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## What Still Stands of Croce's *Aesthetic*<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The fundamental thesis of Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic* consists of two main points: (i) intuitive knowledge is independent of logical knowledge, (ii) intuitive knowledge is given in art, while logical knowledge in philosophy.

After illustrating some theoretical elements that make Croce's aesthetic a focal point in contemporary aesthetics, in the present article I will show how, given the validity of the first part of Croce's thesis (i), the second part of his thesis (ii) is not defensible in the terms proposed by him. Finally, on the basis on the previous analyses, I shall offer some arguments in favour of maintaining the disciplinary distinction between aesthetics and philosophy of art.

### KEY WORDS

Benedetto Croce, James J. Gibson, perception, sensation, knowledge

## PHILOSOPHY AS A WHOLE

Certain "impossible" books have left an important mark in the history of philosophy. Among the most famous, there certainly is *The Birth of Tragedy*. Its very author, Friedrich Nietzsche, was self-critical about it, calling the book – which had brought him deep bitterness both at a scientific and at a personal

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level – an “impossible book”<sup>2</sup>. In the third edition of his *Aesthetic*, Croce looked back at his own work, moved by a feeling in some ways similar to Nietzsche’s.

Perhaps not all of the *Aesthetic* is an impossible book, but certainly – as pointed out by Luigi Russo in his study dedicated to it<sup>3</sup> – a part of it is, namely the section devoted to the *History* of aesthetics. After all, it is impossible by Croce’s own admission: in a moment of self-criticism, in the notes to the fifth edition, the philosopher emphasised that his *History* is covered by a certain “perspective aberration”<sup>4</sup> in dealing with the matter, due to the fact that such a “History” had been thought of as a kind of “armed wing” of the first part of the book, that is, Theory. “Besides – writes Croce – the aim of that historical part was not so much historical as controversial”<sup>5</sup>. Here Croce, so to speak, was philosophising with an axe – or with a hammer, if we wish to further pursue the analogy with Nietzsche – making sure that history would pave the way for theory; an attitude which professional historians would obviously hardly consent to. Now, if the “History” presented in the *Aesthetic* is impossible, it must be said that the “Theory” is not that much different. What I would like to suggest, though, is that, despite the difficulties in following Croce in the positive development of his thesis, the problems he poses are still open and extremely interesting.

So let’s start from the beginning, from what is perhaps the most outdated idea of Croce’s: his conception of philosophy which, in effect, constitutes a whole (philosophical) programme.

The author, especially in the theoretical part, has expanded his treatment to cover more general questions that border upon the subject with which he is dealing. But this will not seem a digression to anyone who remembers that strictly speaking there are no separate and self-sufficient philosophical disciplines. Philosophy is unity; so then when dealing with the *Aesthetic* or *Logic* or *Ethics* one is always dealing with the whole of philosophy, even though, for didactic purposes, one may be highlighting a particular aspect of that indivisible unity<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Leipzig, Neumann 1872; English translation *Birth Of Tragedy Or Hellenism And Pessimism*, George Allen W Unwin Ltd., London 1909, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> L. Russo, *Una storia per l'estetica*, Aesthetica Preprint, Palermo 1988.

<sup>4</sup> B. Croce, *Estetica come scienza della espressione e linguistica generale*, Laterza, Roma – Bari 1902, p. viii. My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem. My translation.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. iv (English translation: idem, *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, p. xxvii).

The increasingly specialised style adopted by philosophy throughout the twentieth century and still used today seems *de facto* to prove Croce wrong. He understood philosophy as a global construction or, if you prefer, as a whole where each part is in a deep relationship with the other. Some time ago, before the term became outdated, one would have said that philosophy can be thought of only in a systematic way. Systematic philosophies have received much criticism, though, most of which is worthy of attention. The most common critique, which has in turn characterised the structure of many postmodernist philosophies, is that against the metaphysical configuration underlying systematic philosophy.

