

Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages

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Is Beauty something objective or just in the eye of the beholder? If objective is it independent of other categories such as Truth and Goodness? The Middle Ages were philosophically dominated by Scholastic thought, which was in its turn heavily indebted to Classical conceptions. Thus in particular Platonic, especially in its neo-Platonic form, and its Aristotelean interpretation. According to Plato Truth, Beauty and Goodness were indeed objective entities, at least in their essence, i.e. their forms. From the Scholastic perspective they are all united in God. This exalted view provides little of an explanation, which of course the scholastic philosophers were well aware of, but it inevitably colors any attempt of an explanatory definition. It is thus indicative of the early Medieval attitude to think of aesthetics in very abstract terms, often vouched in mathematical ones. Thus the beauty of music, according to Boethius, is not to be sought in the merely sensual enjoyment it gives, but in the mathematical patterns that underlines it¹ In Medieval thought everything was connected, thus there was none of the conflict between the good and the beautiful which torment modern sensibilities. Thomas Aquinas, the quintessential scholastic philosopher recognized three components of beauty. First, and maybe foremost there is integrity, which refers to perfection and lack of impairment; then there is proportions, each part should harmonize with the other parts, and finally there is clarity, which has to do with sensual features as bright colors. The latter should of course not be taken too literally as one should never fall into the trap of doing with anything in scholastic philosophy. *Claritas* clearly refers to something 'luminous' about a piece of art, and would in our modern age be referred to as 'lyricism' . 'Luminosity' was an important feature of art criticism in medieval times. It had to do with the presence of light, and as such provided an acceptable admission of sensuality. Pleasure was an important test for beauty. St Augustine had already asked whether things are beautiful because they give delight, or give delight because they are beautiful, and settled for the second, objective character of beauty. To Aquinas the delight that beauty gives is due to reasoning. Such a reasoning must involve an effort, without the effort there will be no delight. This ties in with a more subjective and sensual appreciation of beauty that made advance as time passed. It was becoming more and more clear that perception was not just a passive act of an observer, but instead necessitated construction of the data presented involving memory. Thus beauty may be as objective as anything else, but according to Aquinas, it provided just the potential, for the experience of beauty and the concomitant delight to ensue, one needed the active participation of a subject.

Now so far the entire discussion has been formal and abstract reflecting merely the

¹ In particular this would imply that the aural beauty of a piece of music would also be manifested by its visual representation, provided that is done in the 'right' manner. But such a conclusion seems absent in the writings of Boethius.

philosophical opinions of a select few, whose relevance to the age as such may have been very tenuous at best. There is a large legacy of Medieval Art what is its real connections to scholastic philosophy? First we have to make a distinction between art and beauty. The notion of beauty is indeed a timeless and philosophical one, while art is practical and here and now. The most tangible manifestations of Medieval Art are the cathedrals. Those were indeed majestic projects whose completions often took centuries. The scholastic influence on art manifested itself didactically. Art was there to instruct. Just as nature could be seen as an allegory of divine life, art could instruct the untutored. For those who could not read, pictures could provide an alternative explanation. Thus, somewhat disrespectfully one may see the pictorial ornamentation of churches as comic strips. Allegory and symbolism are closely related, and indeed in scholastic thought an image often tended to be more important for what it symbolized than what it was by itself. Its reverse - iconization, in which symbols for divinity take on a literal meaning and become mere idols is a common phenomena in religious observation. One may only think of the images of gods in Hinduism and the proliferations of images of the Madonna in Catholicism².

What is art? And as we have already noted this is a very different question from 'What is beauty'. The relation of Art to Nature is a classical one. Plato disparaged art, because art was a second order projection. It was an image of what already was an image, and implicit in this censure is the premiss that an image is bound to be but an imperfect rendering. On the other hand art is also a way of achieving directly what nature endeavors in a very round-about way. One must understand that by art, not only artistic expression was meant, but also technology, something that still survives in the notions of faculties of Arts and Science at Universities. What was the source of art? Ultimately it stemmed from God, as everything else, but certainly as an intermediate there was the human agent. Did art stem from reasoning or from the soul? As far as there was any true distinction between the two. Art was concerned with making not doing as in ethics. Thus art involved technology in a wide sense. Did a piece of art first present itself to the artist, and consequently was thoroughly planned before executed? In other words 'form' was paramount and the actual making of the object a matter of manifesting the form. Or was the making itself paramount and art did ensue as a result of unintended consequences? Thus was the making of art a process, an unplanned one, in which contingencies played a major role. Every invention has unintended consequences, and of course it is a matter of words, whether those unintended consequences were already there from the start and being features of a hidden form which only gradually were being revealed. Or whether those consequences actually constitute something new. In fact this is how evolution works. It is not planned, every emergence is an unplanned consequence that radically changes the lay of the land. A modern commentator on art the philosopher R.G.Coolingwood refers to planned art as mere craftsmanship.

