# A Subtle Aesthetic Touch in the Experience of Art

Marc Jiménez-Rolland – Mario Gensollen

The absence of *tactile art* in Western culture is often associated with a marginalization of the sense of touch in the aesthetic experience of art. This paper considers several explanations for the apparent historical neglect of touch as an aesthetic sense. While dismissing the idea that the relevance of touch for aesthetic engagement with art depends on there being an art of touch, it also explores how tactual experiences might contribute to the aesthetic appreciation of artworks across a variety of media. It argues that touch plays a crucial role in our engagement with artworks. Ultimately, it aims to enrich aesthetic theory by foregrounding the subtle yet significant influence of touch in art, proposing a broader, more inclusive understanding of sensory engagement in artistic practices. | *Keywords: Tactile Art, Lower Senses, Sensory Hierarchies, Media Specificity, Methods of Inscription, Aesthetic Experience*

## 1. Introduction

In the midst of the twentieth century, Frances W. Herring complained about what he described as "our lamentable condition of poverty in tactile art," pointing out that "no sound case against the aesthetic fitness of the sense [of touch] has been established by witnesses against it" (Herring, 1949, p. 215). He noted that "the virtual absence [...] of an art form which appeals primarily to the sense of touch" seemed to rest on the belief that "touch is unsuited to serve as the basis of an art form or of aesthetic experience" (Herring, 1949, p. 199). This perspective not only marginalized touch as an aesthetic sense but also entrenched a hierarchy among the senses that favored vision and hearing. Entering the second quarter of the twenty-first century, however, a powerful shift appears to be underway, as both creative and intellectual efforts increasingly engage with the tactual[1] dimension of human experience. This shift is particularly evident as "recent movements in art [...] converge with

[1] Although we adhere to the convention of speaking of *tactile arts*, following Fulkerson (2024), in the main text we use *tactual* to speak broadly about what concerns the *sense of touch*. More specifically, we qualify touch as *haptic* when it involves some movement (usually voluntary and exploratory) of, or against, sensory surfaces; we qualify it as *tactile* when it is mediated entirely through the skin.

philosophical revaluations of the senses [...which] are being revisited as conduits for aesthetic attention and artistic use" (Korsmeyer, 2019a, p. 358). While a fully developed aesthetic theory of touch remains elusive, the proliferation of tangible installations and interactive artworks underscores a growing demand for direct, embodied encounters with art.

This resurgence of interest in touch as an aesthetic sense raises profound questions about the role of tactual experiences in the appreciation of art. Is touch merely a supplementary dimension of aesthetic engagement, or does it hold a more fundamental place in the way we experience and interpret artworks? Rather than advocating for the creation of art forms dedicated solely to the sense of touch, this article seeks to investigate the broader implications of touch in the aesthetic experience of art. Our central claim is that touch performs a crucial, albeit often overlooked, role in the aesthetic appreciation of many artworks – both in historical and contemporary contexts. Importantly, this is not limited to recent artistic movements that explicitly foreground haptic interactions. Instead, tactual experiences are integral to the appreciation of works that span diverse media and historical periods. These works are not simply *tangible assets*; they invite, and often require, tactual engagement as part of their aesthetic reception.

To substantiate this claim, we structure our argument in two parts. In the first part, we examine the historical neglect of touch as an aesthetic sense, proposing several explanations for this enduring marginalization. In the second part, we address the influence of the 'doctrine of medium specificity' – which has traditionally constrained the role of touch within aesthetic theory – and we build a case for the aesthetic relevance of touch by demonstrating how tactual experiences contribute to the appreciation of artworks across a variety of media, including those conventionally associated with vision or hearing. These examples challenge the prevailing assumptions about the sensory boundaries of art and highlight the multifaceted ways in which touch enriches aesthetic experience.

While our primary focus is to argue for the aesthetic significance of touch, we also gesture toward two broader, interrelated claims. First, we suggest that classifying the arts by sensory modalities is an artificial and potentially unhelpful exercise, as it oversimplifies the complex interplay between senses in aesthetic experience. Second, we question the distinction between sensory modalities, proposing that these boundaries may be more fluid and overlapping than traditionally assumed. Although we do not develop these claims in detail here, they underscore the need for a more inclusive and integrative approach to understanding the sensory dimensions of art. Ultimately, this article aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to expand the boundaries of aesthetic theory, challenging entrenched hierarchies among the senses and foregrounding the rich, multifaceted role of touch in our encounters with art.

