

Smith, Adam [addendum] Encyclopedia Article

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Adam Smith's claim on the history of aesthetics lies in his essay, "Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes place in what are called the Imitative Arts," arguably the most logically acute and penetrating discussion of what one would call pictorial representation that eighteenth-century Britain produced. It was first published, posthumously, in 1795, in Smith's *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*.

The main thesis of Smith's account is that "the disparity between the imitating and the imitated object is the foundation of the beauty of imitation. It is because the one object does not naturally resemble the other, that we are so much pleased by it, when by art it is made to do so" (1795, p. 144).

Smith's most elaborately worked-out example concerns the contrast between painting and sculpture, much discussed in the eighteenth century. The idea is that statues represent three-dimensional objects in a three-dimensional medium, whereas paintings represent three-dimensional objects in two dimensions. Hence a higher level of resemblance would be required of a statue to its represented object than would be required of a painting to its, to achieve the same level of representational beauty. "The disparity between the object imitating, and the object imitated," Smith wrote, "is much greater in the one art than in the other; and the pleasure arising from the imitation seems to be greater in proportion as this disparity is greater" (1795, p. 137). Smith pays considerable attention in his essay, as well, to music and dance, concluding that "the imitative powers of Dancing are much superior to those of instrumental Music, and are at least equal, perhaps superior, to those of any other art" (Smith, p. 175).

See Also

Aesthetics, History Of; Art, Expression In; Art, Representation In.

Bibliography

Smith, Adam. *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*. London, 1795.