

## *Ars Erotica* and the Question of Aesthetics

### I TERMINOLOGY

The Latin term *ars erotica*, while sometimes referring to works of fine art with overtly erotic content, is more notably used to designate skilled methods or styles of lovemaking that are thereby elevated with the honorific term “art.” This notion of the art of love – with its various techniques, strategies, and aims – is the principal focus of this study. In what way, however, is such art truly artistic in the aesthetic sense that theorists of art and beauty have traditionally identified with art and have persistently sought to explain? This book, an exploratory essay of philosophical somaesthetics, provides materials for answering this question by examining the most influential ways that *ars erotica* has been theorized in different historical cultures and periods.<sup>1</sup> To what extent those past cultures actually practiced such erotic methods lies beyond our scope of inquiry, which is essentially theoretical. Though historically informed, the book aims at exploring key philosophical ideas and arguments rather than providing a full-blown cultural history of lovemaking. Its study of past theory has the forward-looking goal of helping us to avoid possible blind spots in our current understanding of lovemaking by revisiting some elements of ancient erotic thought.

One of the book’s central arguments is that the techniques and disciplines of traditional *ars erotica* were designed not only to enhance sexual satisfaction but also to provide distinctive aesthetic pleasures and to cultivate qualities of understanding, sensibility, grace, skill, and self-mastery that go far beyond the limits of sexual activity. In other words, such art sought to provide an aesthetic education that, by developing character, sensitivity,

<sup>1</sup> For a systematic account of somaesthetics, see Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

taste, and interpersonal awareness, could contribute to what many consider the highest art of all: the art of living. If eros, in the broad sense of desire and attraction between people, pervades so much of our social life, then the right sort of erotic knowledge could promote better affective relations between persons of all kinds, not just between lovers. A philosophical study of *ars erotica* could therefore yield useful ethical insights for the conduct of life that transcend the sexual realm. In this sense, the book's reorientation of our thinking on eroticism could stimulate broader changes in practice.

As sex belongs to human nature, it is equally fashioned by culture, which determines not only the sexual norms and taboos of a society but also its sense of beauty and range of erotically charged acts, objects, and meanings. If philosophy helps shape a culture, then that culture's philosophical views should shape its *ars erotica*. The differing cosmic, religious, and moral visions of different cultures – with their distinctive ideals of self-realization and social harmony – find expression in differences in their *ars erotica*. As sexual expression provides a powerful medium for shaping one's own subjectivity and interpersonal relations, the practice of *ars erotica* can constitute an important mode of self-cultivation with explicit regard for others. By examining the diverse ways that different cultures have conceived and advocated the art of love, we can see to what extent and in what manner such erotic practices really reflect the categories of aesthetics and art, but also in what ways they reflect key philosophical ideas that shape those cultures. Comparing these different theories of *ars erotica* may reveal important commonalities (such as the objectification of women) but also might provide materials for a superior synthesis or erotic pluralism that could better serve our transcultural world.

These initial paragraphs already announce three of the book's main questions: In what ways can *ars erotica* be appreciated (and practiced) in terms of aesthetics and the fine arts? How can it be used as a means for self-cultivation to enrich both self and other? How does its distinctive shaping of biological functions and somatic energies reflect (and sustain) a culture's background ideologies and social order so that the seemingly universal human sexual drive takes on divergent forms and meanings both across different cultures and within the same culture at different times and places? Before exploring these questions through the historical theories this book covers, we need to articulate them more clearly. But we should begin by clarifying some puzzling aspects of the very term "*ars erotica*."

