

# Characteristics of Environmental Aesthetics and Its Connections to Traditional Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** In modern society, environment problem has become a major issue that endangers the living quality and prospect of our people. On the background of overt phenomena such as policy making, and community awareness and behavior is the metaphysics. The current situation deeply reflects the lag of theoretical research of domestic environment construction. The lagging concept and awareness are one of the root causes of current situation. This essay, aiming at solving current problems, analyzes and discusses the connections between emerging environmental aesthetics and traditional aesthetics, and the characteristics of environmental aesthetics from the perspective of and within the scope of environment design, so that the aesthetic appreciation in natural environment and indoor and outdoor environment, as well as the environmental art design system can acquire the adjustment and adaptation in theoretical support.

## 1. Introduction

The primary connection between environmental aesthetics and traditional aesthetics is that the former is on the basis of the latter, just like post-modernism is on the basis of modernism and deconstructivism is on the basis of constructivism. The production of environmental aesthetics is based on traditional aesthetics, and the development of environmental aesthetics is intertwined with some related concepts of traditional aesthetics. After extremely long time from the 1700s to the 1950s, environmental aesthetics finally forms a system.

## 2. The emerging of environmental aesthetics and the rising of traditional aesthetics

The emerging of environmental aesthetics and the rising of traditional aesthetics are closely connected. Kant's interpretation on aesthetic appreciation in the eighteenth century opens the door for environmental aesthetics to form its system step by step. He believes that aesthetic appreciation is people's disinterested behavior, idea, and awareness, so the disinterestedness is absolutely not utilitarian. Disinterestedness, as an authority consciousness, takes an essential role in the field of aesthetics and is accepted universally. Besides, it combines with the natural style when artificial style of architecture does not have an absolute advantage, forming a tendency that people are obsessed with nature. This tendency also lay a foundation for natural landscape art to form an appreciation way, and the picturesque is the most essential way. The advent of the picturesque has been affecting aesthetics, and art creation, appreciation and criticism until today. The picturesque, since its emerging, has possessed natural selection to two-dimensional images. In the appreciation of natural environment, the intervention of the picturesque enables the natural environment to gain selection. In this situation, the specific angles and scenes can meet the criteria. Then, the landscape emerges and the landscape painting follows. Basically, the picturesque enables natural environment to be appreciated more easily from the perspective of sense organ and form, and people's comprehension of beauty with the involvement of picturesque is limited. Aesthetic synthesis in the eighth century is the genre induced directly by the disinterestedness. Influenced by social and natural circumstances at that time, aesthetic synthesis takes aesthetic appreciation of landscape as a sample and strongly advocates the formalistic

picturesque under the guide of disinterestedness. The aesthetic synthesis has a far-reaching impact until now. During the process that the genre of aesthetic synthesis continuously develops, it is also the impact of picturesque that makes the status and value of artificial artworks rise continuously in conceptual and real world. By contrast, the aesthetic appreciation of natural environment falls increasingly. This is because the art form of picturesque enables people to find the way of aesthetic appreciation more easily. Actually, the focus of aesthetic synthesis is not all about natural environment, but it includes the aesthetic type and pattern of natural environment. Hereinto, the concept of formalistic picturesque related to the disinterestedness has a lasting influence until the twentieth century.

### **3. Environmental aesthetics and analytical aesthetics**

In the early twentieth century, environment aesthetics, deeply affected by the picturesque and disinterestedness, can not break through easily in the paradigm of traditional aesthetic appreciation. The change of situation is because analytical aesthetics' censure on the disinterestedness and formalism breaks the changeless state and promotes the new development of aesthetic appreciation's paradigm. Aesthetics appreciation is transformed from the disinterested in-position viewing of sense organ and formal attribute into the immersion in artificial artworks, only because art has creators and designers, consists of art history and criticism, and can be appreciated easily. Thus, art gradually replaces the status of nature in the category of aesthetic appreciation. In the 1950s, the emerging of the two development situations became the background of environmental aesthetics' thriving. Firstly, analytical aesthetics regards art as the only thing of aesthetic appreciation and other forms and contents are all excluded, let alone the nature. Analytical aesthetics thinks that nature has no creators, designers, development history or criticism, so the nature can only be placed at ideological level. Therefore, philosophical aesthetics and art philosophy are equalized. Secondly, people, represented by those from North America, have a more and more obvious attention on the environment. However, their appreciation patterns and ways on natural environment are only limited within the in-position viewing by keeping distance from formal attribute through sense organ in an isolated way. Lagging theories and methods lead to serious consequences: on the one hand, workers related to environment (such as architect, landscape designer, planner, environment designer, etc.) only make final decisions by sense of form, under the lagging theoretical guidance. As a result, the nature of environment can not be understood and poetical habitat becomes further; on the other hand, environmentalists are not satisfied with the issues on environmental management and innovation that are decided by formalism. Moreover, some people even suspect that the so-called environmental aesthetic appreciation is just people's mind, thus maybe not conforming to the reality. What's worse, it may even affect the positive development of environment.