In fact – as has been well noted by the philosophies that, for various reasons, have discussed and condemned relativisms and scepticisms of various kinds – it is one thing to be aware of the epistemological limitations of the constructions we work on, but to engage in relativistic or even sceptical positions is another thing. Philosophical analysis cannot help but assume metaphysical presuppositions; what it can do, if anything, is either to make these assumptions explicit and declare them or, a little slyly, hide them by pretending they are not there.

When analysis and criticism are not followed by a construction (i.e. a system, a whole worldview that seeks on the one hand to clarify the meaning of the various aspects of the reality in which we dwell and, on the other hand, to apply this analysis to the historical concreteness of the world we live in so as to make it ethically and politically integrated) one wonders what philosophy really is and what it is for. This work, which responds to a profound vocation of philosophy, cannot be done without the adoption of a perspective capable of integrating different levels: it requires the adoption of a perspective that intends to be systematic.

Croce perfectly captures this point where he notes that aesthetics is no exception. This means, very simply, that it is not possible to think and develop the disciplinary field of aesthetics, as well as that of any other philosophical discipline, prescinding from the general corpus of philosophy. As for Croce's argument, which I consider well-founded even though outdated, it is important to emphasise that not only should aesthetics not be separated from the corpus of general philosophy, but it should also work together with all the disciplines that deal with issues that relate in various ways to the domain of epistemology.

Here lies Croce's continuing relevance: in having considered aesthetics as a proper part of epistemology, in other words as a discipline that has as its fundamental objective the clarification of the ways of knowledge. The opening

of the *Aesthetic* is paradigmatic because it distinguishes intuitive knowledge and logical knowledge:

Knowledge takes two forms; it is either intuitive knowledge or logical knowledge; knowledge obtained by means of our power to create mental representations, or knowledge obtained by means of the intellect; knowledge of individuals, or knowledge of universals; of particular things, or of the relationships between them; it is, in short, either that which produces representations or that which produces concepts<sup>7</sup>.

While logical knowledge is in excellent health, intuitive knowledge – Croce underlines – is doing much worse: in addition to having low autonomy, placed as it is under the close protection of logical thought, it has also been less fortunate, having a more modest development. Without there really being a reason for it:

Now the first point to fix firmly in one's mind is that intuitive knowledge has no need of masters; it has no need to lean on anyone; it does not have to ask for the loan of anyone else's eyes since it has perfectly adequate eyes in its own head. And although it is incontestable that in many intuitions one can find an admixture of concepts, in others there is no trace of any such admixture: which proves that such a thing is not essential. The impression of moonlight, depicted by a painter; the contours of a country, drawn by a cartographer; a tender or dynamic musical motif; the words of a plaintive lyric, or those with which we ask for things, give orders or make complaints in everyday life, can all perfectly well be intuitions, without any trace of reference to the intellectual<sup>8</sup>.

The examples presented by Croce are not too straightforward, so he somewhat clarifies what he means below:

The concepts that are to be found mixed and fused with intuitions, insofar as they really are thus mixed and fused, are no longer concepts, having lost any independence and autonomy. They *were*, indeed, once concepts, but have now become simply components of intuitions. Philosophical maxims, put into the mouth of a tragic or comic character, there hold the office not of concepts, but of characteristics of such persons; in the same way that the red in a painted figure does not function like the concept of the colour red as it is used by physicists, but as a characterizing element in that figure. [...] A work of art can be full of philosophical concepts, it can have them in greater abundance, and they can be more profound than those found in a philosophical treatise, which, in its turn, may be rich to overflowing with descriptions and intuitions. But, notwithstanding all those concepts, the net result in the case of a work of art is an intuition; and, notwithstanding all those intuitions, the net result in the case of a philosophical treatise is a concept<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 3 (English translation: p. 1).

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 4 (English translation: p. 2).

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 4–5 (English translation: p. 2–3).

In the application of his distinction between intuitions and concepts, in fact, Croce is rather Manichean: even if art overflowed with concepts and philosophy with intuitions, by the mere fact that a concept finds artistic expression, it would still become an intuition; while, inversely, if an intuition found philosophical expression, it would become a concept. It also seems that intuitions and concepts are put by the philosopher on a hypothetical line that goes from the concrete to the abstract, that is, from the sensible to the intellectual, and that they are poles apart from each other. Furthermore – this is the second part of Croce's thesis – art, by its own nature, can only express intuitions, while in philosophy there are only concepts.

