appraising

Browsing the \*internet, we are collectors of search results. We appraise and discard our findings on a rolling basis; we download and store only very few of them. We let search machines do much of the categorizing and arranging for us. Through the internet, we have access to information concerning all kinds of general knowledge. In the past by contrast, \*encyclopedias, libraries, scientific collections, and museums had a role in shaping how people—scholars and citizens, children and adults—accessed general knowledge. These collections presented their own forms of categorization and organization, and they put forward modes of comparison and appraisal that helped establish in that context what was valuable, beautiful, right, and morally acceptable, and what was not. When the English traveler and collector of curiosities John Evelyn (1620–1706) visited the Venetian island of Murano in Italy in 1645, he wrote in his diary that it was “famous for the best glasses in the world, where having viewed their furnaces, and seen their work, I made a collection of divers curiosities and glasses, which I sent for England by long sea. It is the white flints they have from Pavia, which they pound and sift exceedingly small, and mix with ashes made of a seaweed brought out of Syria, and a white sand, that causes this manufacture to excel.” Evelyn valued the use of rare and very specified materials together with the makers’ craftsmanship, an assessment that brought him not only to marvel at the artisans’ work, but also to buy a number of samples for his own collection. Collectors such as Evelyn followed their own version of the categories and rules of appraisal when they purchased texts and rearranged, erased, or put into storage what was not desired at that moment.

Throughout history, humans have appraised and discarded not only objects, but also information, including knowledge that affects the appraisal of objects. Terms, technologies, and conditions for the activity of appraising have changed. Starting with terms: “appraise” was what official valuers or appraisers did, a meaning captured by the Oxford English Dictionary as early as 1424, the act of assigning a price for a good. In this capacity, appraisers are roaming the world still today. For example, Alison Gay at the US company EquiAppraisal is described by her client G.S. as “a must for anyone in need of a certified equine appraiser.” While Gay would set the monetary value of a horse according to market research and analysis, based on the median price of transactions at the horse’s location, other appraisers would value a horse long before the market value kicks in. The horse breeding associations put forward a catalog of criteria to set the standards of a breed, making it possible to estimate whether a foal will prove to be a good jumper or dressage athlete. The association of Hanoverian horses in Germany revises their goals for breeding Hanoverian horses every year, but they always center them on exterior appearances—specific to a breed owing to its evolution—and performance. They and other breeding associations use statistical methods to determine the genetic influence of animals on their offspring. Several times a year, the Hanoverian breeding association organizes important auctions of Hanoverian horses in the German town of Verden near Hannover, where the best of Hanoverian breeds (according to those criteria) are auctioned off. The auction prices that are realized then contribute to setting the market value of the horses. A goal of appraisals is to set standards within a community of buyers and sellers.

Technologies and methods for professional appraising have changed over time. What today is a projecting science based on statistics did not use scientific methods in earlier times. A study of 335 probate inventories written for the small town of Thame in Oxfordshire in the seventeenth century invites comparisons. The inventories, made after the death of the proprietor, recorded the possessions of the deceased and their values. They represented an official record but were not written by officials or \*notaries, as elsewhere in Europe. Amateurs, such as family, friends, and neighbors, prepared these inventories and organized them differently from one another. An account of the estate appraiser Andrew Parslow in the second half of the seventeenth century shows that he developed and popularized a new method to deal with ever increasing numbers of household goods. Instead of recording items individually, and room by room, as had been the custom, he summarized items by type and assigned them a common value. Other appraisers in Thame followed this use at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century. The new format left individual values of single objects more obscure than before, while emphasizing the overall material wealth of the family; it also speeded up the process of reaching the desired estimate. But the evaluation did not document how the value of objects was calculated.

Taken in its general form as judging or estimating value, other methods of appraisal were practiced during the \*early modern and modern period that were imprecise and not formulaic, such as the development of categorizations or topical lists in natural philosophy (see the entry “lists” in this volume) or acts of religious self-appraisal. Various religious denominations called on their constituents to use accounting and diaries to estimate and attest to their own moral weight in front of God and in preparation for the last judgment, or, as the Quakers did, to progressively dissolve the self and reveal the presence of God in daily events. The journal of George Fox (1626–91), the founder and religious leader of the Society of Friends, as the Quakers call themselves, is typical of many early Quakers’ narratives of journeys and sufferings as it displays “a sense of a divine plan emerging from apparently arbitrary events” that transcends the account of many all-to-human occurrences.

