



# Art Criticism Perspective of Taine

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**Abstract.** Drawing upon principles from empirical research, French literary theorist Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828-1893), constructed a sociological aesthetic system. This paper focuses on introducing Taine's art criticism perspective, exploring his approach to art evaluation, and discussing the criteria for measuring the value of artworks. Key aspects of Taine's art criticism perspective are presented.

**Keywords:** Art criticism, objective standards, artistic value, three dimensions

## 1 Introduction

Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, known as Taine was a prominent French literary theorist and historian in the latter half of the 19th century. Born into a family of lawyers, his early experiences in studying natural sciences and conducting anatomical research greatly influenced his path towards empiricism. During his middle years, he traveled to various countries, including England, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. Taine taught art history and aesthetics at the Paris School of Fine Arts and the University of Oxford in England. In 1878, he was elected as a member of the

French Academy. Taine incorporated elements from Hegel's philosophy of history, Darwin's theory of evolution, Montesquieu's geographical determinism, Stendhal's social critique in literature, and Comte's positivist methodology, constructing a sociological aesthetic system and applying the methodological principles followed in natural sciences to humanities and social sciences. His works "Philosophy of Art" and "History of English Literature" were firmly rooted in empiricism, and he consistently applied historical and scientific methodologies. He formulated the essential principles of race, environment, and era, establishing a new and innovative sociological aesthetic system in the history of aesthetics.

One crucial component of this aesthetic system is art criticism, which represents the concrete expression and elucidation of Taine's aesthetic thought. Delving into Taine's art criticism perspective is of significant theoretical value and practical significance for a precise understanding of his aesthetic philosophy and the synthesis of historical experiences, lessons, and patterns in art criticism.

## 2 Art Evaluation Process

Taine believed that art works could be categorized into different levels based on their varying value, and he embraced a pluralistic and inclusive attitude towards diverse artistic expressions and forms. Firstly, he acknowledged the pivotal role and position of art connoisseurs, critics, and scholars who engage in art research. These individuals possess broad knowledge and sharp discernment, consistently making judgments and precisely gauging the merits of artworks. Additionally, Taine emphasized the objectivity and scientific nature of art criticism, asserting the existence of an absolute objective standard. While art criticism may exhibit significant subjective differences, he argued that "in criticism, just like in other aspects, universally acknowledged truths exist"<sup>[1]</sup> because "the taste of the masses converges on certain definite judgments."<sup>[1]</sup> As Taine pointed out, there is unanimous agreement when it comes to the elevated status of three Italian Renaissance painters—Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael—recognized by all as surpassing all others.

To substantiate the notion that "art evaluation possesses an absolute objective standard," Taine detailed the specific process of art evaluation in his work *Philosophy of Art*, confidently stating that "the way opinions are formed proves the reliability of opinions."<sup>[1]</sup> How can art evaluation become more objective and scientific? Taine proposed three essential steps. Firstly, artists should be evaluated within the context of their era, involving the examination of numerous artists from the same period. As opinions naturally vary, individual limitations in taste can be supplemented by others with diverse preferences, resulting in a gradual convergence of different views and yielding conclusions closer to objective facts. Secondly, the same artwork should undergo evaluations across different eras, subjecting it to successive appraisals by future generations. Each era holds its unique perspectives, and new epochs bring forth novel insights and understanding. Consequently, each era evaluates the same artwork from its own standpoint, either significantly modifying it or providing robust affirmation. Thus, when an artwork withstands the test of time and receives consistent evaluations across generations, its judgment becomes more reliable. Lastly, Taine emphasized the need to transcend personal subjective biases when conducting art evaluation with a scientific approach. Critics must set aside their individual aesthetic preferences and discard subjective factors such as temperament, inclination, and personal interests. Instead, they should consider the societal and temporal context, integrating various disciplines such as history, culture, and customs to provide an objective assessment of artworks. This relatively scientific evaluation method was advocated by modern critics who emphasized the application of scientific theories to art beyond common sense.

Through his comprehensive elaboration of these three processes, Taine convincingly demonstrates the existence of absolute standards for art criticism. Notably, the theme of "era"<sup>①</sup> pervades the entire art evaluation process in Taine's perspective. Chinese

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① Taine believed that the factors influencing art are race, environment, and era, known as the three-factor theory. Among these three factors, Dana considered race to be the internal source, environment as external pressure, and era as a driving force of later development. Together, these three factors propel the development and direction of art.

historical geology expert Li Zhichang believes that Taine's theory of aesthetics is the most scientific and objective theory. He interprets the element of "era" as follows: "It refers to literature that has developed in the past, affecting and influencing the literature of a new era, and literature is always a product of its time."<sup>[2]</sup> The modern writer Yu Dafu also emphasizes the importance of "era": "The spirit of the times is the most elusive and the most easily infective thing. Wherever we live, we have to be influenced by that place; born in a certain place, we have to breathe a certain kind of air."<sup>[3]</sup> Whether it involves evaluating artists from the same period together, subjecting artworks to repeated evaluations across different epochs, or incorporating historical, cultural, and social aspects into personal art evaluations, "era" plays a pivotal role. Taine believes that "era" not only influences artistic creation but also constitutes one of the three factors—race, environment, and era—that impact art, forming the basis of his three-factor theory. These three factors collectively propel the development and trajectory of art, exerting significant influence on art evaluation as well.

