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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series**

**PHI2012-0195**

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from Fine Arts and the Status of  
Fashion**

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URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

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**ISSN 2241-2891**

12/09/2012

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This paper should be cited as follows:

**Mirahan-Zedan, M. (2012) "The Segregation of Applied Arts from Fine Arts and the Status of Fashion" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: PHI2012-0195.**

## **The Segregation of Applied Arts from Fine Arts and the Status of Fashion**

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to define the status of fashion qua art form that is fully equal to 'fine' art as fashion has been labelled for a long time as 'applied.' Pursuing that, I argue in this paper that segregating applied arts from fine arts is superficial since all applied arts are fine as art cannot be applied in the first place. To be sure, there was no such distinction between 'fine' and 'applied' arts in the history of art until the rise of Kant's theory of 'disinterestedness' and 'purposelessness' of art in *The Critique of Judgment*, the implications of which have led to what is called 'the autonomy argument,' which briefly implies that producing a useful/usable object, or an object that appeals to the mass audience, necessarily requires the producer to take into consideration commercial, economic, social, and many other factors while producing such an object; a process that results in a non-autonomous art, if art at all.

Thus, in this paper, I shall argue that art is autonomous by its very nature, not only when producing *disinterested* or non-useful/useable objects; and therefore there cannot be a non-autonomous art since art for an artistic object is like the DNA for cells of a body. Hence, the aim here is to refute the traditional undermining view to fashion design; a view that deprives the literature of fashion from many contributions which may come from philosophers who can enrich such literature in very new and creative ways.

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**Introduction: Art in Dictionaries:**

Before Kant's theory of 'disinterestedness' and 'purposelessness' of art that appeared in *The Critique of Judgment*,<sup>1</sup> the conventional meaning of the word 'art' as it appears in dictionaries<sup>2</sup> (especially etymological ones) comes from the old French *art*, which comes from the Latin word *artem* (the accusative of *ars*), meaning 'skill'.<sup>3</sup> This is the first meaning appears alternatively with another meaning of the word 'art' which is related to the Latin word *artus*, meaning 'to fit' or 'to join'.<sup>4</sup> In those dictionaries, the word *ars* appeared to mean 'skill' in doing or producing anything whether material or intellectual. That concept of 'skill' does not necessarily include or refer to any spiritual or metaphysical content, such as expression, beauty, individuality, autonomy...etc. It refers to 'the ability to do something well, especially because you have learnt and practised it'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For the full original translated text on theories of 'disinterestedness' and 'purposelessness' of art, see Kant, Immanuel. (1982). *The Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup>All dictionaries used in this argument and the following ones in the paper are listed hereinafter, and will be referred to their numbers only in the following footnote:

**Etymological dictionaries:**

1. Onions, C. T. with the assistance of G. W. S. Friedrichsen and R. W. Burchfield. (1966). *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. London: Oxford At the Clarendon Press. P. 52-3.
2. Partridge, Eric. (1961) *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. P. 27.
3. Weekley, Ernest. (1921). *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. London: John Murray. P. 75.
4. Wedgwood, Hensleigh (1859). *A Dictionary of English Etymology*. London: Trübner & Co. P. 64.
5. Barnhart Robert K. (1995). *The Barnhart concise Dictionary of Etymology*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. P. 38

**Dictionaries of Changes in Meaning:**

6. Room, Adrian. (1986). *Dictionary of Changes in Meaning*. London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul. P. 27-8.

**Middle English Dictionaries:**

7. Hans Kurath (ed), Sherman M. Kuhn (associate .ed). (1956). *Middle English Dictionary*. Ann Arbor and Michigan: University of Michigan Press and London and Geoffrey Cumberlege; Oxford University Press. P. 401-3.