## 2. Don't Touch This: A Neglected Sense in the Arts

The Western tradition – narrowly understood as the syllabus of post-Greek, Latin-Christian and early-modern European *fine-art* theory – shows a notable absence of artforms that foreground touch. But why is this? Are the roots of this scarcity psychological, aesthetic, or simply historical? Despite recent rehabilitations of the so-called *proximal* senses (e.g., Candlin, 2006; Hayes and Rajko, 2017; Shiner, 2020; Korsmeyer, 2019b), touch – like smell and taste – still lacks the institutional prestige long enjoyed by sight and hearing.

This marginalization of touch raises several questions. Is it due to historical biases that have favored certain senses over others? Could it be related to the very nature of touch, which requires a physical proximity that other senses do not (Jonas, 1954)? Or is it because, from a cultural perspective, touch has been associated with visceral and carnal attributes historically deemed less worthy of elevation to the status of *art*? These questions are relevant not only to art theory but also to a broader understanding of how our sensory experiences shape our perception of the world and, consequently, artistic production. Therefore, when examining the reasons behind the supposed neglect of touch in the arts, we are not merely exploring a specific aesthetic or historical issue; we are also questioning our own assumptions about how art *is* and *should be* experienced. In what follows, six non-exhaustive interrelated explanations shed light on the apparent relegation of touch from the arts. Although distinct, they are not mutually exclusive.

First, touch, along with taste and smell, has long been considered a *lower* sense compared to sight and hearing. The paradigmatic art forms in the West reflect this perceived *inferiority*: no dominant art form appears to be exclusively tied to touch, which is even prohibited in museums, where visitors are instructed *not to touch* the exhibits (Candlin, 2008). This explanation has a philosophical history worth revisiting. Since antiquity, touch has borne the burden of a stigma that relegated it to a subordinate position within sensory hierarchies. Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle, established a framework that ranked the senses according to their relationship with the intellect. Touch was identified as the most basic and primitive sense, closely tied to physical needs and the material realm.[2] Plato, in *Timaeus* (45b-d) and *Republic* (VII, 514a-520a), emphasized the supremacy of sight as the privileged channel for accessing the world of ideas, whereas Aristotle, though recognizing the importance of touch for survival (e.g., *De Anima*, II, 421a19-421b9; *Metaphysics*, I, 980a25-981b10), characterized it as the most animalistic and least human sense. This perspective, detailed by Shiner (2020) and Korsmeyer (2019b), laid the foundation for a cultural devaluation of touch that would persist for centuries.

Despite the coexistence of many different perspectives during this long and culturally diverse period, the stigmatization of touch became even more

[2] However, according to Kearney (2020), Aristotle considered touch to be the most fundamental and universal of the senses, in contrast to the Platonic tradition, which privileged sight as the superior channel of knowledge. Kearney argues that this sensory hierarchy led to an *optocentric* philosophical culture, relegating touch to a secondary role.

pronounced in the Middle Ages, when Christian thought adopted and reformulated classical sensory hierarchies (Woolgar, 2006). The body was conceived as the primary obstacle to spiritual transcendence, and touch, due to its direct association with the flesh, was linked to sin, temptation, and human weakness. Tactual sensitivity was confined to the domains of pleasure and pain, whereas the *higher* senses, such as sight and hearing, acquired a central role in religious and artistic practices. Gothic cathedrals, for instance, exalted the visual as a means of elevating the soul toward the divine, while touch was excluded from spiritual experience. This dualism reinforced the idea that touch was incapable of contributing to the construction of knowledge and beauty. During the Renaissance and modern periods, even as new ways of valuing sensory perception emerged, touch continued to occupy a marginal place in aesthetic theory. Descartes (1989, I, AT XI 329-331) reaffirmed the separation between body and mind, positioning touch as a purely physical and utilitarian sense, unfit for the subtleties of aesthetic contemplation. Kant, though integrating the senses into the realm of aesthetic experience, argued that touch lacked the capacity to generate disinterested and universal judgments, essential to beauty in his framework (Kant, 2000, §16; Kant, 2006, I, §14). Consequently, touch remained ensnared in a narrative that defined it as excessively corporeal, overly intimate, and too contingent to contribute significantly to art or philosophy. This historical stigma continues to influence many contemporary conceptions, complicating the integration of touch into artistic theory and practice.

