

What is Beauty?

(What are the essential properties of beauty?)

Art is meaningless without beauty. Yet, beauty is one of the least understood if not most ignored concepts of the 20th century. This is due in large part to the propensity of many to reduce it to a mere alteration of the brain, an innate category applied arbitrarily by the mind on incoming sense data. This way of thinking gives rise to the all too familiar clichés we have been tired of hearing of like “*beauty is in the eye of the beholder*” or “*beauty is a matter of taste.*”

But common sense tells us that a rose and a sunset are beautiful even when not a single soul is around to delight in them. Beauty is clearly an objective reality, totally independent from any knowing power and absolutely unaffected by the fleeting opinions of the human spirit. Are we about to dump this evidence from everyday experience in favor of a modern but suspect philosophy?

Beauty can easily be the topic of endless and volatile debates. This is due to a certain extent to its rich and multi-faceted character, let alone the fondness of many for vain polemics. For this reason, we have decided to focus our analysis here solely on its original meaning, the one drawn from reality and recognized since time immemorial as truly representative of its nature. Ancient thinkers described the beautiful as *that which is pleasing to behold*. What exactly did they mean by this?

Understanding Beauty through its Effects

Certain things are better known and understood through their effects. For example, from the scattering patterns of atoms bombarded with high-energy particles, physicists get a clearer picture of the atomic structure. Likewise, the concept of beauty can be grasped more easily by first examining the way it affects the beholder.

A beautiful sunset is a delight to watch especially after a hard day’s work. The melody of a beautiful music never fails to uplift the human spirit. The logic of a mathematical demonstration can move a mathematician into pure ecstasy. The clarity of a well-written and well-delivered speech may drive an audience into emotional high. These facts of daily life show that the *immediate effect of beauty is pleasure*. It causes in the beholder a certain feeling of satisfaction. It is *pleasing* to behold.

Pleasure is a type of joy. In turn, joy can refer to the movement of the sense or intellectual appetites. At the sensorial level, joy is one of the eleven emotions (See

Psychological Striptease on Canvas, Art Creations, MN 170 – previous articles are available in my homepage). Concretely, it is an act of the concupiscible appetite following the possession of a sensible good. This joy is normally accompanied and manifested by physical changes. At a more sublime level, joy is an act of our intellectual appetite, the will. It consists in the contentment of the will upon the achievement of an intellectual good. Strictly speaking, this joy is called happiness. It transcends the body since the will is an immaterial faculty: one can be happy even when in physical pain.

Specifically, therefore, *beauty moves the concupiscible appetite to joy and the will to happiness either separately or simultaneously.*



Silver Pitcher with Roses
(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm)

This resulted from my initial fascination with shiny metals. A painting by Helen van Wyk was my model. The color of silver is the color of its surroundings because of its strong reflective capacity. In this case, the table top, roses, spout, background, foreground and light source must be all painted into the body of the pitcher to simulate its mirror-like quality.

What is so special about this aesthetic joy? Its uniqueness lies in the manner it is produced. Under normal circumstances, joy results from the actual possession of a desirable good. The operative words here are “**actual possession**.” A person craving for ice cream feels contented only when he is already relishing the food in his palate. A car enthusiast rejoices only if he manages to obtain the car of his dreams and not while he is only dreaming of acquiring it. Any hard-working employee surely celebrates if she is given a salary raise or promotion. Anyone who achieves power and glory experiences a kind of satisfaction ordinary mortals can only imagine. All these varying degrees of joy are caused by the **actual possession** of a certain good; the greater the good, the greater the joy.

However, *the joy in beauty is created by knowing alone* and not by possessing. The aesthetic joy is the result of cognition and not of acquisition. The beauty of a sunset gives rise to pleasure

distinctive mark of beauty. Other things engender joy when they are **attained**; only beautiful things give rise to a special joy or delight simply **by being known**. *Beauty is that which is pleasing to behold.*

However, knowledge has two levels: sensorial and intellectual. And within sensorial knowledge itself, there are still several types, corresponding to the five external senses and four internal senses. These several ways of knowing imply that a beautiful thing can cause joy in several ways: by being seen, by being heard, by being felt, by being imagined, by being remembered, by being understood, etc. Something with a higher degree of beauty may cause joy through all the different levels. Others with lesser degree logically have more limited effects. For example, the joy of contemplating a beautiful face may disappear once that face starts to speak. Similarly, a flower could have a beautiful appearance but an ugly smell. There could be intelligible or sensible beauty. All this indicates that beauty is composite and analogical. But, we do not

have time to delve deeper into these aspects of beauty right now.

What is important to emphasize for the moment is that **not all joy proceeds from knowledge and not all knowledge produces joy**. It is only in the case of a perceived beauty that joy comes from knowledge and knowledge causes joy.

Beauty, therefore, involves two inseparable instances: **perception by the knowing powers** (senses and/or intellect) and **satisfaction of the appetites** (concupiscible appetite and/or will). The beautiful satisfies the will or sensible appetites insofar as it is known by the intellect or senses.

