a comprehensive overview of the history of ancient aesthetic speculation unlike those found in available accounts and of the sort that more or less automatically results from including the terms *matter, sensation*, and *experience* in one's historical and critical lexicon.

The departure point will be constituted, as I mentioned, by the sensuous dimensions of aesthetic experience, which are typically demoted to minor significance in what may be called, for want of a better umbrella term, the dominant idealist and formalist traditions of criticism in antiquity and in the modern accounts that mirror these biases. My counter to this tendency is threefold: that to attend to these repressed, sensate dimensions in the ancient sources is to tease out something like the materialist urges of aesthetic thinking in antiquity; that if you pull on this thread hard enough you will find that materialism is an essential component of aesthetic reflection in antiquity from its earliest origins to whenever one chooses to date the end of these traditions; and finally, that this materialist strand of thought threatens, in places, to break free of the ancient traditions and to define a tradition of its own.

The history of this countertendency is utterly neglected in the available accounts, and it is one that the present study seeks to restore. Even so, characterizing the precise object of my study is not easy. On the one hand, I am tracing the emergence, in ancient Greece, of the languages of aesthetic description and analysis *simpliciter* – in a word, of Greek aesthetics and some of its afterlives in Rome. On the other, I am characterizing in my own language and in a language borrowed from the ancients an element that is inescapably common to all aesthetic perception (sensuousness), and noting the marks it left wherever it appeared. In doing so, I am consolidating the markers, so to speak, of aesthetic

materialism (or materialist aesthetics)[8] in antiquity and demonstrating their prevalence across a wide range of areas. Because all these ways of attending to objects and of reflecting upon them – labeling their features, describing their qualities, their impact, their feel, and so on – build upon one another historically, they can be rightfully said to add up to a tradition of sorts, regardless of how these different vocabularies and discourses were finally put to use. That is, materialist aesthetics, as a way of capturing certain features of aesthetic objects and of aesthetic experiences, is an instrument of cultural expression that can be put to a myriad of uses, be they civic, private, religious, class-based, gendered, ethnic, or any other number of further ends beyond aesthetic enjoyment for its own sake (examples of which abound). Having said this, there is probably something wrong with dividing up the work of aesthetics and its application in a given context, since in reality the two are closely integrated and, in the heat of the moment, indistinguishable. The felt properties of a votive object (its colors, shape, and sheen) merge into the activities in which that object is dynamically inserted. Under the right circumstances, the vocal intonations of a text when read aloud take on the aura of classicism and may be used to support that form of ideology (say, in the classroom). How can we separate these out? We can, because the ancients did. And they did so in the shared experience and languages of ancient aesthetic description. It is thanks to their accounts that we can tell these elements of their experience apart. That there is no third language for describing the fusion of aesthetic features and, as it were, utility values – something like an aesthetics or materialism of useful practices – is not a deficiency of aesthetic thought in Greece: we are guilty of the same deficiency today.

My account is intended as a partial precursor to other historical studies in which the empiricist tendencies of art reflection and inquiry are well established, or at least where a case for their presence has been convincingly made, likewise against prevailing counter-views, whether in the Byzantine, medieval, Renaissance, or early or later modern periods.[9] So common and consistent are the sensual allures of art, one is tempted to say that art and aesthetics, at every moment in time, have been shadowed, if not outright driven, by materialist tendencies as much as

[8] I am not sure I see any significant difference between these two designations, which are in any case modern, not ancient (though one could easily stipulate a difference for them). In what follows, I will use both terms more or less interchangeably.

[9] See Ch. 1, n. 17 below.

they have been propelled by opposing factors that value a transcendence of the sensory given alone. The tensions between these two opposing but not infrequently overlapping and even collaborative developments, as significant as they may be, are too complex to detail here beyond a number of suggestions. More urgently needed, at least in the area of classics, is the kind of corrective and recuperative work that can lay the foundations for such studies in the future.

The outstanding trait of the perceptions and viewpoints I will be tracing, which only in modern accounts figure as non-canonical, is the emphasis they place on works of art as phenomenal and material objects, that is, as palpable and sensuous objects of experience. And while a kind of native sensualism and materialism were everywhere in evidence from Homer down to the fifth century, it seems apparent that there was an increasing focus on the empirical and material dimensions of art during the fifth century in the wake of the Presocratics (especially the pluralists), an era that also happens to correspond to the formative years of art theory. Though Plato and Aristotle write largely in response and in opposition to these developments (a fact that is itself too little heeded), they do not succeed in displacing them. That is, Plato and Aristotle are not the beginning of aesthetic inquiry in antiquity by any means; they are merely one of its more prominent *derailing* moments. After Aristotle, proponents of a sensuous aesthetics stand out not least by the way they diverge from the canons of taste and criticism enshrined in the Museum at Alexandria, which is to say, the official, institutional, and academic style of criticism that set the standard for so many of the arts during the Hellenistic period and beyond.

These counter-views, grounded in aesthetic materialism as they are, frequently stand in a critical relation to established norms. Aesthetic materialism can highlight problems of conventional value in striking ways. If aesthetic criticism implies a discussion of cultural biases, norms, and values (from morals to meaning), criticism in a materialistic vein – criticism that is centered on the phenomenal experience of art as registered through the pleasures of the body (as disseminated through the eye, ear, touch, and other senses) – can be intensely critical of conventional values, and especially of the conventions of nature that underpin them. By these latter, I have in mind the naturalistic and naturalizing assumptions so common in antiquity, according to which the appropriateness, say, of signifiers and signifieds (images or sounds and meanings), or of kinds of musical rhythms and ethical behaviors, or of bodily postures and bodily decorum, were felt in some quarters to be justified. So conceived, materialist aesthetics touches, as it were, the very heart of valuation – the conditions