Etymologically, it is a strange hybrid of the Latin word for art (*ars*) and the Greek word for love (*eros*). Its sense as "the art of love" goes back to ancient times and is rendered in impeccable Latin in Ovid's *Ars amatoria*,

one of the masterworks in erotic theory despite its jocular, versifying style. The actual term “*ars erotica*” is of much more recent vintage. Its wide currency seems to originate with Michel Foucault’s use of the term in his influential *History of Sexuality*, whose first volume distinguishes sharply between the modern Western study of sex as *scientia sexualis* and non-Western sexual knowledge in the form of *ars erotica*.<sup>2</sup> Foucault does not explain why he uses this mongrel term, but let me offer one reason it seems a useful hybrid. The Latin *amor*, like our English word “love,” is extremely ambiguous. Not only denoting erotic and romantic love (“Amor” being Cupid’s other Roman name), it also refers to other, milder forms of affection, friendship, and even mere liking. The Greek language of love was much more precise, discriminating between four important kinds of love. As *eros* (ἔρως) denoted passionate, sensual, desiring love, so *agape* (ἀγάπη) expressed a deep, unconditional, more-than-sensual form of love that was then adopted and transformed into the Christian concept of love. If *philia* (φιλία) connoted the general notion of affectionate commitment to friends, family, or one’s community, then *storge* (στοργή) conveyed the special natural affection that parents have for children and that could extend to other family members. The Greek term *eros* is clearly better than the Latin *amor* for conveying the specific notion of physical love and lovemaking while not being confined to it. But the Latin term *ars* (so close to its English

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 57–58. Foucault’s list of cultures “with an *ars erotica*” includes “China, Japan, India, Rome, [and] the Arabo-Moslem societies.” In his vision of *ars erotica* and even in his choice of this term to designate sexual practice, Foucault may have been particularly influenced by the Chinese account of *ars erotica* presented in Robert van Gulik’s work on the subject, for van Gulik chose the terms *ars* or *art* to translate the Chinese term *shu* 術, which more precisely means “technique” or “procedure” and which the Chinese used when describing erotic techniques (techniques of the bedroom). This term thus appears in the expression *fangzhong shu* 房中術, which is rendered in van Gulik’s English translation as “Art of the Bedchamber.” Van Gulik’s book was published in French translation by Foucault’s Parisian publisher Gallimard in 1971 as *La vie sexuelle dans la Chine ancienne*; its original English version was *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), see 121 for quotation. Foucault explicitly refers to van Gulik when speaking of Chinese “erotic art” or “arts of conjugal pleasure,” in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1986), 137, 143. In a later interview he furthermore highlights the Chinese *ars erotica* while claiming that Greek and Roman culture really had nothing comparable (at least in terms of importance). See Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 259. The sinologist Kristofer Schipper, who contests some of van Gulik’s account of Chinese sexology, likewise uses the phrase “Art of the Bedroom.” See his book *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 148.

counterpart) is best for evoking our notion of art as rich in creativity, skill, and pleasure, while the ancient Greek word for art – *techne* (τέχνη) – could suggest the arid narrowness of mechanical technique.

The hybrid “*ars erotica*” combines the advantages of both languages and in so doing also provides a provocative example of creative coupling, thus symbolically expressing its referent. The word *ars* is in the singular nominal case (its plural being *artes*), so *ars erotica*, like “art” or “fine art,” is grammatically a mass noun that takes the singular verb and would have no definite article. But like art or fine art, *ars erotica* includes many genres, styles, and forms. To convey that plurality I will often speak of *ars erotica* as the erotic arts and occasionally will use the phrase “the *ars erotica*” in a plural sense as elliptical for “the diverse forms or styles of *ars erotica*,” since the Latin plural *artes* seems awkward and foreign, while *ars* has the “s” suggestive of the English plural. In such occasions, the definite article should *not* be understood as assuming there is only one such art.