### 3 Three Scales for Measuring the Value of Art

As mentioned earlier, Taine believes that there exists an absolute and objective standard for measuring the excellence of an artwork. So, how do we define this objective standard? We observe that contemporary literary criticism exhibits tendencies to focus on historical criticism, social and political criticism, moral criticism, and aesthetic criticism separately. This raises the question of which orientation should be fundamentally used to establish evaluation criteria.<sup>[4]</sup> According to Taine, the intrinsic value, moral significance, and aesthetic form of a work are at the core of evaluating a piece of art. To this end, he proposes three scales for measuring the value of art.

**i Importance of Characteristics:** The importance of characteristics refers to the degree of proximity to truth or the essence of things. In other words, the value of an artwork depends on the solidity and closeness to the essence of its main characteristics. An artwork may possess multiple features, but there is undoubtedly a primary characteristic that is the most important and least subject to change, deep and enduring. Taine recognized the stable and unchanging characteristics shared by great art.<sup>[5]</sup> He believed that, the more stable and closer to the essence the main feature of a work is, the more excellent the artwork becomes.

Taine categorizes characteristics into two types: "profound, intrinsic, innate, and fundamental features belonging to elements or materials"<sup>[6]</sup> and "superficial, external, derivative, and cross-referenced features arranged in a coordinated manner."<sup>[6]</sup> Taine believes that the closest characteristic to the essence is the racial characteristic because it is profound and enduring. Profound and enduring characteristics are crucial to the value of a work. He uses the analogy of geological strata to divide human mental phenomena into the following levels of value: fleeting popular characteristics, lasting for about three to four years, akin to fleeting fashion trends; characteristics persisting for half a historical period, relatively stable and enduring, such as the character, preferences, and tastes of a generation; characteristics persisting throughout an entire

historical period, broad and profound, spanning the memories of several generations; ethnic characteristics, deeply rooted in a shared origin, representing the original consciousness of a particular ethnic group, embedded in the bloodline of that ethnic group, existing with the nation's survival or demise unless affected by invasion, conquest, or changes in geographical environment; racial characteristics, immensely vast and unshakable, even migration, intermingling, or destruction of a nation cannot shake them; characteristics of shared human emotions, deeply hidden in the deepest levels of human values, common traits possessed by all higher human beings, evoking resonance, such as the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. Taine points out that "the value of spiritual life is identical to the value of literature, and the ranking of artworks depends on the importance, stability, and profundity of the historical or psychological characteristics they depict."<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, in his view, the value and power of artworks are akin to the spiritual realm. Works that merely reflect current trends are of little value, those reflecting the characteristics of an era may be acknowledged by several generations, works depicting ethnic or racial traits can become immortal exemplars of their respective ethnicities, while the highest position is reserved for works that portray characteristics of shared human emotions, transcending race, region, and time, becoming enduring exemplars.

**ii** The beneficial nature of characteristics: The beneficial nature of characteristics is another scale for evaluating the value of art. This criterion is based on the ethical and social aspects of the artwork's moral and educational impact. As the British aesthician William Francis Hare Earl of Listowel said, "Taine provides a dual standard for the excellence of art, a rational standard and a moral standard."<sup>[7]</sup> Taine believes that among artworks that are otherwise equal, those that portray beneficial characteristics hold higher value compared to those portraying harmful characteristics. Beneficial characteristics can be directed towards self-interest or benefiting others. In his book *Philosophy of Art*, Taine states, "All characteristics of will and intelligence that can aid human actions and cognition are considered beneficial, while the contrary is deemed harmful."<sup>[6]</sup> Regardless of the purpose, motivation, or method used by an individual, as long as it can help support human actions and decisions as well as their determination and willpower, it is undoubtedly remarkable.

In *History of English Literature*, Taine divides literary characters into three levels: The lowest level comprises characters depicted with a focus on realism and comedy, portraying narrow-minded, foolish, selfish, cowardly, and vulgar personalities. For example, the character Harpagon in Molière's comedy "The Miser" is not only greedy but also extremely miserly, valuing money above all else. The next level includes characters with mental imbalances, strong yet flawed, such as the admired figures who display perseverance despite physical disabilities, as seen in Shakespeare's creation of Hamlet. Hamlet received a good education from an early age and was a firm humanist with lofty ideals, but he failed to act on his desires for revenge, being plagued by a weak and indecisive character, ultimately meeting a tragic fate in his era. The highest level consists of perfect characters who are true heroes, celebrated and beloved by people, serving as exemplary figures admired by society as a whole. For instance, Honoré de Balzac's portrayal of Eugénie Grandet, who is kind, pure, desires love, is indifferent to money, and represents the epitome of true goodness and beauty in humanity. According

to Taine if two works convey the same profound meaning using the same artistic methods, the one depicting a hero holds greater value than the one depicting a coward.