Thus, Croce's thesis is made up of two parts: i) intuitive knowledge is independent of logical knowledge; ii) intuitive knowledge is given in art, and logical knowledge in philosophy. To summarise, we could put it as follows: aesthetics is the science that deals with that part of knowledge which is not yet structured by the intervention of the intellect (that is, in Croce's language, intuitions) and with how it is expressed.

In what follows, I will try to illustrate two points: to begin with, that the first part of Croce's thesis (i.e. point i.) is in all respects the horizon of contemporary aesthetics. I will then move away from Croce with regard to an issue that I deem important: I will try to show how, precisely because of the validity of Croce's starting point, the second part of his thesis (i.e., point ii.) is not defensible in the terms in which Croce puts it. I will argue, finally, that it is good to preserve the distinction between aesthetics and the philosophy of art, leaving to the latter the study of those things that we are used to classify as „works of art” and considering, conversely, aesthetics in all respects as a proper part of epistemology.

## AESTHETICS AS KNOWLEDGE

Let us turn to point i., namely to intuitions and their expressions. In order to illustrate his idea, Croce refers, among other things, to the “impression of moonlight, depicted by a painter”. I would like to note a preliminary point. In the passage I reported, Croce considers the impression of moonlight perceived by any observer the same way as the impression of moonlight depicted by a painter – say, the one painted in 1869 by Édouard Manet in *Clair de lune sur le port de Boulogne*. Or better: he only considers the impression that is embedded into some kind of expression, i.e. precisely the impression that Manet gives of his moonlight in 1869, as an impression that it is a harbinger of the illogical knowledge mentioned in the opening of Croce's treatise.

Croce's thesis is well known, but it is worth reviewing quickly here: an impression, in order to be such and to distinguish itself from a sensation or a perception, must be at one with its expression. In other words, I can very well be in the presence of moonlight, perceive it, have some feeling of it. All this, however, for Croce, remains a rather obscure matter and is certainly not an object of knowledge. Conversely, the sensation of that moonlight becomes the first moment of knowledge (and therefore an intuition) when I know how to give adequate expression to that sensation, perhaps – if I were a painter – on the canvas.

However, in order to have a correct and precise notion about intuition it is not enough to recognise that it is independent of the conceptual. Among those who recognise this, or who, at any rate, don't explicitly make intuition dependent on the operations of the intellect, another error appears which obscures and confuses its true nature. Intuition is frequently understood as perception, that is to say, as the knowledge of what has actually happened, the apprehension of something as a real thing. Certainly perception is intuition [...] But, as much an intuition is the picture that is now passing through my mind of a me that writes in a different room, in another city [...]. Which means that the distinction between what is real and what is not is to be made only after intuition has occurred and is extrinsic to the true nature of intuition<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore, it makes no difference whether the moonlight is perceived or the perception of moonlight is rather remembered. In both cases we are dealing with an intuition. Rather, the question that Croce attempts to answer is roughly this: what kind of knowledge is that which comes to me from the intuition of moonlight that finds expression in Manet's painting? He assumes, obviously, that there is a distinction between the dictionary definition of moonlight (logical knowledge) and the artistic expression of moonlight (intuitive knowledge); while, on the contrary, assuming that an ordinary intuition of moonlight – the kind available to any normal subject in terms of perceptual capacity – is not in any way a moment of knowledge, if it is not accompanied by its expression:

Intuitive activity *intuits only insofar as it expresses*. If this proposition sounds paradoxical, one reason for that lies without doubt in the tendency to give too restricted a meaning to the term "expression", using it only of those expressions that are called "verbal expressions"; whereas there exist also nonverbal expressions, like those constituted by lines, colours and tones; all of which are to be included in the notion of expression, which therefore encompasses every kind of product of man, - orator, musician, painter or whatever<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 5–6 (English translation: p. 3).