## II AESTHETICS

Over its long history as a cherished and fiercely contested concept, art has acquired a number of meanings. In its oldest and widest sense, deriving from the Greek term *techne*, art denotes any skill, craft, or branch of learning, typically one that involves some organizing principles of practice. In this sense, we speak of the liberal arts, or the martial arts, or even the arts of conversation or of salesmanship. *Ars erotica* is clearly art in this most general sense, providing an attractive counterpart to the martial arts, as the deities Amor and Venus do to the god Mars. Since the eighteenth century, however, art has assumed a narrower, dominant sense that is closely bound up with the notions of fine art and aesthetic experience. Here art requires more than mere mastery of skills, principles, or learning; it essentially involves experienced pleasures of form, feeling, and meaning. Moreover, the requisite feelings and pleasures are defined in terms of aesthetics – a realm devoted to beauty, sublimity, expressive meanings, significant forms, delightful sensory perceptions, imaginative ideas, creative designs, and other important values central to the fine arts.<sup>3</sup> The pleasures, feelings, meanings, and skills

<sup>3</sup> Our notion of the fine arts did not really exist in ancient times, and neither, in a strict sense, did the theoretical field called aesthetics. Alexander Baumgarten initiated this field by coining the concept of aesthetics in the mid-eighteenth century. For the historical formation of our concept of art, see Paul Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics” (Parts I and II), *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (1951): 496–527; and *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13, no. 1 (1952): 17–46.

involved in a particular practice should therefore be recognizably aesthetic in character if we are to consider that practice as truly art in the more specific modern sense.

Can *ars erotica* be considered art in this aesthetic sense? What indeed are its aesthetic or artistic features, and how are they best characterized and understood? How do they relate to their counterparts in more paradigmatic artistic domains? What, for example, would be the counterpart of an artwork in *ars erotica*? Could it be an isolated coital coupling; a long session of lovemaking with multiple coital episodes; a whole night of courtship and consummation perhaps starting with drinks and dinner, a concert, and extended foreplay and then finishing with a conjugal bath and breakfast? Could an erotic artwork be construed even in terms of an entire love affair that could extend over weeks or longer? Such questions of work-identity also arise in the fine arts: We speak of James Joyce's *Dubliners* and George Herbert's *The Temple* as particular works of literature, but we also consider the particular stories and poems in these respective works as individual literary works in their own right. Where could *ars erotica* fit in our classification of art forms? If it is essentially a performing art, then how does its performance differ from the mere performance of a sexual act? Can we further identify different genres of *ars erotica* that particular performances could be ascribed to – for example, by classifying them into oral, genital, and anal sex with their different postures, movements, and performative processes? Or should we instead classify them in terms of the gender roles of the partners or in terms of the situational logic of performance: the couple's first kiss or coital episode, the marriage night, or “makeup” sex after a quarrel? What are the general aesthetic principles that govern the erotic arts? Do they form a coherent system or are there conflicting aesthetic principles in different genres, styles, or traditions of *ars erotica*? Properly addressing such questions calls for an exploration of the culturally diverse theories of *ars erotica* undertaken in the following chapters, but I offer here an introductory outline of some key aesthetic features that those theories display.

First is the incorporation of fine arts and other paradigmatically aesthetic activities into the practice of *ars erotica*. Poetry and music, for example, are invoked for courtship and enhancing mood; perfumes may be concocted or blended to create an attractively sensual ambience. Culinary arts provide appealing food and drink that promote desire and can improve sexual performance; arts of design (including flower arrangement) enrich the sensuous attraction of the bedstead, making it an appealing stage to attract and stimulate lovemaking. Finally, arts of fashion and grooming serve to heighten the beauty and sexual allure of the lovers. They also offer lovers a

wide range of looks and costumes that evoke different personalities or social identities and thus can add the spice of variety to erotic play by imaginatively enlarging its range of *dramatis personae*, even if the very same two bodies are involved.