**English Language Dictionaries:**

8. Without authors. (1811) *Barclay's Complete and Universal English Dictionary*. Liverpool: Nuttall, Fisher, and Dixon. (pages have no numbers).
9. Simpson, J. A. and Weiner, E. S. C. (1989). *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. I (Second Edition); Clarendon Press; Oxford. P. 657-60.
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11. Shaw, Harry. (1975). *Dictionary of Problem Words and Expressions*; McGraw – U. S. A.: Hill Book Company. P. 245.
12. Longman Dictionaries. (1995). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*; Essex: Longman Group Ltd. P.63-4

<sup>3</sup>See all dictionaries except nos. 6, 10, and 13.

<sup>4</sup>See dictionaries nos. 1, 2, 4, 11, and 16.

<sup>5</sup>See dictionary no. 16 p.1348.

Another meaning of this word is to do with learning certain sciences.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, those specific sciences were known traditionally as 'the liberal arts',<sup>2</sup> which consist of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. *Trivium* (the three liberal arts) are: grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the *quadrivium* (the four liberal arts) are: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Impact of Kant:**

Thus, before Kant's theory, an 'artist' is so called when s/he is very skilled in practising something. However, during the Renaissance era, the connotation of the word 'art' started to change a little bit with the intensive interest in particular forms of arts, especially those which are labelled as arts nowadays.

New lines of philosophical thinking about the 'beauty' of art as a unique phenomenon that is so much related to the individuality of an artist have begun to develop with the rise of the Renaissance. To be sure, before the Renaissance era, there was no much interest in the name or the life of an artist as much as in his/her art works. Then, Kant came with a revolutionary kind of thinking when he made a clear distinction in his *Critique of Judgment* between what he called 'fine' arts (which he argues that they are 'disinterested' or 'purposeless' and therefore judging them should be purely aesthetic) and 'mechanical' ones (which he argues that judging them involves thinking about their use or benefit more than their aesthetics; a kind of thinking that is necessarily pragmatic as it engages the faculty of reason more than that of aesthetic judgment).

Art movements which followed Kant's wave of philosophical thinking such as the 'art for art's sake' movement have worked dramatically to create the category of 'applied arts' as opposed to the 'fine,' 'high,' or 'pure' ones. The modern and (to a large extent) the postmodern and contemporary philosophy and theories of art do not put applied arts in the same place at which it puts 'fine' or 'pure' ones, as they were. To be precise, this inferior view of arts the products of which are useful/able actually reached its peak with the avant-garde theory and practices of art that praised the so called 'individuality' and 'autonomy' of art and artist.

### ***An Overview of the Individuality and Autonomy Arguments:***

Accordingly, it has been a long time since the view to useful/able artefacts changed from seeing them as artworks to seeing them as non-art or at the best as products of 'applied' arts which are theorized at best as second class arts or 'less artistic' ones. The main line of argumentation that categorizes some arts, such as fashion design, as 'applied' vs. 'fine' or 'high' art is the 'autonomy argument,' as it were. It, mainly, maintains that art should be autonomous to be art at all, which implies that it should be distinguished, and somehow detached, from other realms of life. It also maintains that art should be expressive of the

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<sup>1</sup>See dictionaries nos. 1, 4, 6, 8, 11, 16, 18 and 19.

<sup>2</sup>See dictionaries nos. 1, 4, 8, 11, 16, 18 and 19.

<sup>3</sup>See dictionaries nos. 4, 11 and 16.

artist him/her self or of the people, a claim that can be referred to as the 'individuality argument.'<sup>1</sup>

In the light of the 'autonomy argument,' there has been hostility against mass art (such as Cinema, T.V, and the like) since it has been accused of lacking autonomy. In his book *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, Noël Carroll (1998) discusses in detail arguments that are raised against mass art. Comparing the arguments mentioned in that book, one would immediately realize that most of the arguments that are raised against fashion design qua art form have also, and maybe originally, been raised against mass art. Viewing fashion design as a kind of mass art is based on the grounds that commercial and useful/able objects (*in general*) share with mass art many aspects, such as attempting to approach the majority of the possible audience, and being produced for mass consumption.<sup>2</sup>