### **4. The rise of environmental aesthetics**

After the 1950s, environmental aesthetics became prosperous on the basis of theoretical renaissance represented by Ronald W. Hepburn. His thesis *Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty* criticizes the aesthetic appreciation pattern of analytical aesthetics on the nature and the neglecting attitude of traditional philosophers towards the nature appreciation. Also, he interprets the aesthetic appreciation of nature. As he claims, the characteristic that nature and art are different makes that nature can be appreciated in an open and engaged way more easily. The aesthetic appreciation of nature and art have the same development trend from complexity and triviality to seriousness and deep experience. However, this kind of seriousness and deep experience can not be attained easily or only by focusing on external form. Instead, it can only be attained after the instinct of nature is understood on the basis of openness, engagement, and creativity. Hereinto, the instinct of nature should be attained through science and ecology. This thesis clearly proposes the new appreciation pattern of environmental aesthetics, namely, the aesthetic appreciation

experience of nature is built on the basis of openness and significance of natural environment and it possesses the same meaning richness as art in the emotional and cognitive level.

## **5. Philosophical breakthrough in environmental aesthetics**

Environmental aesthetics has made two breakthroughs in the level of philosophical aesthetics: one is proposing that natural environment should be appreciated in the mode of openness, engagement, and creativity, in order to refute that traditional aesthetics regards aesthetic appreciation as the in-position viewing that keeps distance; the other is proposing that appreciation must be guided by people's understanding to the instinct of nature although natural world is open, engaged, and creative, in order to refute that traditional aesthetics almost exclusively lists aesthetic appreciation into sense organ and formal attribute. The former one disproves the disinterested in-position viewing and is developed by Arnold Berleant into aesthetics of engagement. It emphasizes that people should get rid of the difference between subject and object and motivate all sense organs to engage in aesthetic appreciation, whether to nature or to art. The latter one is developed by Cheryl Foster into the surrounding viewpoint that has "surrounding dimension of aesthetics experience". However, neither aesthetics of engagement nor surrounding viewpoint can solve appreciation cognitive way of environmental aesthetics. Both of them only place the appreciation in which perception is involved and disinterestedness into opposed situation while the solution still comes from the guidance of nature's instinct proposed by Hepburn. Besides, the understanding of nature still needs support of science and knowledge. Therefore, the appreciation cognitive way of environmental aesthetics is related to biology, geography, ecology, etc. In this situation, natural environment possesses the same knowledge of natural history and natural science as art designers, art history, and art criticism.

## **6. Aesthetic approach to environmental aesthetics**

As to the idea that the appreciation cognition of natural environment need to be achieved by scientific knowledge, the most representative is ecological aesthetics and positive aesthetics. The ecological aesthetics combines nature aesthetic appreciation with ecological environment stability, organic balance, circulation, and growth. The positive aesthetics believes that pristine nature is most beautiful because it shows the best aesthetic patterns including balance, equilibrium, harmony, symmetry, order, etc. These positive attributes of aesthetic appreciation should be approved and expanded to the field of environmental aesthetics. Besides, this pattern should be applied to the whole world and the knowledge besides scientific knowledge should also be focused on. Then, in the cognitive process of nature aesthetic appreciation, questions like "why it is like so? what it is? what it looks like?" should be understood clearly. In general, nature should be considered as nature. The related knowledge of "why it is like so? what it is? what it looks like?" includes the history, function, and role from the past to the present and even the future.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, environmental aesthetics possesses the attribute that combines engagement and cognition. This attribute is neither the perception of disinterestedness of traditional aesthetics nor in-position viewing of formative attribute, and it also provides more ways to choose for environmental aesthetic appreciation. Besides, environmental aesthetics studies ordinary and daily landscape, namely people's colorful life. Finally, environmental aesthetics studies all landscape and environment around people, and it reveals that special and ordinary environment both have aesthetic value which need to be found.

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