A second key aesthetic feature of *ars erotica* is its emphasis on beauty and pleasure rather than mere utility. While sex obviously has an essential reproductive function, *ars erotica*'s prime focus is typically on enjoying lovemaking for its own sake (in terms of its sensory pleasures and expressive feelings and meanings) rather than for the production of children or some other external end or product. If aesthetic experience is characterized by its immediately experienced value rather than deferred utility, this does not preclude its involving a process that is temporally extended and mediated through stages. Our enjoyment of reading a poem, watching a film, or listening to a sonata cannot occur in an instant; it takes time. But the felt value is still immediate in the sense that we do not have to wait until the final word, image, or note in order to enjoy the work. Rather, we appreciate the work at each stage of its unfolding process, and this developing appreciation is essential to appreciating the work's conclusion and the work as a whole. The aesthetic experience of climbing a mountain is not just enjoying the view from the summit but savoring the different stages of the climb and their directional movement toward its peak. In the same way, *ars erotica*'s aesthetic design seeks to ensure that sexual pleasure is not confined to the moment of orgasmic release but instead delightfully pervades the whole temporally developing process leading up to and then away from the anticipated sexual climax, even if it does not come.

This implies a third key aesthetic feature of *ars erotica*: its highlighting of form. What distinguishes a performance of erotic artistry from mere sexual performance is attention to formal and structural qualities. Just like a successful piece of theater or music, a superior performance of *ars erotica* typically has a sense of developing wholeness, with a beginning, middle, and end whose stages are organically related to enhance the pleasures of dynamic harmony and interest. Theories of *ars erotica* are designed to achieve this intensifying developmental unity through successive, integrated stages of action, even if these stages are sometimes temporally compressed. This formal emphasis expresses a concern for unifying ambience and focus, so that discordant feelings or distracting elements are kept away. Another aspect of *ars erotica*'s formalism is expressed in its staging of the act of love within an attractive *mise-en-scène* that helps dramatize and intensify the experience by demarcating it from the ordinary humdrum flow of life. What precisely constitutes an attractively erotic *mise-en-scène* can differ

significantly according to cultural tradition and changing context, ranging from the opulent to the humble, from the meticulously prepared to the impulsively improvised through the hurried heat of passion.

Beyond these formalist concerns is a fourth aesthetic feature: the drive for stylization. *Ars erotica* is distinguished from mere sex by the careful attention it gives not simply to which erotic acts are performed – a kiss, caress, cuddle, or love moan – but to *how* one performs them. Besides advice on the proper sequencing and combination of erotic actions or movements (which can give lovemaking an appealingly ritualistic sense of order and measure), we find directions for stylizing the precise manner of action: a light, brushing kiss; a tightly clasping embrace; a playful pinch; a rapid or slow, shallow or deep, hesitantly gentle or boldly forceful penetration of the tongue or other body part into some erogenous zone of one's partner. One general aesthetic dimension of stylization is the attentive, cultivating use of the artistic medium. In *ars erotica* this key medium is the human soma, which the erotic arts seek to cultivate both in terms of beautifying the soma's aesthetic surface (through cosmetics, fragrances, fashion, and regimes of body sculpting) and in terms of sharpening the soma's perceptual acuity, its discriminating sensibility and awareness of its own feelings and those of the lovers with whom it interacts, and its consequent performative skills.

Aesthetics was first established in modern times as a science of sensory perception rather than a theory of beauty. Deriving it from the Greek word *aisthesis* (αἴσθησις) for sensory perception, whose traces are also found in the notion of an anesthetic (something that renders us unconscious, insensible, and incapable of proper perception), Alexander Baumgarten founded aesthetics in the 1750s as a science concerned with perfecting perception, not just explaining it theoretically. He defined it as “the science of sensory cognition” whose aim was “the perfection of sensory cognition as such.”<sup>4</sup> Contemporary somaesthetics shares this meliorative practical impulse while conceiving of the body as sentient, purposive soma (unlike Baumgarten's view of the body as mindless flesh).<sup>5</sup> Because *ars erotica* displays the same critical meliorative approach to the soma as both an alluringly expressive

<sup>4</sup> My citations from Baumgarten are from the bilingual (Latin-German) abridged edition of *Aesthetica*, Alexander Baumgarten, *Theoretische Ästhetik: Die grundlegenden Abschnitte aus der “Aesthetica”* (1750/58), trans. H. R. Schweizer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1988), 3, 11; §§1, 14.