The sensual arts always had low status. It was connected to manual work, and as such dismissed as menial. Yet, the delight it provided, could never be fully denied. Con-

² As was noted in later Medieval times. A picture of the Madonna and the Jesus child, is just a picture of a woman and a child, and can only be identified with the former by means of a title. Why should this giving of a particular title make it more beautiful than it would be by another one. By forcing a divine connection one is expected to receive more delight from observation.

sequently the earlier artists were anonymous. The personality of the actual artist was as uninteresting as the personality of a craftsman. Thus the artists employed in the making and ornamentation of a cathedral remain anonymous. There were, however, one exception to this, and that was poetry. Poets were not anonymous, the name of the originator was an important feature of the poem itself. Of course words and thoughts expressed by words are more abstract than the makings of plastic art. Poetry was almost akin to philosophy. Still poetry was, maybe partly as a legacy of Plato, considered to be inferior. Poetry was not about the truth, but was a deliberate lie. However, the literal attitude to poetry tended to fade away, as other emergent qualities were being more and more appreciated. One may incidentally compare them to dreams. The actual happenings in a dream are just imaginations and as such ephemeral and not worthy to be committed to memory. On the other hand dreams can convey more than just a sequence of confusing and inconsequential events. They can evoke moods and feelings, of which terror is one of the most striking. Those secondary qualities of dreams tend to be those that stay with us, long after the actual content has vanished.

As the Middle Ages wore on, there was a gradual change in ontology. While from a scholastic point of view common features were of importance and individual quirks accidental and ephemeral; there were a growing appreciation of the 'thisness' of a thing. Its individuality and uniqueness. This was absolutely essential for a change in the view of art towards a more sensual. In fact our world of perception is a sensual one, and as such unique to each individual's experience; while our world of intelligence is more general, and through which communication is possible. The concrete stays with us and cannot be exported, only the abstract shorn of individuality allows transition from one consciousness to another. Ultimately this changed the way to think about beauty. As noted already, any invention has unintended consequences, and by focusing on the individual, another attitude towards beauty takes form. Rather than being explicitly imposed from above, it becomes immanent. Beauty ties up with functionality. Something that is well-made takes on an intrinsic beauty related to how well it is consonant with its purpose. Thus a picture of an ugly thing becomes beautiful, in the sense of being well-made if it faithfully renders the ugliness, or more abstractly if it makes the ugliness even more vivid in the imagination of the observer.

Human nature is in many ways constant through the ages. This is what makes history not only fascinating but understandable. Scholasticism tends to be disparaged as mere quibbles of words, the ideal target for Wittgensteinian criticism of pursuing phantom problems seduced by the empty connections provided by the structure of language. Taken literally their exalted pronouncements may appear arid and ridiculous, but when interpreted sympathetically they accord remarkable concordance with our own thinking. The disadvantage of medieval thinkers lies not in intellectual deficiency, on the contrary they tended to be too clever for their own good, but in empirical poverty. Their sharp minds had too little to feed on. By slowly relinquishing the constraining hold on the sensual world, by accepting it on its own terms, a more scientific attitude gained ascendancy, as well as a more nuanced attitude towards art. Both of those tendencies have enriched our world, for better and for worse, must freely be admitted, Science more than art, at least when it comes to tangible benefits.

Umberto Eco writes primarily as a scholar and as a philosopher only secondarily. His work is one of compilation. He has with not inconsiderate effort collected what has been said on the issue of art and beauty during the middle ages. This he has arranged in a coherent way. He rarely if ever impose his own ideas on the material, except of course that those have strongly influenced both selection and organization, but of that the reader is of course unaware of. In humanism it is very important to know how said what and when, and then on that basis provide an instructive narrative. And Eco writes as a humanist. Such a compilation is of course invaluable to anyone who wants to think deeply on the issues. It provides an empirical basis from which both to draw inspiration as well as to check conclusions. On the other hand as a narrative such a compilation is somewhat misleading from a historical point of view. It gives the past a spurious unity and coherence. In short, an uncritical reading would give the impression that there were during the middle ages a long and cohesive philosophical tradition that served as a universally acknowledged superstructure on the artistic life of the time. There is a tendency in historical scholarship to create epochs. Such have great intellectual value, and make the past more intelligible and graspable; but of course such epochs are only existent in the minds of the historians and by implication in those of their readers³.

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³ The tendency is very much disparaged by Collingwood, although of course their fruits become inescapable elements in the general discourse. Collingwood would not be able to dispense with notions such as 'the Middle Ages'