American philosopher who made major contributions to epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of science, as well as to aesthetics. In his youth he ran an art gallery, and throughout his life he was an avid collector of art. He was professor emeritus of philosophy at Harvard University.

The arts enhance understanding, Goodman (1976) contends, and aesthetics explains how they do so. Aesthetics, then, is a branch of epistemology. He maintains that understanding a work of art is not a matter of appreciating it, or finding beauty in it, or having an “aesthetic experience” of it. Like understanding an utterance or inscription, understanding a work of art consists in interpreting it correctly. This involves recognizing how and what it symbolizes, and how what it symbolizes bears on other visions and versions of our worlds. Works of art, then, belong to symbol systems with determinate syntactic and semantic structures. Much of Languages of Art (first published in 1968) is devoted to delineating the structures of the systems that the various arts employ, detailing their powers and limitations.

Goodman recognizes two basic modes of reference: denotation and exemplification. A symbol denotes whatever it applies to. A name denotes its bearer; a portrait its subject; a predicate the members of its extension; and so on. Fictive symbols fail to denote. Their significance, he believes, depends on what symbols denote them. Because the term “Ophelia description” denotes a range of names and descriptions in Shakespeare’s play, those names and descriptions collectively fix Ophelia’s fictive identity (1972: 221–38).

Some symbols – including abstract art, most instrumental music, much dance – do not even purport to denote. They deploy other modes of reference exclusively. Prominent among these is exemplification, whereby a symbol refers to some of its own properties. A Mondrian painting, for example, exemplifies squareness. It not only consists of squares, but points up this fact about itself. That is, it refers to the squareness of the shapes it contains. No more than denotation is exemplification peculiar to the arts. It is critical in commerce and science as well. A commercial paint sample exemplifies its color and sheen; a blood sample, the presence of antibodies. In art and elsewhere, exemplifying symbols afford epistemic access to properties that they sample.

Exemplification and denotation are not mutually exclusive. Works of art that denote typically exemplify as well. Wivenhoe Park exemplifies Constable’s style while denoting the park. Tolstoy’s description of the Battle of Borodino describes the battle and exemplifies his attitude toward war. Critical to Goodman’s aesthetics is the recognition that symbols can, and often do, simultaneously perform a variety of referential functions.

Denotation and exemplification need not be literal. A distinctive feature of Goodman’s theory is that metaphorical symbols genuinely refer to their figurative subjects. “Bulldog” genuinely denotes Churchill; the Pietà genuinely exemplifies sorrow. Reference, then, is not restricted to literal reference, nor truth to literal truth.

Symbols typically belong to schemes – systems of signs that collectively classify the objects in a realm. “Bulldog” belongs to a scheme that, in its literal application, sorts the realm of dogs. In metaphor,
Goodman maintains, the scheme transfers to a new realm. The organization of dogs into breeds is reapplied to classify people. Because under that transfer Churchill falls within the extension of “bulldog,” Churchill is metaphorically a bulldog. New patterns and distinctions in the human population emerge; for the metaphor sorts people into classes that no literal predicate exactly captures. This is one reason why metaphors resist literal paraphrase.

In referring to a property that it metaphorically possesses, an object metaphorically exemplifies that property. Thus, Churchill metaphorically exemplifies bulldoggishness when serving as an example of that trait. Expression, Goodman contends, is a form of metaphorical exemplification. A work of art, functioning as such, expresses the properties that it metaphorically exemplifies. Being inanimate, the Pietà cannot literally exemplify sorrow. But it can and does exemplify that property metaphorically. It therefore expresses sorrow. Expression, as Goodman construes it, is not restricted to feelings. For aesthetic symbols metaphorically exemplify other features as well. Music may express color; sculpture, motion; painting, depth. There is evidently no a priori limit on the features that works of art can express (1976: 45–95).

Reference need not be exclusively denotational or exclusively exemplificational. Sometimes, Goodman maintains, reference is transmitted via chains consisting of denotational and exemplificational links. Allusion is a case in point. The simplest allusions involve three-link chains. A symbol alludes to its referent by exemplifying a feature that it shares with its referent, or by denoting an object that exemplifies its referent. Thus, passages in Ulysses allude to Roman Catholic prayers by exemplifying the cadences of those prayers. And the figure of a dog in a Dürer print alludes to loyalty by denoting dogs, which exemplify loyalty. Longer and more complex chains also occur. And multiple routes of reference may secure an allusion. Regardless of length or configuration, so long as reference is transmitted across such a chain, indirect reference occurs (1984: 55–71).

A variation must be like its theme in some respects and different from it in others. But merely having shared and contrasting features is not enough. Otherwise, every passage would be a variation on every other. A passage does not qualify as a variation, Goodman contends, unless it refers to the theme via the exemplification of both sorts of features. Variation, then, is a form of indirect reference (Goodman & Elgin 1988: 66–82).

Scientific symbols, Goodman urges, are relatively attenuated. They symbolize along comparatively few dimensions. Aesthetic symbols, by contrast, are relatively replete. Comparatively many of their aspects function symbolically. The same configuration of ink on paper might be an electrocardiogram or a drawing. If the former, only the shape is significant. If the latter, the precise color and thickness of the line at each point, the exact shade of the background, the exact size and shape of the paper and of the line on the paper, even the quality of the paper itself, may be significant. Moreover, the electrocardiogram is referentially austere. It denotes a heartbeat and perhaps exemplifies certain symptomatology. The drawing is apt to perform myriad complex and interanimating referential functions. Via denotation, exemplification, expression, and allusion, it refers to a multiplicity of referents through a variety of routes (Goodman 1976: 229–30).

The status of a line as an electrocardiogram or a drawing depends on its function. It counts as a work of art so long as it functions as an aesthetic symbol. And it may function aesthetically at some times and not at others. The crucial question, then, is not “What is art?” but “When is art?” Although Goodman supplies no criterion of aesthetic functioning, he identifies its symptoms: exemplification, relative

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repleteness, complex and indirect reference, syntactic and semantic density. A symbol system is syntactically dense if the finest differences among signs make for different symbols. It is semantically dense if it has the resources to mark the finest differences among objects in its domain. As symptoms, these features are neither necessary nor sufficient, but they are indications that an object is functioning as a work of art (1978: 71–89).

Interpreting a work involves discovering what symbols constitute it, how they symbolize, what they refer to, and to what effect. Because of the richness and complexity of aesthetic symbols, the task may be endless. And multiple, divergent interpretations may be correct. But it is not the case, Goodman maintains, that every interpretation is correct. Only such interpretations as make maximally good sense of the work's symbolic functions are acceptable. His pluralism consists in his recognition that more than one interpretation may do so (Goodman & Elgin 1988: 222).

To construe works of art as symbols and the aesthetic attitude as a quest for understanding might seem to anaesthetize art. It does not. For the feelings that a work evokes are sources of understanding. Emotional sensitivity, like perceptual sensitivity, enables us to discern subtle but significant features. In the arts, Goodman maintains, emotions function cognitively (Goodman 1976: 245–52).

Merit, too, transforms from an end to a means. Rather than seeking to understand a work in order to evaluate it, we use evaluations as sources of understanding. An unexpected assessment kindles curiosity, prompting us to attend more carefully to the work – to search for features that previously eluded. The knowledge that a given work has (or lacks) aesthetic merit may then help us to understand it better (1972: 120–1).

See also twentieth-century anglo-american aesthetics; depiction; expression; metaphor notations; ontological contextualism; ontology of artworks; perspective; representation.

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