Pronunciation: ( /ɛsˈθɛtɪk/ : see below)

Forms: Also esthetic.

Etymology: mod. < Greek αἰσθητικ-ός, of or pertaining to αἰσθητά, things perceptible by the senses, things material (as opposed to νοητά things thinkable or immaterial), also ‘perceptive, sharp in the senses’; < vb. stem αἰσθε- ‘feel, apprehend by the senses’. Applied in German by Baumgarten (1750–58, Ἀέσθητικα) to ‘criticism of taste’ considered as a science or philosophy; against which, as a misuse of the word found in German only, protest was made by Kant (1781, Crit. R.V. 21), who applied the name, in accordance with the ancient distinction of αἰσθητά and νοητά, to ‘the science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception,’ a sense retained in the Kantian philosophy, and found in English c1800. But Baumgarten's use of Ἀέσθητικ found popular acceptance, and appeared in English after 1830, though its adoption was long opposed. (See below.) Recent extravagances in the adoption of a sentimental archaism as the ideal of beauty have still further removed Ἀέσθητικ and its derivatives from their etymological and purely philosophical meaning. ‘The pronunciations /ɛsˈθɛtɪk/ , /iːsˈθɛtɪk/ , /ɛsˈθiːtɪk/ , /iːsˈθiːtɪk/ , are all in use; the second is at present most common in London’ (N.E.D., 1884).

The following quotations illustrate the history of the word:

1832  *Penny Cycl.* I. 156  Ἀέσθητικ (Ἀέσθητικ) is the designation given by German writers to a branch of philosophical inquiry, the object of which is a philosophical theory of the beautiful.

1832  *Philol. Museum* 1 369  Beautiful and ugly depend on principles of taste, which it would be very convenient to designate by an adjective · · · Some English writers have adopted the term esthetical. This has not however yet become an established English word · · · Perception in general is something very different from that peculiar and complex modification of it which takes cognizance of the beauties of poetry and art. Esthetics would naturally designate the doctrine of perception in general, and might be wanted as a technical term for that purpose. By the Kantian school, indeed, esthetic is used to denote that branch of metaphysics which contains the laws of perception · · · As an additional reason for hesitating before we adopt esthetic, it may be noticed that even in Germany it is not yet established beyond contest.

1842  *J. GWILT Encycl. Archit.* III. i. 673  There has lately grown into use in the arts a silly pedantic term under the name of Ἀέσθητικ · · · it is, however, one of the metaphysical and useless
additions to nomenclature in the arts, in which the German writers abound.

1856 W. HAMILTON Lect. Metaphysics (1859) I. vii. 124 It is nearly a century since Baumgarten first applied the term Æsthetic to the doctrine which we vaguely and periphrastically denominate the Philosophy of Taste, the theory of the Fine Arts, the Science of the Beautiful etc., and this term is now in general acceptation, not only in Germany, but throughout the other countries of Europe. The term Apolaustic would have been a more appropriate designation.

A. adj.

†1. Of or pertaining to sensuous perception, received by the senses. Obs.

1798 W. TAYLOR in Monthly Rev. 25 585 In the dialect peculiar to Professor Kant his receptivity for aesthetic gratification [is] not delicate.

2. Of or pertaining to the appreciation or criticism of the beautiful.

1821 S. T. COLERIDGE in Blackwood's Edinb. Mag. 10 254 I wish I could find a more familiar word than æsthetic, for works of taste and criticism.

1831 T. CARLYLE Sartor Resartus (1858) 77 In answer to a cry for solid pudding comes, epigrammatically enough, the invitation to a wash of quite fluid Æsthetic Tea!

1855 A. BAIN Senses & Intellect II. iv. 607 The first object of an artist is to gratify the feelings of taste, or the proper æsthetic emotions.

1872 H. SPENCER Princ. Psychol. (ed. 2) II. VIII. ix. 627 The æsthetic sentiments originate from the play-impulse.

1872 H. SPENCER Princ. Psychol. (ed. 2) II. VIII. ix. 632 The æsthetic character of a feeling is habitually associated with separateness from life-serving function.

3. Of persons, animals: Having or showing an appreciation of the beautiful or pleasing; tasteful, of refined taste. Of things: In accordance with the principles of good taste (or what is conventionally
regarded as such).

1871  C. DARWIN Descent of Man II. xiii. 39  Birds appear to be the most æsthetic of all animals, excepting of course, man, and they have nearly the same taste for the beautiful as we have.