<sup>5</sup> For the relationship of somaesthetics to Baumgarten's founding project of aesthetics, see Richard Shusterman, “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999): 299–313. For the application of somaesthetics to the arts, see my *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), which includes a preliminary application to *ars erotica*.

external appearance and a perceiving, savoring, performative subjectivity, we could consider it a paradigmatically somaesthetic art.

Symbolic richness is a fifth aesthetic feature of *ars erotica*. Although visually identical to real Brillo cartons, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* is experienced as a richly meaningful artwork by symbolically representing both the real world of commercial objects and the vast intricacies of the art world and its traditions. A line drawing of a mountain and a line graph depicting a stock's changing value may be visually identical, yet the former is experienced as more aesthetic because it is richer in meaning through the fact that the color, thickness, and intensity of its line (and not just its location on the horizontal and vertical axes) function symbolically. Common sentiment may endorse the popular lyric: "You must remember this; a kiss is just a kiss." But in *ars erotica*, we should instead remember that a kiss can mean much more: the sealing of a vow, a mark of acceptance or provocation, or even (as the *Kamasutra* points out) a prefiguring symbol of the sort of coital style desired.

A sixth aesthetic aspect of *ars erotica* concerns its evaluative dimension: a concern with distinctive achievements of beauty, performative virtuosity, or superior taste that finds expression in critical judgments, connoisseurship, rankings, and competitions. In *ars erotica* we see this dimension in the classificatory rankings of different types of women and men in terms of their sexual desirability, but also in rankings of different pairings of men and women. Indian erotic theories, for instance, assess the varying suitability of different male–female pairings in terms of comparative genital size, excitability, and other matters relevant to the pair's compatibility for erotic success. In the Japanese pleasure quarters of Yoshiwara, courtesans had official rankings, determined not simply by their feminine beauty but especially by their skills in the fine arts and arts of love. Male suitors competed for the status of being their most preferred clients, such preferences being measured in part by a courtesan's acts of sacrificial devotion (*shinju*) that themselves were ranked in terms of their level of self-sacrifice that could reach levels of violent self-mutilation.

Consider a final trio of similarities between the fine and erotic arts. If fine art and aesthetic experience arise through natural drives and energies as shaped by culturally constructed forms and attitudes, then *ars erotica* surely shares this hybrid status of nature and culture. Moreover, as art involves the dramatization of experience by presenting and intensifying it within a formal frame, so *ars erotica* dramatizes the vivid experience of sexual desire and fulfillment by staging it through distinctive steps and methods designed to heighten its aesthetic form. Cognitive and ethical ambivalence is yet another shared feature. As art's aesthetic education provides delightfully



insightful instruction but is equally famous for purveying misleading fictions that perniciously corrupt rather than positively cultivate, so *ars erotica's* carnal knowledge includes both penetrating cognition and distracting delusion, revealing the intimate facts of life while conversely feeding fantasies of romantic passion that distort the truth, becloud reason, and even debauch character. Erotic artistry, moreover, can so enchantingly embellish a relation of sexual exploitation with an aura of beauty, pleasure, and refinement that even the lovers themselves fail to see its destructive, immoral unseemliness.