**iii** The concentration of effects: The concentration of effects refers to the degree to which various elements in an artwork (including characters, composition, color, light and shadow, themes, etc.) cooperate and coordinate with each other to express the main features. It also reflects the perfection of artistic expression and the harmony between content and form. According to Taine only when the effects of all elements are concentrated, the main features will stand out prominently, and the value of the artwork will be higher. He believes that the main purpose of art is to reveal the deficiencies in reality and restore reality. However, achieving this goal is not something that can be accomplished through mere photography, but rather by seeking essence, focusing on summarization, and refining the features in the artwork to make them even more distinct than in real life. Consequently, the degree of concentration of effects is of paramount significance. If other aspects are equal, the brilliance of a work depends on the degree of concentration of its effects.

Taine summarized the specific aspects of concentrating effects into three parts. Firstly, it is the concentration of character personality, mainly referring to the portrayal of characters. Taine pointed out that a person's character includes both the "innate spiritual essence," which is a certain degree of talent inherited from ancestors, and the "physical temperament," which is determined by lineage but distinct from parents and other family members. These two aspects form the initial background of a person. In addition, the social factors of one's upbringing, including the learning environment, level of education, family beliefs, social norms, political system, economic structure, and all the incidents and actions in one's surroundings, also play a vital role in shaping a character. Marx once pointed out the significant influence of social factors on shaping individuality: "Personality freedom is based on the foundation of the comprehensive development of individuals and their common social productive capacity becoming their social wealth."<sup>[8]</sup> These social factors are reflected in various aspects of real life, but without concentration and vividness. Therefore, artists must use various means and methods to complement and combine the inherent factors with social factors to depict more distinct character personalities. In this way, the characters portrayed by artists are similar to real characters but possess even more strength and power.

Secondly, there is the concentration of encounters and incidents, "referring to a series of incidents and a certain type of experiences in the plot of a work."<sup>[6]</sup> The development and progression of character personalities are inevitably intertwined with the plot, especially under intense conflicts and clashes, where the characters' true nature is fully exposed. According to Taine real life often limits the opportunities for characters to showcase their personalities fully. However, in works of art, artists create encounters and incidents that align with the characters' personalities, deliberately crafting the plot to drive character actions and reveal their true nature, thus evoking resonance in the audience. Through such incidents and encounters, "hidden instincts and latent abilities, previously concealed by monotonous habits, come to the surface together."<sup>[6]</sup>

Lastly, there is the concentration of style. Here, "style" primarily refers to the artistic methods and forms of expression, belonging to the realm of form, while the first two

aspects are related to content.<sup>[6]</sup> These three aspects complement each other to achieve a unity of content and form. "Style" is the "visible element," and when it matches the content, it enhances the presentation of the "content," adding the finishing touch to the artwork. Taine emphasizes that artists must carefully consider the choice of different styles for their works, selecting the appropriate stylistic expression that suits character portrayal. The effectiveness of style is only enhanced when it aligns with the effects of other elements in the work; otherwise, it weakens the overall presentation.

## 4 Conclusion

Taine's artistic criticism is an important part of his sociological aesthetic system, where he emphasizes the objectivity and scientific nature of art criticism, believing that the evaluation of artistic value has absolute standards. His artistic criticism elaborates on three criteria for evaluating art and measuring the value of artworks. But one thing we need to pay attention to is that Taine seems to be in contradiction when emphasizing the beneficial nature of the characteristics and the level of concentration of the effect. For example, some of the characters described by Balzac have moral shortcomings, and the portrayal of these character roles is not of the highest order. However, when it comes to the level of concentration of the effect (i.e., stylistic performance), Taine has to admit the infectiousness and expressiveness of these character portrayals. In this light, it seems that Taine has generated an irreconcilable contradiction among the three criteria for assessing artistic value<sup>[9]</sup>. Regarding this issue, Taine mentioned in his book more than once that each evaluation criterion has a premise, which is that they are equivalent in other aspects. So, his three evaluation criteria are both interconnected and independent of each other.

In the aesthetic system constructed by Taine, the characteristic of the era is always woven into his art criticism. He places social value at its core and advocates that artistic works should focus on expressing essential characteristics, moral edification, and the influence of stylistic elements. Under the influence of positivism, Taine embarked on an innovative path in literary and artistic research, choosing to adopt scientific empirical methods.<sup>[10]</sup> This significantly advanced the development of the art criticism system and provided valuable insights for establishing the value standards of modern art criticism.

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