The claim that useful/able objects are commercial implicitly criticises that their designers should take into consideration industrial, economic, and marketing factors, which is supposed to be an obstacle to the autonomy of art. We can find the same accusation in Adorno and Horkheimer's rejection of film as art.<sup>3</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer's argument, which Carroll (1998) calls 'the freedom argument', shares with Dwight MacDonald's, 'the massification argument',<sup>4</sup> the same hostility against the commercial nature of mass art, and the view that it has been produced *solely* for mass consumption (*ibid*: 16-7). The main line of argumentation against the commerciality of useful/able products is that such products are neither expression of the individual artist nor the common people themselves (which is referred to as the individuality argument).

To be sure, MacDonald contrasts mass art with high art as well as with folk art<sup>5</sup> since the former and the latter are produced to satisfy and attract the vast majority of the audience. Nevertheless, MacDonald argues that folk art, unlike mass art, is an expression of the people, and therefore folk art maintains the necessary individuality of an artwork.

The individuality argument then claims that the artist is not usually keen on expressing his or her individuality as much as s/he is keen on designing a product that is more likely would attract the audience, and therefore such a product is less artistic, if artistic at all, because it lacks the individuality aspect which is essential to achieving the autonomy of an artwork.

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<sup>1</sup>For more details about different forms of the 'autonomy argument,' see Hermerén, Göran. 1983. 'The Autonomy of Art,' in *Perspectives on the Work of Monroe Beardsley*, ed. John Fisher. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Pp 35-49.

<sup>2</sup>For this reason, I consider Carroll's book an important reference that a reader should refer to in order to enrich his/her background about the problem, and to read other arguments for and against mass art.

<sup>3</sup>Adorno, T. W and Horkheimer, Max. (1990). 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.' In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum. Pp. 120-67, cited in Carroll, Noël. (1998). *A Philosophy of Mass Art*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup>See MacDonald, Dwight. (1957). 'A Theory of Mass Culture.' In ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (eds.). *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*. New York: Free Press. Pp. 59-73, cited in Carroll, Noël. 1998. *ibid*.

<sup>5</sup>See Carroll, Noël. 1998. *Op. Cit.* P. 17.



Adorno and Horkheimer as well as MacDonald discuss several dimensions of this claim: that mass art (and here I similarly discuss applied art in general and fashion design in particular) lacks individuality and autonomy, and therefore it is indistinctive, non-free, suspicious, and conditioned. Many moral, social and political aspects have been assigned to this conclusion; yet, as the space here is limited, I shall focus only on refuting what is called the 'individuality argument' and the 'autonomy argument.'

***The individuality argument:***

This argument maintains the claim that useful/able arts are neither expressive of the individual artist nor of the people, and thus it is not autonomous. I shall start with the notion of 'the people', which refers to folk art. Dwight MacDonald, as I mentioned above, contrasts mass art with folk art, and argues that mass art is not expressive of the people since it is necessarily imposed on them. For MacDonald,

*'[F]olk Art grew from below. It was spontaneous, autonomous expression of the people, shaped by them [...] to suit their needs. Mass culture is imposed from above [...] its audience are passive consumers, their participation is limited to the choice of buying and not buying' (in Carroll 1998: 17).*

According to this vision of the relationship between a people and its folk art, MacDonald treats a people as a whole or as one virtual personality: i.e. as one artist. Therefore, if folk art comes from that whole people and introduced to it, then it is still an expression of that whole virtual artist. However, even when we take such analysis to be true, and I shall come to this later, most of the folk art is originally produced for commercial and practical purposes, or 'to be used', including folk dance; yet, MacDonald considers the folk art as autonomous.

In fact, if folk art comes from the people, then it presupposes a common denominator because it expresses the majority and appeals to them. Folk art is called 'folk' because it does not represent the taste of an individual, but of a whole folk; and yet, MacDonald considers it as autonomous because, in comparison with the mass art, he thinks that mass art is imposed upon the people, while folk art comes from them. Yet, to refute such an argument, let's imagine the process by which folk art, has come to existence.