### III SELF-CULTIVATION

The notion of aesthetic education highlights our second major theme: *ars erotica* as a means of cultivating one's humanity, a method of meliorative care of the self that likewise essentially implies a regard for others, most minimally for one's erotic partners but also more widely for society with its customs and mores. A discipline of critical and reflective practice, *ars erotica* is also rich in pleasurable sensations, dynamic action, and spontaneous movements and feelings. Advocates claim it distinguishes human lovemaking from mere animal coupling by enveloping the sexual act within a complex network of multilayered meanings and aesthetic qualities. It does so by situating that act not only within an open narrative structure of performance that allows the individual to exercise creative choice and decision making (rather than being dictated by unreflective animal instincts with hardwired responses and fixed goals) but also within an enriching social context and cultural tradition. If the exercise of creative personal choice gives the erotic act the heightened significance of individual intentionality and aesthetic taste, then the sociocultural background further multiplies the possibilities of meaning and the discrimination of aesthetic features through the erotic performance's relation to historical precedents, social norms, cultural values, and artistic genre traditions. By means of such intertextual signifying, for Indian *ars erotica*, a particular sequence of coital postures can symbolize the successive incarnations of Krishna, while a certain pattern of love bites connotes a meaningful mandala. Moreover, in communicating such meanings and values (that are often complex, subtle, and not easily discerned), we exercise and develop our sensorimotor and cognitive faculties. *Ars erotica* can thus serve as an aesthetic discipline to sharpen our perceptual powers and heighten our refinement through the alluringly gratifying experience of love's sensual delights.

By presenting a pleasurable path for self-cultivating refinement that is also essentially social or other-directed, *ars erotica* offers a radically different

perspective on sex education than our conventional one but that is nonetheless deeply grounded in ancient traditions of theory and practice. Our standard conception of sex education focuses on physiological mechanics, hygienic prescriptions, and moral proscriptions about sex that are aimed at avoiding problems or pathologies such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, sex crimes, and varieties of social stigma and psychological damage due to inappropriate sexual behavior. Rather than this purely negative focus, *ars erotica* provides a positive yet critical vision of sexuality, an educational path for improving our handling of life's inescapable erotic dimension by providing real benefits beyond the evasion of sex-related troubles. These edifying benefits transcend the augmenting of pleasure, skill, and beauty in our sexual performance. They extend into a broad range of perceptual and performative skills and forms of knowledge that enhance our powers more generally in the conduct of life. In this sense, *ars erotica's* sex education should be understood as not simply an education *about* sex but an education *through* sex. By this I mean an edification of self and other that uses the potent energy of sexual desire and deploys the meliorative exercise of erotic skills, techniques, and forms of knowledge to render the experience of this desire and the performative process of its fulfillment more richly enjoyable, rewarding, and instructive, in cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical terms.<sup>6</sup>

The varieties of erotically fueled edification range from self-knowledge and knowing other persons to a more general knowledge of culture and the world.<sup>7</sup> One way *ars erotica* enhances cognition is by improving our perceptual powers through the sharpening of our attentive focus and acuity of the senses and affect. Attentive discipline in lovemaking promotes

<sup>6</sup> The deep connection of sex and knowledge has ancient roots even in cultures whose *ars erotica* was underdeveloped. The Old Testament, for example, uses the Hebrew verb "to know" (*yada* יָדָה) in order to indicate sexual intercourse (as in Genesis 4:1: "And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain"). This biblical usage carried over into nineteenth-century British law, where "carnal knowledge" designated sexual intercourse implying penile penetration of female (or male) erogenous openings. Therefore, "it shall not be necessary in any of those Cases to prove the actual Emission of Seed in order to constitute a carnal Knowledge, but that the carnal Knowledge shall be deemed complete upon Proof of Penetration only." See "The Offences against the Person Act of 1828," in *The Statutes of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, 1829* (London: His Majesty's Statute and Law Printers, 1829), 198.

<sup>7</sup> Goethe claims more generally that passionate love is the essential engine of knowledge. "One comes to know nothing other than what one loves, and the deeper and more complete the knowledge, the stronger, sturdier, and livelier must the love, indeed the passion, be." From his letter of May 10, 1812, to F. H. Jacobi in Max Jacobi, ed., *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und F. H. Jacobi* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1846), 254; also available at [www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Briefe/1812](http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Briefe/1812) (my translation).