Second, the cultural primacy of sight and hearing has profoundly shaped artistic practices and theories, relegating touch to a peripheral role in the experience of art (Lauwrens, 2019). Since antiquity, these senses have been exalted as primary channels for knowledge and sublime experiences. Painting, sculpture, and music – the dominant artistic expressions in the Western tradition – are rooted in perceptual capabilities that transcend physical distances and create a collective impact. While sight and hearing can capture images and sounds intended for wide audiences, touch requires proximity and direct contact, placing it at disadvantage in practicality and adaptability. The centrality of the visual and auditory reflects a paradigm that prioritizes the distant and shared over the intimate and immediate. Technological achievements such as perspective and musical notation magnified this distance, while touch lacked equivalent tools. Even in arts where touch could play a role, such as sculpture, the experience focused on visualizing forms rather than physically interacting with surfaces. This emphasis limited touch's ability to be recognized as a sense with genuine aesthetic potential, an imbalance that contemporary technological innovations (e.g., haptic VR, responsive material) now seek to redress (Shiner, 2020).

Third, the subjective and intimate nature of touch is another critical factor in its marginalization (Gallace and Spence, 2011). Unlike visual and auditory artforms, which are often conceived as collectively experienced and

appreciated, touch is inherently private. Each tactile interaction – sensation of texture, pressure, temperature – depends on anatomy, emotion, and context. This intimacy seems at odds with art's traditional aim of creating shared experiences accessible to broad audiences. The variability of individual tactile perception complicates integration into artforms that are thought to require communal reception. Additionally, the difficulty of translating tactile experiences – what an artist feels in shaping a surface cannot be easily replicated for viewers – further limits touch. Art has historically aspired to universality, and touch's subjectivity seems to challenge this aspiration. Most philosophers, like many artists, have therefore avoided senses that cannot produce shared experiences, relegating touch to a secondary position. Yet Korsmeyer (2019b) argues that the *desire* to touch, and the imaginative activation of tactual memory, can itself be universal, anchoring aesthetic appreciation in embodied presence.

Fourth, technical and logistical challenges make touch difficult to integrate into artistic practice, contributing to its marginalization (Henderson and Lingle, 2023).[3] Artworks appealing to touch present unique problems: since physical interaction accelerates deterioration, preservation and insurance costs rise; textures resist reproduction. While paintings can be digitalized and music recorded, tactile art lacks equivalents that faithfully replicate sensations beyond specific contexts, limiting reach. Museums and galleries designed to protect visual and auditory works require substantial adaptation to exhibit tactile pieces – dedicated spaces, controlled environments, and new conservation protocols. These hurdles increase operational costs and demand conceptual shifts in exhibition design, leading institutions to perceive tactile art as riskier and less profitable. Nevertheless, emerging curatorial practices – controlled-touch displays, 3-D tactile reproductions, haptic interfaces – begin to counter these obstacles (Shiner, 2020).

Fifth, the neglect of touch reflects traditional sensory classifications that privileged sight and hearing, narrowing the artistic spectrum. Visual culture's dominance – perspective, photography, and digital media – reinforced the idea that the world is best apprehended through eye and ear. Hearing, especially in the form of music, gained cultural weight as an intellectual art. Touch, integral to human experience, was marginalized, relegated to the physical rather than expressive domain. This privilege is contingent, shaped by historical and philosophical forces rather than necessity. Shiner (2020) shows how reevaluating smell has already expanded aesthetic frameworks; a similar revaluation of touch promises to enrich our understanding of sensory experience in art.