Cultural change had an impact on the dynamics of appraisals and led to reappraisals. Following the reception of object \*taxonomies over a number of generations illustrates how cultures have changed their value systems. In a case study about the significance of the category “monsters” for late medieval and early modern European beliefs, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park focus on three types of appraisal that changed in relevance over the years: monsters were objects of horror, as they represented divine portents of future doom; monsters were entertaining, as they were objects of spectacle and an artful manifestation of the playfulness of nature; and monsters were repugnant, as they infringed the standards of order and decency set by society and the university disciplines. All three interpretations developed in parallel to each other, but their emphases shifted. A stress in the sixteenth century on religious horror shifted in the eighteenth century toward one on the violation of cultural standards. This emotional turn from wonder to repugnance occurred in anatomical and natural philosophical accounts of monsters, in late seventeenth-century aesthetics, where monsters chiefly violated taste, and found its way into encyclopedias for the wider public.

Individual appraisals are informed by cultural patterns of choice and preference. In the 1960s and 1970s, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu researched modern aesthetic judgment (interlaced with morals and beliefs), what we call in short “taste.” In his book Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste” (1979, English translation 1986), he maps out the results of two large surveys conducted in 1963 and 1967–68 in France on a sample of 1,217 people. He examined the preferences of his contemporaries, organized by professional groups. His questionnaire included twenty-five questions on tastes in interior decoration, clothing, singers, cooking, reading, cinema, painting, music, photography, radio, pastimes, and more. Question 10 about choices in food asked: “When you have guests for a meal, what kind of meals do you prefer to serve: simple but well presented; delicate and exquisite; plentiful and good; pot-luck; appetizing and economical; original and exotic; traditional French cuisine; other (specify).” Bourdieu claimed to be able to match certain cultural preferences to individual professional groups, and to their home background and formal education. In his category of food, items such as charcuterie, pork, pot-au-feu, and bread would represent food materials that manual workers would prepare and eat, with the value grid salty-fatty-heavy-strong-simmered and cheap-nourishing, while the dominant middle class would rather settle on beef, fish, and fruit as delicate, lean, refined, and light nourishment that didn’t take long to prepare. He concludes that “to the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers.” Bourdieu’s theory that taste is firmly linked to class, education, and upbringing encourages us to view appraisals historically, as constructions that change through time and across cultures, though this was not Bourdieu’s primary purpose.

Scrutinizing the Scottish delicacy “offal” and its ingredients over a period of time and through cookbooks for different social groups, Jeremy Strong has criticized Bourdieu’s approach, suggesting how his theory could be reformulated as an explicit historical analysis of cultural taste. Offal is an ingredient that forms part of the Scottish heritage dish haggis and refers collectively to the edible parts that are cut off in preparing the carcass of an animal for food, mainly internal organs and entrails. Clearly, Bourdieu would have located this ingredient on the “manual workers’” side of his roster, among the “salty-fatty-heavy-strong-simmered and cheap-nourishing” meals. However, around the year 2000, offal had a revival among British and American diners who made up a subgroup of increasingly discriminating consumers belonging to the wealthy middle class. This subgroup was interested in knowing and preparing the food they ate. Strong interpreted this relocation in the register of Bourdieu’s social distinction “as a consequence of … [the offal’s] appropriation and re-presentation by influential tastemakers.” Bourdieu had not anticipated a fluidity of his terms of difference.

The place of information in past and present cultures and societies is shaped by practices such as appraising. To give value to an object or belief is an elementary form of appraising as a cultural practice. Every person individually who expresses taste builds and rebuilds implicit taxonomies of preferences and dependencies. The individual agent not only codefines interdependent cultures of society; he or she also uses this roster as an important directive for the order and interpretation information to receive and transmit. Appraising methods and practices interact with and filter the information we get and give.

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See also book sales catalogs; censorship; encrypting/decrypting; indexing; inventories; knowledge; learning; lists; media

Further Reading

Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, translated by Richard Nice, 1986; Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, “Monsters, a Case Study,” in Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750, 2001, 173–214; John Evelyn, The Diary of John Evelyn, edited by William Bray, vol. 1, 1901; German Hanoverian Association, Auctions, https://en.hannoveraner.com/verden-auction/collection-of-the-135th-elite-auction/; Hilary Hinds, George Fox and Early Quaker Culture, 2012, 82–99; G. Riello, “‘Things Seen and Unseen’: The Material Culture of Early Modern Inventories and Their Representation of Domestic Interiors,” in Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800, edited by P. Findlen, 2013, 125–50; Donald Spaeth, “‘Orderly Made’: Re-appraising Household Inventories in Seventeenth-Century England,” Social History 41, no. 4 (2016): 417–35; Jeremy Strong, “The Modern Offal Eaters,” Gastronomica 6, no. 2 (2006): 30–39.