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The function of art

In the arts, the question of aesthetics has always been fundamental and omnipresent. What do we mean when we talk about art? Why does art move us? How do we measure the aesthetic value of texts, images and objects? In the 18th and early 19th centuries, art's claim to autonomy increasingly asserted itself as a formative criterion – the idea that art follows its own laws independently of the social context of its creation. Yet works of art from antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern era cannot be understood using modern aesthetic categories; they have their own, different aesthetics. The collaborative research center **Different Aesthetics** (SFB 1391) focuses on this 2000-year-old history of art and culture prior to the artistic developments of the 18th century. Its aim is to identify and reflect on aesthetic practices, manifestations and concepts that open up alternatives to the traditional notion of modernity, in which the aesthetic is defined above all by its freedom of purpose. The researchers seek to initiate a change of perspective in the aesthetic discussion by focusing on the question of the function of art. To this end, researchers from 16 disciplines ranging from archaeology, art and musicology, ancient and modern philology to history and theology are working together in 18 subprojects within the interdisciplinary network.

Their work ties in with current debates in society. Aesthetic questions are increasingly a source of public and academic de-

bate – the 'aesthetic turn' has been proclaimed on several occasions. It seems there is a new interest in aesthetics, as can be seen, for example, in the record attendance at exhibitions and in the public discussions about the quality of works of art which have emerged, for instance, in the course of the recent discussions on sexual harassment and exploitation known as the me-too debate.

The central concept of Different Aesthetics is that these phenomena cannot be understood in the tradition of modern concepts of autonomy. This is where the new perspective of Different Aesthetics comes in. Works of art from the pre-modern era are always in an interactive relationship between technical and artistic demands on the one hand and social practice on the other. Roman coins, for example, were not only artifacts artistically designed with text and images; they were also currency. By taking pragmatic aspects of art into account, the collaborative research center takes up ideas such as the aestheticization of our surroundings, identified by sociologists in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. We increasingly perceive our everyday life and lifestyle from an aesthetic point of view – although purely autonomy-aesthetic interpretations do not necessarily apply.

The art of the pre-modern age and the present day have one thing in common – there is no clearly-defined border between



the everyday world and the arts; works of art are part of the social space, are always in relation to it, and take on very specific functions in it. In order to focus clearly on these functions, researchers in the Different Aesthetics network analyze aesthetic acts and artifacts in two ways. They look at works of art via the works' own artistic logic, i.e. the way they use knowledge of form and design. At the same time, the researchers reflect on the concrete function for their audience in certain social contexts. They do not see these dimensions as opposites, but rather investigate them as a dynamic interactive framework. In this way, pre-modern aesthetic phenomena with their strong references to the world around them can be more finely differ-

entiated. For example, researchers in the subproject Different Aesthetics of Ancient Economic Areas in the Late Republic and Early Roman Empire deal with department stores in the ancient world. The architecture is not simply 'beautiful' – it aims to control buying behavior as these types of buildings are designated for retail.

The Different Aesthetics collaborative research center thus focuses on phenomena at the interface between art and social practice. The aim of its work is to provide a historical foundation for the current debates on the relevance of aesthetics and at the same time to make a contribution to current debates in art and society.