

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art
Prof. Funkhouser
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Sagoff, "On the Aesthetic and Economic Value of Art"

*Q: Why are some people willing to pay so much for art?

*Sagoff claims ignorance regarding what is meant by *aesthetic value*.

--He resists the claim that something can be valuable in virtue of the pleasure it produces. Sagoff claims that for some activities, like prostitution, the pleasure received makes it worse. Further, he claims that the pleasure received from such activities is probably greater than that received from art. So, art is probably not done for the sake of pleasure.

--What should we make of *this* passage?

"When I was an adolescent I loved stimulation, as it were, for its own sake; I would say things like 'Oh, wow!' So I did appreciate it. When someone passes the age of thirty-five, however, he or she begins to lose interest in emotion, passion, or pleasure for its own sake." (120)

*Sagoff's speculation: The price of art will always go up.

"The iron law is this: the prices of these things always go up, never down. Imagine a Leonardo, Rembrandt, or Turner selling for a hundred dollars. You shudder to think what would reduce society to such a savage state." (121)

(He only makes an exception for something like a nuclear holocaust!)

--Sagoff suggests that, like the price, the (perceived?) aesthetic value of a work never decreases either.

*Sagoff deduces 5 principles from this economic observation:

First Principle: Works of art are assumed to be imperishable. (Otherwise, we would expect the price to go down once they near their expected end.)

--Artworks are conserved, and deterioration often *heightens* the aesthetic worth.

Second Principle: Most art objects are not in circulation (but locked in public or private collections).

--This principle provides an answer to the following puzzle:

"While the supply of art grows, however, the demand does not... Why, then, are higher prices consistently paid?" (122)

--So, art is not generally kept as an economic investment. (Great art is thought of as both priceless, and having a very high price!)

“...it is very important for society that the monuments and symbols of its history should not sell so cheaply that just anybody could control them. It is important to the structure of society that significant art works should be controlled by the appropriate *caste*; this, then, is guaranteed, in part, by the iron law of increasing price.” (123)

Third Principle: Forgeries are worthless. (Otherwise, we could mass produce forgeries and drive the prices down.)

Fourth Principle: Art works do not have practical use (even if they originally did).

“An art object, once it has established itself in that status, never goes back to any earlier use it might have had, even if it was first intended, e.g., as a sofa, bureau, sailor’s box, or scarp of advertising.” (125)

--Also, other objects could fulfill that practical function better.

--Sagoff marks a boundary between the symbolic/historical and the practical.

Fifth Principle: Enduring art works must be “discovered” “long after they have been rejected or thrown out.” (124)

--This principle is explained in the first full paragraph, p. 126.

*“One reason why art works, including antiques, draw ever increasing prices may be this: they confer on their owners status as being protectors and preservers of the past.” (127)

--Sagoff compares the artworld to the totem-culture of certain tribes.

“The difference between the aesthetic and the economic value of art, then, may be simply explained. It is the difference between the sacred and the profane.” (128)