Finally, although historically marginalized, touch has begun to gain prominence through integrative innovations in artistic practice. Movements

[3] Candlin (2004) explores the tension between art conservation and accessibility, particularly for blind or visually impaired individuals. Candlin analyzes how museums have historically privileged visual knowledge, relegating touch as both a threat to conservation and a challenge to the authority of curators. However, she argues that touch is not only crucial for blind individuals to access cultural heritage but could also enrich the museum experience for everyone.

challenging sensory hierarchies allow touch to be explored as a legitimate medium.[4] Interactive installations, tactile performances, and works designed for manipulation exemplify this shift, challenging conventional notions of artistic experience. Technological innovations – such as haptic virtual reality, tactile feedback devices, shape-memory alloys – have expanded creative possibilities, legitimising touch as a source of complex aesthetic experiences. Integrating touch into multisensory installations dissolves boundaries among senses, fostering a holistic understanding of perception in art. Korsmeyer (2019b) calls for cultivating tactual sensibilities as conduits of aesthetic attention, and Shiner (2020) documents artists composing multisensory *atmospheres* that envelop the whole body. These developments suggest that recognizing the richness of touch can transform both theory and practice, revealing that sensory hierarchies are culturally contingent rather than fixed.

These six explanations reveal how historical biases, technological constraints, and aesthetic prejudices have shaped our perception of touch in the arts. While sight and hearing have dominated aesthetic theory and artistic production, reducing touch to a subordinate role oversimplifies the complexity of our aesthetic experiences. Far from being excluded, touch has occupied a *subtle* yet *essential* place, indirectly influencing how we physically and emotionally engage with artworks. Acknowledging its aesthetic potency invites a more inclusive understanding of artistic experience – one that honors the full range of human sensibility.

### 3. Touch in Art Does not Require an Art of Touch

The marginalization of touch in the arts gains momentum from the recognition that there are no specifically *tactual* artistic media – as there are visual and acoustic media for which sight and hearing play crucial roles in aesthetic appreciation. Since there are not *tactile* arts – at least, not yet – , touch does not seem to play a role in the aesthetic experience of art. According to this line of argument, even if it were somehow involved in the appreciation of art, touch is not a relevant sense modality for the aesthetic experience art provides. In this section, we will attempt to defuse the appeal of this argument. First, we examine the assumption that the arts are (or should be) classified by means of the sense modalities deployed in their aesthetic appreciation. Then, we provide a positive case for the relevance of touch in the aesthetic appreciation of art, one that does not rely on there being a *tactile art*.

[4] Artists such as Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica pioneered tactile and participatory art, with Clark's *Bichos* (1960), a series of articulated metal sculptures meant to be manipulated by viewers, and Oiticica's *Parangolés* (1964), wearable structures that only come to life through movement and touch. Marina Abramović explored the physical and emotional dimensions of presence in *The Artist Is Present* (2010), where the intensity of silent, bodily engagement was central to the experience. Ann Hamilton's *The event of a thread* (2012) created an immersive environment where visitors interacted with large suspended fabrics, emphasizing the relationship between touch, space, and movement. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer incorporated biometric data in *Pulse Room* (2006), transforming participants' heartbeats into pulsating lights, creating an embodied, tactile connection between the viewer and the artwork. Olafur Eliasson's *Your Blind Passenger* (2010) challenged visual primacy by enveloping visitors in dense fog, forcing them to navigate space through touch. Similarly, Studio Roosegaarde's *Dune* (2007) responded to the presence and touch of viewers through interactive light and sound, reinforcing the integration of haptic feedback into contemporary artistic expression. These works exemplify a shift in art towards multisensory engagement, redefining artistic experience beyond visual and auditory hierarchies. As an anonymous referee pointed out, the emergence of tactile art happened a few times before, around the 1920s.

### 3.1 Art Media and Sense Specificity

Along with the concept of art, our classifications of artistic practices have undergone deep transformations throughout history (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, pp. 11–49, 50–72). Nevertheless, the assumption that a sensible division can be made within artistic practices still thrives. This classification is meant to serve both descriptive and evaluative purposes. When faced with descriptive questions, a classification provides useful (though not infallible) clues to address a factual matter. The question 'Is this art?' – posed when stumbling on an unusual object or situation – , becomes more readily assessable by asking whether that object or situation is a recognizable token of an art form, or whether it is deployed in an artistic medium. As noted in our fourth explanation, a classification of arts is expedient to store and display kindred items. But classifying artistic practices has also normative implications. In judging whether a work of art is good or bad, artists, critics, and theorists point to relevant features for its appreciation that seem to depend on it being an artwork of a certain kind.