1875  F. W. FARRAR Silence & Voices III. 62  A corrupt Hellenism, which regards sin forsooth with æsthetic toleration.

1881  W. S. GILBERT Patience I. 22,  I am a broken-hearted troubadour, Whose mind's æsthetic, and whose tastes are pure.

1884  N.E.D. at Aesthetic,  Mod. Colloq. He must have æsthetic wall-paper and a dado.

4. spec. Of or pertaining to a late nineteenth-century movement in England of artists and writers who advocated a doctrine of ‘art for art's sake’.

1868  W. PATER Æsthetic Poetry in Appreciations (1889) 213  The ‘æsthetic’ poetry is neither a mere reproduction of Greek or medieval poetry, nor only an idealisation of modern life and sentiment.

1882  D. G. ROSSETTI St. Agnes in Coll. Wks. (1886) I. 410  The journal of the worthy poet-critic ⋅⋅ was much too æsthetic to permit itself many readers.

1882  W. HAMILTON Aesthetic Movement 31  The leaders of the Æsthetic School in poetry have been styled fleshly poets, delighting in somewhat sensually-suggestive descriptions of the passions.

1950  E. H. GOMBRICH Story of Art xxv. 402  Whistler became a leading figure in the so-called ‘æsthetic movement’ which tried to make out that artistic sensibility is the only thing in life worth taking seriously.

B. n. commonly pl. æsthetics, as collect. sing.: but also in sing., after German ësthetik, French esthétique.

1. The science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception. Hist.
Aesthetic commonly signifies the Critique of Taste, but with Kant, the science containing the rules of sensation.

If the experimentalists of the Institute had abandoned their physics for the study of transcendental aesthetics and all the refinements and abstractions of pure reason.

The only department [of transcendentalism] to which he attached himself with his ordinary zeal was that which relates to the principles of the imitative arts, with their moral influences, and which in the Kantean nomenclature has been designated by the term Aesthetics, or the doctrine of sentiments and emotions.

Kant under the title Transcendental Aesthetic, treats of the a priori principles of all sensuous knowledge.

The philosophy or theory of taste, or of the perception of the beautiful in nature and art.

Most German writers, who have published systematic treatises on aesthetics, have followed the principles laid down by Baumgarten, Kant, or Schelling.

John is a man of taste, and knows something of practical aesthetics.

To deal fully with the psychology of aesthetics is out of the question.

He accordingly applied himself diligently to study the spirit of classical Tragedy, and the principles of Aesthetic.

The two propositions which constitute the Aesthetic of the Essay.
1864  Press 21 May 481  Certes, we English are behind hand in æsthetic.

1868  M. Pattison Suggestions Acad. Organisation §5. 196  Two professors of the science [of art] and æsthetic, dealing with Painting, Sculpture, etc.

3. = Aesthete n.; an adherent of the æsthetic movement (see sense A. 4).

1883  L. Troubridge Life amongst Troubridges (1966) 164  The great Oscar Wilde ⋅⋅ is grown enormously fat, ⋅⋅ not at all the aesthetic he used to look.

1894  Cosmopolitan May 122  The æsthetics ⋅⋅ who proclaim the infinite superiority of art to nature.

1946  English Studies XXVII. 49  It is not unsympathetic to the Aesthetics, for it seeks to understand them.

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**aesthetic distance** n. a sense or degree of emotional detachment considered integral to (and necessary for) dispassionate appreciation of the creative arts: see also **psychical distance** n. at **psychical** adj. Special uses.

Some artists (esp. dramatists) have proposed methods designed to engender aesthetic distance in the viewer: see alienation effect at **alienation** n. 1d.

1911  Jrnl. Philos., Psychol. & Sci. Methods 8 306  While teaching to regard objects in themselves, apart from their practical use, art creates ‘esthetic distance’.

1948–9  Poetry 73 155  The direct approach is perilous to the artist ⋅⋅. An art is usually ⋅⋅ a kind of obliquity. ⋅⋅ Its fixed form proposes to guarantee the round-about of the artistic process, and the ‘aesthetic distance’.

necessary separation between the observer and the work is called ‘psychic’ or, especially by the New Critics, ‘aesthetic distance.’

1991 J. A. Cuddon *Dict. Lit. Terms & Lit. Theory* (ed. 3) 11 In his [sc. Hans Robert Jauss’] theory literary value is measured according to ‘aesthetic distance’, the degree to which a work departs from the ‘horizon of expectations’ of its first readers.