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 11 (English translation: p. 9).

Now, there are good theoretical reasons to argue that in the construction of this argument, Croce's analysis has maintained too coarse a level of granularity. Does ordinary intuition of moonlight (the one that is not accompanied by an expression) really not fall in the first form of knowledge identified by Croce?

Let us try to put the issue in different terms and wonder what difference there is between the intuition of moonlight that overwhelms me in an August evening and that does not find any artistic expression, the "moonlight" painted by Manet and the definition of moonlight regulating in some way the knowledge our naive conceptions refer to.

## MOONLIGHTS

Moonlight is moonlight: that is, it is a particular lighting condition of the environment, a night glow or luminosity, which makes the atmosphere suspended, perhaps a bit mysterious. It is, Croce argues, something more than just a sensation or a perception. However, this "something more" only gives itself by means of the expression of that intuition. That is, I have to give shape to that intuition, externalise it, make it somehow shareable for it to constitute the first moment of knowledge. Maybe a little curiously, Croce tied this externalisation of our intuitions to artistic expression: paintings, sculptures, musical works, works of words. Hence the importance of art for aesthetics.

So: an intuition can be a perception or a memory and it is essentially an expression. An intuition so conceived – that is, an essentially expressive intuition – is a form of our knowledge. In the moonlight there is no concept, at least in the first instance, when we perceive and discriminate it as a particular environmental situation. And, underlines Croce, there is no concept or, perhaps more properly, the concept is not the prevalent element, also in Manet's painting.

One wonders why expression is such an important element in Croce's argument. I suspect that there is no real reason, but that such a choice rather depends on Croce's project to tie aesthetics and art – a move that does not seem necessary neither to Croce's project in particular nor, even less, to aesthetics as a discipline. Specifically, Croce thus has to support two rather unusual theses: a) that intuition devoid of expression is not a cognitive activity; b) that art brings with it no conceptual elements. Or, rather, that, even if such elements presented themselves, they would be completely reabsorbed into the intuition, which is actual non-conceptual knowledge.

Consider, therefore, the first part of Croce's thesis, returning to the simple perception of moonlight which, according to Croce, can become an intuition if

expressed in a picture à la Manet, in a symphony à la Beethoven and perhaps in the description of a battle à la Homer. What happens, then, when we are in the presence of moonlight and we perceive it without painting it or putting it into music?

In the situation that typically fascinates our poetic imagination, we would happen to be in a special environment: it would be night, yet we would be able to quite distinctly perceive the surface of certain objects. The light is not the usual hot one of the sun. It is rather a cool, white light which we associate with discrete emotional tones. Much of the charm that we feel when we see moonlight obviously depends on the light. Perceiving the light of the moon that illuminates the surfaces of the environment is a completely different feeling from the one linked to the perception of sunlight. Much, Gibson would say, depends on that very light that is not a blank medium:

Only insofar as ambient light has *structure* does it specify the environment. I mean by this that the light at the point of observation has to be different in different directions (or there have to be *differences* in different directions) in order for it to contain any information. The differences are principally differences of intensity. The term that will be used to describe ambient light with structure is an *ambient optic array*. This implies an arrangement of some sort, that is, a pattern, a texture, or a configuration. The ambient light cannot be homogenous or blank<sup>12</sup>.

Gibson's thesis is that such ambient light, i.e. the ambient light that we identify as "moonlight", tells us a great deal and is rich in information. For this reason, probably, art is so much interested in it. That, of course, does not mean that it is what it is only insofar as it finds expression. Far from it. The light of the moonlight, similarly to what happens to the daylight we are more accustomed to, is "structured" by nature. In other words, this means that it carries a wealth of information for all the living beings who perceive it. Otherwise, in the presence of moonlight, we would be moving in an amorphous and diaphanous structure, similar to the most opaque kind of fog:

In the case of unstructured ambient light, an environment is not specified and no information *about* an environment is available. Since the light is undifferentiated, it cannot be discriminated, and there is no information in *any* meaning of that term. The ambient light in this respect is no different from ambient darkness. An environment could exist behind the fog or the darkness, or nothing could exist; either alternative is possible<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Hillsdale (NJ.) – London, Erlbaum 1986, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

The perceptual activity, as Gibson describes it, is a-conceptual to the extent that there is no need for human beings to give shape to stimuli in order to structure the outside world: light, substances, surfaces, layouts, are all elements loaded with information about the world environment. Once we become familiar with a different way of conceptualising the environment – a way that, for instance, does not follow the categories dictated by classical physics that generally speaks of bodies in space – then regarding the terrestrial world as a world of substances, media and surfaces that separate each from the other will lead to considerable theoretical advantages (if by profession we are not physicians, but we are rather interested in the methods of our knowledge).

Then we will say that the media are, for example, air and water; they allow both for the movement and for the passage of light. Conversely, the part of the environment that does not allow for the movement is substance. Finally, we could introduce in our basic ontology what separates substances and media: surfaces. Until substances change or at least change in a relevant manner – in Gibson's jargon, until they *persist* – their surfaces also persist and have a layout, a stable conformation. None of this would hold without yet another important phenomenon: what Gibson calls the reflection of light in the medium. Light is partly absorbed, partly reflected by the surfaces, and this obviously depends on the chemical composition of the substances:

In our concern with surfaces and their purely geometric layout, we must not forget that the air is filled with sunlight during the day and that some illumination always remains, even during the night. This fact, too, is an invariant of nature. Light comes from the sky and becomes ambient in the air. This is what makes persisting surfaces potentially visible as well as potentially tangible<sup>14</sup>.

In this context, Gibson can argue that perception is something different from mere sensible stimulation: more properly, it is "information pickup"<sup>15</sup>. Not always is such pickup accompanied by perceptual awareness, but in some cases this happens. In these cases perception is the basic, fundamental and indispensable element of our knowledge: a collection of information that we need first of all to dwell in the world, and secondly in order to know it.

How many things are we told by the light, substances, surfaces and layouts of that part of the world environment we see under moonlight? We are told, for example, that if there were only the moon, our days would be marked by a softer light and that bodies would remain partially submerged in the dark; we

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 238 ff.

are also told that the world would have few colours, rather cool and sometimes icy. And someone – perhaps Beethoven – should perhaps compose a piece of music to heat those tones of white and blue.

We have come to the second moonlight, the painted one that, for Croce, has all the trappings of the first occurrence of knowledge. Following Gibson once again, I propose a more detailed distinction than that offered by Croce. Somehow Gibson distinguishes drawing from the artwork itself (i.e. the artistic object to which we attribute aesthetic or, more generally, artistic properties). Drawing, in particular, is for Gibson a typical cognitive activity to the extent that at stake there is not a process of depiction or representation of reality, but a method of detection and re-proposition of some invariants that the subject – so to speak – “extracts” from reality as well as from memory, in order to present them in the work. Drawing is, in this sense, really knowing rather than copying.

By gradual stages human children begin to draw in the full meaning of the term – to raw a man or a woman, a house, a flower or the sun in the sky. [...] [The child] delineates for himself and others something he has apprehended or experienced. The traces he leaves on the paper are not just lines, or the outlines of forms, but the distinguishing features of the environment. While drawing he may be looking at something real, or thinking about something real, or thinking about something wholly imaginary; in any case, the invariants of his visual system are resonating. The same is true of the artist as of the child. The invariants are not abstractions or concepts. They are not knowledge; they are simply invariants<sup>16</sup>.

Gibson is basically telling us that the activity of drawing what we do, whether we are beginners or professionals, means selecting some elements of the structure of the external world, selecting them and shaping them into a whole that will be original and devoid of any mimetic or representational purpose in relation to that part of the world that is poured on canvas, music sheet, or on any other media.