The disdain of aesthetic relevance of touch has been fuelled by an influential classification of the arts. Nöel Carroll called it the doctrine of *medium-specificity*: it "holds that each art form has its own domain of expression and exploration [..., which is] determined by the nature of the medium through which the objects of a given art form are composed" (Carroll, 1985, p. 6). When conjoined with the idea that "artworks are things perceived through the senses" (Lopes, 1997, p. 425), and that every art form, like "all art, is *about* the sensory" (Hopkins, 2009, p. 530), it entails the idea that "particular senses play key roles in individual art forms" (Hopkins, 2009, p. 531). Herbert Read put forward an explicit formulation of this doctrine: "an art owes its particularity to the emphasis or preference given to any one organ of sensation" (Read, 1956, p. 70). The idea is to classify artistic practices in virtue of the sensory modality required to appreciate them.

The artistic paradigms for the doctrine of medium specificity are painting, a visual art, and music, an art of hearing. Other artistic practices are perhaps less straightforward. While the aesthetic appreciation of architecture and photography presumably involves sight, most works of opera, drama, dance, and cinema, would seem to involve visual as much as acoustic media. Literature seems to be less intimately linked to the senses, since it does not require reading aloud nor with our eyes; when written in Braille, a literary work can be read by haptic means. Arguably, however, "literature is an art of sound. [...] Even when reading silently to oneself, one appreciates literature in key part by engaging with the sound of the words out of which it is composed [... by means of] the auditory imagination" (Hopkins, 2009, p. 531). These cases illustrate how, as we outlined in the first explanation, the doctrine of medium specificity privileges the *higher* senses of sight and hearing. Other senses do not seem to play any significant role in the appreciation of these arts. They are not to be smelled or tasted; touching is seldom encouraged, and it is explicitly forbidden in many cases.

There would seem to be an art from that heavily relies on touch for its aesthetic appreciation: the art of sculpture. Johann Gottfried Herder claimed that the visual experience of a sculpture would be aesthetically incomplete:

> A creature that is nothing but an eye, indeed, an Argus with a hundred eyes, may look upon a statue for a hundred years and examine it from every side; but if it is without a hand with which to touch, or at least able to sense its own touching, if it possesses only the eye of a bird and is all beak, gaze, pinion, and claw, it will never have anything more than a bird's-eye view. (Herder, 2011, p. 40)

Along these lines, Herbert Read defined sculpture as "an art of *palpitation* – an art that gives satisfaction in the touching and handling of objects" (Read, 1956, p. 49). But it is doubtful that the aesthetic appreciation of sculpture requires employing the sense of touch. Sculptural works of art "are in most cases, as a matter of fact, not touched by the beholders" (Kovac, 1970, p. 98), and in many instances (e.g., monumental statues) they "cannot be touched and are not intended to be" (Koed, 2009, p. 104). Although possible, Jerrold Levinson deemed *tactile sculpture* a nonexistent artform, one in which "objects are fashioned for palpation and caressing with no concern for, or even explicit disregard of, how they look" (Levinson, 2006, p. 118). Thus, since there are not *tactile arts*, the doctrine of medium specificity does not offer a straightforward vindication of touch in the aesthetic appreciation of art. But that does not altogether exclude the relevance touch for the aesthetic appreciation of art.

In a lively exchange, Dominic McIver Lopes and Robert Hopkins argued over the classification of painting as a visual art. They focused on pictorial art, since "pictures are widely viewed as essentially and paradigmatically visual representations" (Lopes, 1997, p. 427). They discussed whether "the value of pictorial art, and in particular its distinctive value as pictorial, as opposed to, say, literary, musical, or theatrical, [...makes] use of the idea that pictures are especially visual representations" (Hopkins, 2000, p. 149). Their arguments showcase how tactual experiences can be relevant for the aesthetic appreciation of art, even if it is not classified as tactual.