The autonomous character of art, which is supposed to be innate in its very nature, implies that the birth of ideas of an artwork, the ideas which determine the form and content in that artwork, happens in one person's mind, not in the minds of a whole people. Yet, since folk art, like any other art, is a human activity, which necessarily implies that it is a social practice, and since it deals with producing objects to be used in everyday's life by everybody in that society, the ideas that are first born in that person's mind, i.e. the artist's mind, are originally grown in the womb of the collective mind of that people; a collective mind of which the folk artist's mind is a part. As I imagine, in folk arts, it is always one artist who starts a tradition, and then, it becomes a

tradition when the whole people adopts it. However, in folk arts, the original artist is always forgotten because the idea of art as an individual practice the autonomy of which happens by its detachment from the society becomes impossible. The original artist sees him/her self and art as a thread in the weave of the society; and because such art activities are threads in the weave, and very much supported in the whole cloth by, and interlaced with, other threads, they appear everywhere in the whole cloth, and they therefore are seen as if they do not have an individual origin.

Folk art is the fruit of thousands of years of weaving, and that is why it is difficult to trace the individual origin now after all those years. Art, because it grows in the collective mind of the society, though first comes through the mind of one person, expresses the features of that collective mind, and appeals to other humans whose minds are formulating, and formulated by, such a collective mind. That is how and why that mind is collective in the first place.

Being able to appeal to the majority, then, does not mean that mass art or applied arts are not expressive of the individual artist. It rather means that the artist's mind is sensitive enough to assimilate, whether consciously or unconsciously, universal aesthetics into his/her individual work. The desire in the audience to own such appealing artworks, in many cases, could be a result of the feeling that those artworks express what that audience themselves wish to express. Such artworks, therefore, express the artist as much as they do the audience and vice versa. Yet, to make things clearer, in the following I shall argue that all art is autonomous by its very nature and not by the virtue of being purposeless or disinterested.

### **The Autonomy Argument:**

'Etymologically the word [autonomous] goes back to the Greek *autos*, "self," and *nomos*, "law." But [the autonomous] has been used in different ways at different times and places...' (Hermermén 1983:35). 'Autonomous' in dictionary means: having the power to govern a region without being controlled by anyone; or, having the ability to work and make decisions on one's own, without the help of anyone.<sup>1</sup> 'Being for its own sake,' 'governed by itself,' and 'expressive of the individual artist' are supposed to be the only, or at least the most guaranteed, ways to provide art with its autonomy: 'avant-garde art has detached itself from society by becoming autonomous – by becoming art for art's sake' (expressed in Carroll 1998: 31). The question here, however, would be: is detaching art from society possible?

Detaching art from any social context is itself a social decision and a social action. To be sure, art cannot be detached from society since artworks are necessarily about something in the world whatsoever, and are placed somewhere in the world, which is a social place. The artist's mind itself is a social product, and an artwork as a product of a social product (i.e. the artist's mind) must be social, if the word 'social' means 'belongs or is connected to or influenced by society' in any way. In other words, even if avant-garde artworks

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<sup>1</sup>See dictionary no. 12, P. 75

do not *represent* social matters, they are still about society since they *represent* the artist's social decision of dismissing social issues from his/her work. On the other hand, the language used to create and to interpret such a work (let it be a symbolic language or else) is necessarily a social product, which implies that its product (i.e. the artwork) is itself a social product.

Thus, taking into consideration social matters, putting the audience preferences into the heart of the production process of an artwork, or bearing in mind what may appeal to a great number of people does not work against the autonomy of art, because art is social by its very nature.

Many philosophers have discussed the 'autonomy argument,' and each meaning the word 'autonomous' does have has been argued for and against. The notion that applied arts are less autonomous than 'fine,' 'high,' or 'pure' ones would lead us to the next question:

### **Can Be Art Applied?**

The argument that I shall conduct here attempts to refute the claim that art cannot be useful/able, or, at the best, that the useful/able arts, which are called 'applied' arts, are not as 'pure' and 'high' as the 'fine' arts since they are less autonomous. In so doing, I argue here that there is no tangible difference between such categories of art.

