“Pleasures of the Imagination” by Joseph Addison

In ’ The Spectator’ Addison developed an essay style which greatly influenced the writings in eighteenth-century periodicals. In the short well-known passages in our readings on the pleasures of the imagination, Addison clearly notes some first suggestions towards a theory of æsthetics. His contribution represents a shift in emphasis from the creations of the artist to the pleasures of the connoisseur; for this reason, Addison’s essays had great appeal to the rising middle class seeking to improve their refinement and taste. Addison notes that of the pleasures of sense, the understanding and the imagination, only the latter pleasures originate from sight. Whether or not imaginative pleasures derive from the appearance or the ideas of visible objects, the pleasure, he thinks, is due to their expansiveness, novelty, or beauty. He argues that the purpose of such pleasure is attributable to the Supreme Being providing light and color to behold His works. Accordingly, Addison believes beauty in nature surpasses that of art, even though different aspects of beauty in each form enhance the beauty of the othe.r

Our Sight is the most perfect and most delightful of all our Senses. It fills the Mind with the largest Variety of Ideas, converses with its Objects at the greatest Distance, and continues the longest in Action without being tired or satiated with its proper Enjoyments. The Sense of Feeling can indeed give us a Notion of Extension, Shape, and all other Ideas that enter at the Eye, except Colours; but at the same time it is very much streightned and confined in its Operations, to the number, bulk, and distance of its particular Objects. Our Sight seems designed to supply all these Defects, and may be considered as a more delicate and diffusive kind of Touch, that spreads it self over an infinite Multitude of Bodies, comprehends the largest Figures, and brings into our reach some of the most remote Parts of the Universe. It is this Sense which furnishes the Imagination with its Ideas; so that by the Pleasures of the Imagination or Fancy (which I shall use promiscuously) I here mean such as arise from visible Objects, either when we have them actually in our View, or when we call up their Ideas in our Minds by Paintings, Statues, Descriptions, or any the like Occasion. We cannot indeed have a single Image in the Fancy that did not make its first Entrance through the Sight; but we have the Power of retaining, altering and compounding those Images, which we have once received, into all the varieties of Picture and Vision that are most agreeable to the Imagination.

The Pleasures of the Imagination, taken in the full Extent, are not so gross as those of Sense, nor so refined as those of the Understanding. The last are, indeed, more preferable, because they are founded on some new Knowledge or Improvement in the Mind of Man; yet it must be confest, that those of the 4 Reading For Philosophical Inquiry: Article Series “Pleasures of the Imagination” by Joseph Addison Imagination are as great and as transporting as the other. A beautiful Prospect delights the Soul, as much as a Demonstration; and a Description in Homer has charmed more Readers than a Chapter in Aristotle. Besides, the Pleasures of the Imagination have this Advantage, above those of the Understanding, that they are more obvious, and more easie to be acquired. It is but opening the Eye, and the Scene enters. The Colours paint themselves on the Fancy, with very little Attention of Thought or Application of Mind in the Beholder. We are struck, we know not how, with the Symmetry of any thing we see, and immediately assent to the Beauty of an Object, without enquiring into the particular Causes and Occasions of it.. . . There are, indeed, but very few who know how to be idle and innocent, or have a Relish of any Pleasures that are not Criminal; every Diversion they take is at the Expence of some one Virtue or another, and their very first Step out of Business is into Vice or Folly. A Man should endeavour, therefore, to make the Sphere of his innocent Pleasures as wide as possible, that he may retire into them with Safety, and find in them such a Satisfaction as a wise Man would not blush to take. Of this Nature are those of the Imagination, which do not require such a Bent of Thought as is necessary to our more serious Employments, nor, at the same time, suffer the Mind to sink into that Negligence and Remissness, which are apt to accompany our more sensual Delights, but, like a gentle Exercise to the Faculties, awaken them from Sloth and Idleness, without putting them upon any Labour or Difficulty. We might here add, that the Pleasures of the Fancy are more conducive to Health, than those of the Understanding, which are worked out by Dint of Thinking, and attended with too violent a Labour of the Brain. Delightful Scenes, whether in Nature, Painting, or Poetry, have a kindly Influence on the Body, as well as the Mind, and not only serve to clear and brighten the Imagination, but are able to disperse Grief and Melancholy, and to set the Animal Spirits in pleasing and agreeable Motions.

A second major concern of 18th-century writers was the role of [imagination](https://www.britannica.com/topic/imagination). Addison’s essays were [seminal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/seminal), but discussion of imagination remained largely confined to the associative theories of Locke and his followers until Hume gave to the imagination a fundamental role in the generation of commonsense beliefs. Kant attempted to describe the imagination as a distinctive faculty, active in the generation of scientific judgment as well as aesthetic pleasure. Between them, Hume and Kant laid the ground for the [Romantic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Romantic) writers on art: [Johann Gottfried von Herder](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Johann-Gottfried-von-Herder), [Friedrich Schiller](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Friedrich-Schiller), Friedrich Schelling, and Novalis (pseudonym of Friedrich Leopold, Freiherr von Hardenberg) in Germany, and [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Taylor-Coleridge) and [William Wordsworth](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Wordsworth) in England. For such writers, imagination was to be the distinctive feature both of aesthetic activity and of all true insight into the human condition. Meanwhile, Lord Kames and Archibald Alison had each provided full accounts of the role of association in the formation and justification of critical judgment. Alison, in particular, recognized the inadequacies of the traditional Empiricist approach to imaginative association and provided a theory as to how the feelings aroused by a work of art or a scene of natural beauty may become part of its appearance—qualities of the object as much as of the subject (*Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* [1790]).

The concept of [imitation](https://www.britannica.com/art/mimesis), introduced into the discussion of art by [Plato](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plato) and Aristotle, was fundamental to the 18th-century [philosophy of art](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy-of-art). Imitation is a vague term, frequently used to cover both representation and expression in the modern sense. The thesis that imitation is the common and distinguishing feature of the arts was put forward by James Harris in *Three Treatises* (1744) and subsequently made famous by Charles Batteux in a book entitled *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe* (1746; “The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle”). This diffuse and ill-argued work contains the first modern attempt to give a systematic theory of art and aesthetic judgment that will show the unity of the phenomena and their common importance. “The laws of taste,” Batteux argued, “have nothing but the imitation of beautiful nature as their object”; from which it follows that the arts, which are addressed to taste, must imitate nature. The distinction between the fine and useful arts (recast by Collingwood as the distinction between art and craft) stems from Batteux.

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