Lopes provided a straightforward argument to challenge the assumption that pictures are visual representations: (1) If pictures were *visual* representations, sight would be necessary for appreciating them; but (2) sight is not necessary to appreciate pictures. Thus, pictures are not visual representations (Lopes, 1997, pp. 427–430). To support the second premise, Lopes cited empirical studies concerning pictorial representation in congenitally or early blind subjects. Having no previous experience with pictures of any kind, these subjects were able to recognize the objects in silhouette, and even to produce outline drawings very similar to those created by sighted subjects (Lopes, 1997, p. 429; Lopes, 2002, p. 192). Thus, sight is not unique in providing cognitive access for the content of these pictures.[5] If "pictures are not exclusively visual representations, then [...]

[5] Lopes (1997, p. 437) further argues that "perspectival perception is not unique to vision". Hopkins (2004, p. 149) claims that "touch is also perspectival, but the perspective involved is different from that of vision". We will not rehearse this aspect of their arguments here.

there is no reason to insist that pictures' aesthetic properties are only visual and must be apprehended by using our eyes" (Lopes, 1997, p. 439).

In his reply, Robert Hopkins noted that appreciating pictures aesthetically may involve many non-visual factors (e.g., ideas, attitudes, emotions, memories); however, that does not imply that the distinctive value of pictorial art is altogether independent of it being a *visual* representation. While other features might consort with the aesthetical experience of pictorial art, sight is indispensable to experience such art *as* pictorial. Touch can provide information about the properties of a pictorial representation – e.g., contour – that determine what it represents. But what the representation represents is not grasped by tactual experience (Hopkins, 2000, p. 151). In contrast, visual experience allows us to appreciate the content it represents. This is especially clear in cases where pictures provide *borrowing*: "the same aesthetic satisfaction as would seeing the depicted scene face-to-face" (Hopkins, 2000, p. 162). In contrast, the sort of pictures described by Lopes do not offer "the same aesthetic satisfaction as touching what they represent" (Hopkins, 2000, p. 166). If that experience occurs, it is parasitic of memory and imagination – heavily relying on subjective rapport, as our third explanation suggested. This, Hopkins argues, is a difference "of potential aesthetic importance" (Hopkins, 2000, p. 155), since it shows that there is an aesthetic satisfaction of pictures (*visual* experience) that the sense of touch could not possibly provide.

In a rejoinder, Lopes insists "that pictures are not essentially visual; their content can be grasped in the absence of vision […], they can be grasped as pictures when they are perceived by touch as well as by vision" (Lopes, 2002, p. 193). He notes that Hopkins' central case rests on specific instances of pictorial art that offer aesthetic satisfactions of *visual* pictures *as* pictures. But not all pictures – not even all artworks pictorial in nature – aim to provide that kind of aesthetic satisfaction. By enabling us to engage with properties of their represented content, Lopes suggests that "tactile and visual pictures might offer different kinds of aesthetic satisfactions" (Lopes, 2002, p. 194). In fact, Hopkins does recognize that touch can provide access to features of aesthetic interest, at least in some cases. After all, an important aspect of the aesthetic value of some pictures hinges on grasping their content. Insofar as they can represent their content, "tactile pictures will share in the aesthetic possibilities of other pictures" (Hopkins, 2000, p. 161). Since representation seems to be a central aspect of our aesthetic engagement with pictures, it can be a non-experiential source of aesthetic satisfaction from pictures *qua* pictures (Lopes, 2002, p. 199).

Skipping over many interesting details of this exchange, the upshot is that there are *tactile pictures*, that is, "there are pictures made for, and by, the blind" (Hopkins, 2004, p. 157). Therefore, not all pictures are visual, and "vision is not, after all, essential to appreciating every picture" (Hopkins, 2004, p. 158). This could be accommodated within the doctrine of medium specificity by distinguishing "two arts of pictures, the art of visual pictures and the art of tactile pictures" (Lopes, 2002, p. 194).[6]

[6] It could also point to a flaw in the doctrine of medium specificity, since "it is not clear what it is for an art to be visual" (Hopkins, 2004, p. 153).