A thing is beautiful if the intellectual or sense perception of it is pleasing.

What causes that delight?

But beauty is not the pleasure or delight itself that accompanies the contemplation. It is rather those **properties pleasing to behold**. They are inherent perfections of things themselves and do not arise from the intellect or the will. In other words, things are beautiful even when no one is around to appreciate and enjoy them.

What are these properties that immediately cause aesthetic pleasure? Or to phrase this question in a more specific way, what do an attractive face, a graceful dance, a wonderful song and a great literature have in common that makes all of them beautiful? It is here where nailing down the answer becomes extremely difficult. Ancient scholars had grappled with this question with only a general idea to offer as an answer. Thomas Aquinas had the most enlightening explanation. For him, something is beautiful if it possesses three basic properties: **harmony or proportion**,



Bronze Vase with Fruits
(Oil on Canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm)

After a long period of inactivity because of the arrival of Josemarie, I had a freak opportunity to get back to my brushes and canvas when Carol volunteered one time to stay longer with him. Given the really limited time, I chose this very simple composition, using it as a means to reconnect with whatever dormant skill I still had in my blood. Of course, Carol is now back to work and I am left wondering when the next chance to paint will ever come.

only through contemplation; no one ever enjoys the sun by owning it. Spectators feel delight in their hearts by merely watching a Ferrari car in a race circuit, a delight certainly insignificant compared to the joy of the Ferrari owner but a delight nevertheless. Music lovers experience inner happiness by merely listening to beautiful songs on the radio even if they own no recorded copy of them. Satisfaction can be derived by just reading a superbly composed novel or by finally understanding a complex mathematical theorem. **Pleasure through knowledge is the**

integrity or completeness and *clarity*.

First, an object must have *harmony or proportion* in itself and also with regard to its surroundings. This involves a fitting and congruent disposition of its parts and an appropriate relation with its environment. Thus the marvelous arrangement of the universe in its totality or the harmonious structure of a living organism or the rhythmic melody of a musical composition can delight both the senses and the intellect because they are beautiful.

in the material and spiritual sense. For the intellect, clarity means intelligibility; it must be capable of being understood without any trace of vagueness and ambiguity. For the sense of sight, it means light, color, brightness or limpidity. For the sense of hearing, it means clear and distinct composition of sounds that makes listening to them more pleasant.

These three characteristics are always present although perhaps in diverse forms in everything beautiful. But harmony, integrity and clarity are properties that are, in a sense, presupposed or implied



Bronze Pitcher with Fruits
(Oil on Canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm)

Balance is an element of composition. As the name implies, whatever is placed on one side should be made up for on the other side. Balance is normally achieved when there is equality between opposing weights, surface areas, colors or shapes; at least, this is the principle of the weighing scale. In painting, however, one is allowed to balance a huge mass with just a small one. This is what happens in this Still Life where the large bronze pitcher is balanced by the two almost unnoticeable bronze strips of the mug.

Second, a thing must have *integrity or completeness* with respect to the perfections required by its substantial form or accidental forms. A thing cannot be beautiful if it is incomplete or if it lacks some necessary elements demanded by its essence. Completeness should be understood here not only in the principal meaning of the word but also in the sense of having received the finishing touches. Completeness could also be viewed from three perspectives as suggested by Aristotle. A thing may be complete or perfect: a) with respect to its dimensions (*quantitas continua*), like a horse with no missing physical parts; b) with respect to its operative powers (*quantitas virtutis*), like a fast horse or a horse with working or dancing skills; and c) with respect to the attainment of its end (*consecutio finis*), like a horse that has won a race. Any being which is complete or perfect according to any of these ways is beautiful.

always by the essences of things. Essences are modes of beings, a sort of patterns or molds that determine the way things should be or exist. Molds and patterns always connote a certain degree of harmony, completeness and clarity. This simply means that beauty can also be understood from the standpoint of the essence. ***Something is beautiful in the fullest sense if it possesses all the perfections that correspond to its own nature.*** A goldfish, a tiger and a short story are beautiful if they possess all the perfections proper to their respective essences. This is the principal meaning of beauty.

A Perfection Pleasing to Behold

Beauty is a perfection of things that causes joy or happiness in the appetites when perceived by the senses or intellect. A natural tendency is put to rest when such perfection is apprehended by the cognitive faculties. This is what ancient thinkers meant when they described the beautiful as that which is pleasing to behold.

With this, the mystery surrounding beauty seems resolved. But we have just begun to muddle the picture. A lot of questions immediately arise begging for answers. Besides, beauty still has to be explained within

the context of art. But lack of time and space prompts us right now to end this discussion with whatever conclusions we have reached so far. For me, *knowing* that this is the last sentence of the article just gives me immense *relief and satisfaction*; it must be a thing of beauty.

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Finally, for an object to be beautiful, it must have *clarity* both