First, I shall start with the notion that useful/able arts, which are called 'applied' arts, are not as 'pure' and 'high' as the 'fine' arts. Let us begin with analysing the lingual meaning of the word 'applied'. This word comes from the verb 'apply,' which 'add' and 'use' are some of its main meanings which relate it to this kind of semantic use in the phrase 'applied arts'. The word 'applied' then will mean 'added', 'used' or 'to be used'.

Considering the first meaning, namely 'added', it indicates that this kind of art is *added* to something. The thing to which art is to be *added* is, therefore, supposed to become an artwork only when art is *added to* it. Consequently, that object, under this logic, cannot be seen as more than a *carrier* of art. However, even if we accept this to be true for the sake of argument, this does not imply that there is any reason to consider that artwork as a 'second class' or a 'non-pure' artwork, since the art that has been *added to* it is still 'art'. In other words, if art has identity, this implies that art which is *added* to an object is equal to any other art which is not *added* to any object. Therefore, 'art' that is *applied* is still 'art' no matter whether it is 'added' or not. Thus, art that is *added* to an object cannot be different from any other art that is not *added*, if we agree that art can be *added* in the first place.

Thus, all art is equally valuable because it is art, and not because it is 'high' or 'fine.' Claiming that art is valuable in itself is the core of the theory of 'intrinsic value' of art, which has been at the heart of the value theory. 'The idea of something that is valuable in itself, or ultimately valuable, or valuable for its own sake, is an intriguing one although there has not been unanimity on exactly how this idea should be elucidated, nor on what properly falls under it.'

(Levinson 2006: 400).<sup>1</sup> That is to say, '[P]hilosophical reflection on art would be idle unless art were valuable to us, and the significance of any question that arises in philosophical reflection on art derives directly or ultimately from the light that its answer throws upon the value of art [...] In sum: artistic value is intrinsic, sentiment-dependant, intersubjective, anthropocentric and incommensurable.' (Budd 2004: 262-71)<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Being 'applied' does not change the fact that that which is 'applied' is *art*, i.e. valuable in itself regardless of its ontological subsistence whether it is *added* or not. However, is there an actual possibility for 'art' to be *added* at all? As mentioned above, the word *added* indicates that there is already two things exist: the thing you add and the one to which you add. But is it the case with 'applied' art? From an ontological point of view, can I say that an object already exists and the artist *adds* art to it? Does art has such a material existence to be added to something else? Can we imagine art as a gown that can be put on or off? If art can be applied, then, it can also be removed; yet, can we imagine the process of removing art from an object? If an object is an 'artwork', then, is there any possibility to imagine that 'art' as separate from the 'work' in that object?

When an object is an 'artwork', it means that the existence of that object is equal to, or identical with, the existence of 'a work of art'. This means that constructing that object is equal to, or identical with, constructing a work of art. Thus, the object is the work of art itself, and not something separate from it. In other words, any useful/able art object is an 'artwork' because it has been *artistically* structured, which means that 'art' is what structured that object, and therefore, such art has become for every single molecule of the object, if you like, the same as the DNA for every single cell in a body.

To make the idea clearer, consider an example that Sherri Irvin (2005) gives in his paper *The Artist Sanction in Contemporary Art*. Although Irvin gives this example to illustrate the distinction between the object and the work in a work of art, I shall show how this particular example is an evidence for the opposite. In his example, Irvin indicates that if a painting is hanged in a reversed position (i.e. not in the right direction in which it should be hanged), the visible appearance of that reversed painting is not a feature of the work, unless the artist does something to sanction the consideration of this feature, since the sanctioning of a mode of presentation serves *to sanction a connection* between the object and the work.<sup>3</sup> In this example, the phrase '*sanctioning a connection* between the object and the work' implies that Irvin assumes a distinction between them, since *a connection* requires the artist's sanction whether implicitly or explicitly. Irvin, therefore, gives this example to emphasise that the features of the object could be different from the work, as the object could be reversed or hanged upside down and still be the same object, while the work has only one mode of presentation, namely the mode that is sanctioned by the

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<sup>1</sup>Levinson, Jerrold. (2006). *Contemplating Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup>Budd, Malcolm. (2004). 'Artistic Value.' In Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (ed.), *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytical Tradition*. Oxford: Blackwell Press. Pp. 262-72.