But, insofar as pictorial representation is a feature of aesthetic interest,

> if there can be pictures appreciated by touch, then exploiting vision does not seem a particularly profound feature of painting. True, *painting* is not accessible by touch, since it is colour, not contour, which is the key tool. But this is just an accident of the methods which painting involves. Other pictures can be felt, so vision is not, after all, essential to appreciating every picture. (Hopkins, 2004, p. 158)[7]

Remaining true to the doctrine of medium specificity, these remarks foster artistic innovation, in the spirit of our sixth explanation. They call for a new art of touch, sharpening tactual sensibilities "as conduits for aesthetic attention and artistic use" (Korsmeyer, 2019a, p. 358). But, regardless of the prospects of tactile art, touch does have broader implications in the aesthetic experience of art that pervades the appreciation of artworks in diverse media across historical periods.

### 3.2 Aesthetic Touch across the Arts

The previous discussion shows that, even if it provides a useful classification of the arts, the doctrine of medium specificity does not restrict the role of touch in aesthetic experience. We lack an extensive catalogue of *purely* (o even *mainly*) *tactual* artworks. But instead of exorcizing touch from the aesthetic experience of the arts, this draws attention to our tactual experiences across the arts. Throughout history, aesthetic experiences have not been purely visual or auditory; rather, they have involved a sensory interplay where touch – whether real or imagined – has played a crucial role in how artworks are perceived, understood, and valued. This recognition paves the way for a more nuanced analysis, where the subtlety of touch in the arts is not seen as evidence of its exclusion but as a testament to its ability to operate on a level that transcends the explicit, influencing both artistic creation and reception in ways that traditional theories are only beginning to acknowledge.

To emphasize this fact, many artistic practices might be conceived as *methods of inscription*, imbuing experiences "into artifactual vessels: for recording them, preserving them, and passing them around" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 1). This view is compatible with the doctrine of medium specificity, since "our techniques for inscribing and recording bits of human experience [...include] methods for capturing sights: drawing, painting, photography, and film [...; and] methods for capturing sounds: written music, recording technologies, and wooden duck calls" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 18). However, Thi Nguyen's suggestion crosscuts across the sensorial classification of the arts. For starters, artistic practices are but a subset of our methods of inscription; other activities (such as science, sports, religion, and education) also craft artifacts to record, preserve, and share (valuable) human experiences. Besides, not all of our methods of inscription are best described by means of our sensory modalities: "stories let us record narratives, and games let us record agencies" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 1). What is crucial is that they account for a paramount reward of our

[7] Instead of the unqualified claim that painting is a *visual* art it would be more accurate to say that *some* paintings are prominently visual. Hopkins (2004, p. 152, n. 4; p. 156, n. 10) offers further reasons for this qualification.

engagement with artworks: they bring about, intentionally, aesthetic experiences. This view of artistic practices as methods of inscription helps us revisit the various explanations for the relegation of touch from the arts.

Bracketing some puritan concerns,[8] there seem to be no grounds for the idea – encapsulated in our first explanation – that touch is a lower sense due to its cognitive limitations, according to the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions. Being deprived of a sensory modality reduces phenomenology significantly; but that does not seem to impose intellectual limitations.[9] Insofar as linguistic means are haptically available (e.g., through tactile writing systems, such as Braille), touch can communicate as much as visible or audible language. Besides, pictorial and rhythmic experiences might be transferred by *tactile pictures* and *musical vibrations*.

Our culture has developed sophisticated visual and auditive ways of transferring experience that transcend physical distances, while creating a collective universal impact – as voiced by our second and third explanations. Although they might not seem as impressive as the techniques of perspective in painting, many artworks exhibit ingenuity in devising means for providing an intersubjective and simultaneous engagement with tactual qualities. In sculptural and architectural artworks that allow for haptic touch, this is achieved by exploiting not only textures but also materials. But tactual experience does not always demand contact. The care for thermal qualities in architecture also aims to create a collective aesthetic experience. Literature has also a tactual dimension: "the seemingly intangible art of poetry directly [engages] the sense of touch through the tactile and kinesthetic dimensions of speech" (Classen, 2012, p. 124). Uttering words elicits pleasant (or unpleasant) sensations in the mouth (sometimes conveying difficulty, as in tongue-twisters). These tactual aesthetic experiences in representational arts multiply if we allow to "supplement sense experience with sensory imagining" (Hopkins, 2009: 531), since tactual descriptions and images evoke both haptic and tactile experiences.[10] There is also a tactual component in "a strange and strangely pleasurable response to music [...] the singular phenomenon of music induced 'chills', or [...] 'frissons'" (Levinson, 2006, p. 222). In many instances, this skin suffusing effect – similar to a tingle or shiver – seems to be intentionally produced as part of the pleasurable musical experience.