I insist that what the draftsman, beginner or expert, actually does is not to replicate, to print, or to copy in any sense of the term but to mark the surface in such a way as to display invariants and record an awareness. Drawing is never copying. It is impossible to copy a piece of the environment. Only another drawing can be copied. We have been misled for too long by the fallacy that a picture is *similar* to what it depicts, a *likeness*, or an *imitation* of it. A picture supplies some of the information for what it depicts, but that does not imply that it is in projective correspondence with what it depicts<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 278.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 279.

We have now come to the point. Perception has nothing conceptual in itself, in the sense that it is not an activity that must be thought of in terms of the construction of sense-data functional to a perceptual scheme. Rather, it must be thought of along the lines of information pickup: perceiving subjects derives from the ambient optic array some information about the invariant structures of that array. The same information constitutes sufficient and necessary material to allow the perceiver to dwell in the world. This is more or less what happens when we perceive moonlight: perceiving it, we know many things regarding that specific ambient optic array, without – contrary to what Croce thought – it being in any way necessary to express anything of that perceptual activity.

It may then happen that someone decides to draw that same moonlight. What happens in this case – whether this is done while being surrounded by the lunar atmosphere or the next day in bright sunlight – is a selection or a recollection from memory of some constitutive features of that specific ambient array. For moonlight to be recognised as moonlight it does not have to be imitated or copied. Rather, we must choose the invariant elements of the “moonlight” optic array that define it as such: to draw is “to mark the surface in such a way as to display invariants and record an awareness”.

Now, one might wonder whether in *Clair de lune sur le port de Boulogne* there is nothing but this; that is, whether Manet's painting is nothing but the choice of invariants knowingly recorded on canvas. The hypothesis is that it is right here that one should find the gap that exists between a simple expressive activity (the drawing of moonlight) and an artistic activity. The second cannot be reduced to the first, since it expresses a more detailed conceptuality. In a word, there are different kinds of awareness and it is reasonable to assume that Manet's is much different from that expressed by a child who draws his moonlight, and from that expressed, say, by a student of the Art Academy.

Manet's painting style, in its early stages, was distinguished by the fact that it expressed a realism without frills, inspired as it was by the master Gustave Courbet. The reference to classical painting in his early works is obvious. The turning point in Manet's art – the turning point that led critics to regard him as one of the first Impressionist painters even if, in fact, Manet never exhibited with the other Impressionists – took place in 1863 with *The Luncheon on the Grass* (1862–1863). In this work, Manet abandons the tools of chiaroscuro and perspective altogether to use evenly spread colour spots. He retains, instead, the spatial simulation that the eye still manages to catch if the observer is at some distance from the canvas.

The later works marked, on a technical level, an even more substantial and profound break with the past. In many of them, however, Manet plays

with tradition and history of art, unfolding in this way a rich conceptuality. Both *Olympia* (1863) and *The Luncheon on the Grass* (1862–1863) explicitly refer to Titian's subjects. *Olympia*, in particular, a well-known Parisian prostitute portrayed in a vulgar effrontery, overturns the symbolism of *The Venus of Urbino* (1538), the painting by Titian which directly inspired Manet. *The Balcony* (1868–1869) quotes an analogous subject painted by Goya, who is also the source (*The Third of May 1808*) of Manet's *Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1867). From Velazquez (*Las meninas*) he derives the visions reflected in the mirror behind the bar tender in *A bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881–1882), and so forth.

Manet's dialogue with the artistic tradition is continuous and tight, which means that his works do not only express the particular way in which the artist gathers information from the outside world and expresses the invariants of his "moonlight". It means that the works of Manet bear the concrete mark of the artistic tradition that preceded his own, of the way he read the works of the past: his works dialogue with that tradition, cite it while modifying it deeply in the stylistic forms and ways of representing the world. We find a rich universe of meanings in this way of dealing with the past; these meanings, using an absolutely new style, convey certain parts of Manet's present.

If we fail to understand this – as Croce seems to be doing in his *Aesthetic* – we fail to understand the difference between the perception of moonlight, the drawing of the moonlight perceived or remembered and *Clair de lune sur le port de Boulogne*. There is a whole (conceptual) world in Manet that makes the difference between perception and its expression on the one hand, and the works of art on the other.

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