<sup>3</sup>Irvin, Sherri. (2005). 'The Artist's Sanction in Contemporary Art.' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (4): 315-326. [My bold and italics].

artist. However, this argument is false and the reasoning behind it is a subsequent conclusion of viewing art as an abstract entity, as I argue in the following.

In the last example, the object – which is the picture – is itself the artwork, and the *work* is what constructed the object in the way it is. For this reason, viz. because the object and the artwork is one and the same thing, when the object is reversed, it loses its artistic features as an artwork, the features that are sanctioned by the artist. In other words, when the visible features of the object change, it loses the identity that has been sanctioned by the artist, and loses its identity qua artwork. This means that the visible features of the object are identical with the visible features of the work, since a change in the visible features of the object necessarily implies a change in those of the work and vice versa.

The conclusion I want to draw here is that art cannot be 'applied' because it cannot not be *separable* from the object through which art manifests itself (or its features) since the work that constructs that object is a 'work' of *art*. That is, the notion of 'applied art', whether 'applied' means 'added', 'to be used', or 'has a use', implies that art is an entity that is *separable* from its objects, which is not true, as I argued. The same argument above applies to other meanings of the word 'applied.'

Thus, refuting the alleged difference between 'applied' and 'fine' or 'high' art shows that if something is produced to be used, this does not mean it is not art, or that it is art of a second class, because art cannot be classified in such a classicism sense. The judgment should not depend on the purpose or the intention behind producing an object, because, on the one hand, there is no decisive way by which one can be sure about such purpose or intention, and on the other, there is no reason to think that the intention to make a non-useful/able object is superior to the intention of making a useful/able one (even after reading Kant's argument). Taking into consideration the rules of the market place cannot restrict the creativity of an artist.

In fact, the ability to create a product that *aesthetically* attracts thousands or millions of people in spite of all economic and industrial restrictions as well as cultural differences is a genius work. And, after all, what is the difference between making an artwork for commercial purposes and making another to win a prize in an art competition? In both cases the competitor takes into consideration the 'market place,' what is going on in the field, to whom s/he is going to present the work, and how to win. Whether the gain is money, fame, or whatsoever, it is all the same: it is all gain.

### **Conclusion:**

As shown above, the individuality argument led us to the autonomy one, both of which have been refuted in this paper. Useful/able artworks then, under which the 'applied artworks' might be classified, are as 'high' and 'pure' as other works of the 'fine' art. That is because applied arts perform the idea as a process, which makes the 'idea' for the object as the DNA for the body cells. To be exact, *Processing* an object presupposes the 'idea' that carries the

information that is necessary to *build* or *process* that object in the same way the DNA carries the information responsible for *forming* all parts and tasks in a body. If such an 'idea' is that which is 'art' in an 'applied artwork', and if such an 'idea' is that which is supposed to be *applied* to/in mak(ing) the object an 'artwork', then the resulting 'artwork' cannot be separated, isolated, or distinguished from the 'idea' which processed, formed, and built it. Hence, the object which has become an 'artwork' by virtue of being processed, built, and formed as an *art* 'work' cannot be seen as distinguished from the 'idea' that is supposed to be that which is the *art* in this entire story.

Hence, there is no tangible difference between the so called 'applied arts' and other 'fine', 'high', or 'pure' ones. Fashion design thus is as 'high', 'fine' and 'pure' as the avant-garde art.

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- All dictionaries mentioned in endnote no. 2 below.