The previous observations concerning tactual experience at a distance should alleviate some of the concerns surrounding technical and logistical challenges of displaying artworks that appeal to touch – acknowledged in our fourth

8 Especially, setting aside the idea that touch is "intimately bound up with erotic expression [..., since] the sense of touch [is not] really unique in this respect" (Herring, 1949, p. 208).

9 Constance Classen suggests that the taboo on touch in the modern museum had to be cultivated in the nineteenth century, by imposing the idea "that touch had no cognitive or aesthetic uses and thus was of no value in the museum, were only cognitive and aesthetic benefits were to be sought" (Classen, 2012, p. 145).

10 This was emphasized by Alois Riegl in the 19th century by means of the concept of 'haptic gaze'. For similar insightful suggestions concerning the crucial role of touch in film experience, see Antunes (2016) and Sobchak (2004, chap. 3). We thank the anonymous referees for drawing our attention to these works.

explanation. If tactual aesthetic experience required physical interaction, the artworks would be subject to deterioration and would have limited accessibility. But instead of relegating the aesthetic contribution of touch, this might provide a clue for the immense value historically attributed to art acquisition. As Constance Classen explains, "the personal possession [...] enabled one to touch an image at will [...]. The unlimited amount of contact made possible by the personal ownership of a picture could be intoxicating" (Classen, 2012, p. 130).

Our eagerness to touch art speaks volumes against the suggestion – floated by our fifth explanation – that touch is somehow less important than sight and hearing. That haptic touch is something that we yearn in our search for aesthetic value is also indicated by the fact that touching was allowed in early private and public museums (Classen, 2012, pp. 136-146). Nowadays, when touching them could put the integrity of unique artworks at risk, some museums display 3-D reproductions of their tactual qualities.[11] These artifacts might "act as something like surrogates for their sources. When the source cannot readily be [...touched, they allow] a wide audience some form of aesthetic [...] engagement with it" (Hopkins, 2015, p. 11).

## 4. Concluding remarks

Throughout this paper we have explored the underappreciated role of touch in the aesthetic experience of art, challenging traditional sensory hierarchies that have historically privileged sight and hearing. We traced the marginalization of touch from ancient philosophical frameworks to modern aesthetic theories, identifying cultural, technological, and practical factors that have limited its recognition as an aesthetic sensory modality. We argued that, despite the absence of a *tactile art*, touch has played a fundamental – albeit overlooked – role in the appreciation of artworks across diverse media and historical periods.

Conceiving artistic practices as *methods of inscription* to record experience helps to illuminate how the appreciation of the arts is not "detachable from the normal operation of the senses with which human beings have been endowed" (Levinson, 2006, p. 80). Although our discussion relied on the doctrine of medium specificity – which classifies arts by sensory modalities – , the role of tactual experiences in the aesthetic appreciation of art suggests that this classification might be artificial and unhelpful to capture the complex interplay between senses in aesthetic experience. Even more, in search for a more inclusive and integrative approach to the sensory dimensions of art, the boundaries of sensory modalities might turn out to be more fluid and overlapping than traditionally assumed.[12]

[11] A prominent example can be found in the *Feeling Van Gogh* exhibition at the *Van Gogh Museum* in Amsterdam.

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Marc Jiménez-Rolland
Autonomous Metropolitan University
Department of Philosophy
186 Av. San Rafael Atlixco, Iztapalapa, CDMX, Mexico
mjrolland@izt.uam.mx

Mario Gensollen
Autonomous University of Aguascalientes
Department of Philosophy
940 Av. Universidad, Aguascalientes, Ags., Mexico
mario.gensollen@edu.uaa.mx

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