On Beauty and Art

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Contemporary aesthetic theory has broken the traditional link between beauty and art. The classical position that art is concerned with the creation of beauty is now considered a mere historical view. Hence, beauty is no longer considered a necessary quality of a work of art: good art need not be beautiful.

The distinction between art and beauty is not new. It is already stated in Platonic philosophy, although based on a different rationale. Art, according to Plato, is an imitation of concrete nature, which in itself imitates ideas. Art is false and illusory, and therefore cannot be truly beautiful. Real beauty which reflects the truth is the ideal beauty, unobtainable in the corporeal world. Plato condemned art and praised beauty. In the modern view, on the other hand, these perceptions have been reversed: not only is good art not necessarily beautiful art, but beauty has been rejected as illusory and superficial, whereas art is considered a lofty matter, worthy of contemplation. Art is perceived as expressing an existential or ideal truth, whereas beauty is centered on that which gives immediate, superficial pleasure to the senses.

The dissociation between beauty and art has been justified in modern thought from three major directions: I. The prevalent view in contemporary aesthetics that there is no quality essential to art except for the institutional recognition which defines the status of artifacts; II. Depreciation of the notion of beauty in
general, and identification of beauty with inferior values; III. Rejection of
classical values of beauty. In the following paragraphs I shall briefly examine
these justifications, and set out to demonstrate that they stem from a twofold
misconception: a misconception of the essence of beauty, a misconception of
the essence of art, and consequently – also a misconception of the
interrelations between the two.

I. The prevalent tendency to exhaust the discussion about art's essence under
the institutional definition makes it impossible to attribute any essential quality
to art, apart from its association with social-institutional activity. According to
this view, all the qualities that have been attributed to art are not fundamental
to it, nor do they express its essence, but rather the spirit of the time
(zeitgeist). In some eras, the emotional expression is regarded as most
important, while in others – beauty or the representation of reality are
perceived as such. The common denominator of all art works, according to
the institutional perception, does not lie in such qualities, but in the fact that
they are defined as art by the relevant institutions. A distinctive representative
of this view is George Dickie, whose view has provoked extensive debate.¹
Dickie holds that a work of art acquires its status by virtue of the institutional
authority, and not by virtue of its being beautiful, moving or depicting a certain
reality. Such ascription is not unique to art, nor does it indicate anything about
the reason for artistic practice.

The institutional definition answers the question: what is considered a work of
art, rather than the question: what art is. Evasion of the latter question has
kept out any theory striving to explore why art is created, consumed, etc. The institutional definition puts artistic practice in one basket with all other social activities, neglecting to explain the distinction between good art and bad art, or the differentiation between artistic practice and other activities which are similarly regulated by social institutions. In the process of institutional acceptance it is determined what art is, but such process is non indicative of the ideological distinctions between different works, and moreover, it does not answer the question: why we need such a social game. By the same token, an institutional definition of marriage answers the question: who is considered a married couple, but not the question: what good or bad marriage is, and why so many wish to wed. The vacuous nature of the institutional position exempts us from intricate questions regarding the nature of artistic activity, and for many this void is possibly where its appeal lies.

For those interested in the essence of art, regardless of the classification of any specific object, understating the (essential) link between art and beauty may hold a possible key. Addressing the question, what beauty is and why it is so important to us, may also shed light on our great interest in art and its diverse forms.

II. The depreciation in the status of beauty and its identification with inferior values stems from a misapprehension of beauty. Many tend to regard beauty as a quality pertaining to the object's external, superficial aspects, whether that object is an art work or alternatively, a person, a place or a vessel. In this context, beauty is perceived as that which lures the senses, obscuring the
object's real values. Reference to beauty as "skin deep"² expresses this view. It is commonly held that in a work of art there is more than meets the eye or ear, and therefore "beauty" cannot exhaust all that lends the work its value.

It is clear that the significance and value of an artwork are not determined solely by that which is perceived by the senses. This applies not only to art, but to any object. Sensory perception is not detached from our conceptual understanding of the object, its purpose and significance with respect to our interests. The belief that beauty concerns sensory perception alone is a fundamental misconception, for sensory perception cannot be detached from concepts. The beauty of an object is associated not only with its form, color or sound, but also with the conceptual context of these qualities. The same quality may contribute to the beauty of one object, yet detract from the beauty of another. A color beautiful in a flower may not necessarily be beautiful in a garment or on the wall. A beautiful painting is not beautiful because of a specific color, or the shape of the depicted object. Beauty is related to the whole, which brings together sensuous qualities, concepts and values, as well as historical, social and personal contexts. The beauty of an object results from the entire set of qualities perceived by the beholder. One spectator might see beauty where another sees none despite his keen eyesight, precisely because beauty is not conditioned only by what is visible, but also by concepts associated with the object. If the beauty of an object is indeed determined by the total array of interrelations between its properties (both sensual and conceptual), then one may discern beauty in a work of art, even if it is not agreeable to the eye.
Kant distinguished between "agreeableness" and "beauty": agreeableness rests entirely upon sensation and not upon cognition of the pleasing object. A cat relishing the warmth of the sun (presumably) does not understand how the sun warms it, but this does not interfere with the pleasantness of that warmth. Beauty, on the other hand, is conditioned by a combination of sensation and a conceptualization capacity. Kant attributed the ability to perceive beauty to human beings alone, holding that only they possess the necessary combination of sensuality (the bestial element) and intellect.³

Following Kant, one may judge a painting beautiful even if it does not elicit sensuous pleasure: its colors are somber; the composition is disharmonious, etc. Beauty results from the correlation between the different elements, including the conceptual ones. If the disagreeableness of the colors and forms is congruent with the subject matter of the painting, and sheds a new, significant light on the subject, then the painting is beautiful.

The beauty of the painted object, or that of the colors and forms on the canvas, do not directly determine the work's beauty. A beautiful work may be made of ugly or disagreeable materials, and vice versa. Not every painting of beautiful flowers is beautiful. Similarly, a delicious cake is made of ingredients which in themselves are usually not tasty: oil, flour, yeast, and the like. The cake's taste, like the beauty of an art work, lies in the interrelations between the various qualities – both sensual and conceptual, and their processing mode. It is commonly held that a modern art work is not necessarily beautiful
because modern art presents ugly objects, and at least partly employs disagreeable sensual qualities that inspire gloom, disgust or disconcert.

The confusion between agreeableness and beauty is one of the most common misconceptions to have given rise to the differentiation between artistic value and beauty. Nelson Goodman in his seminal book, *Languages of Art*, maintains that attribution of beauty to art is erroneous since many good art works are ugly. A similar argument is also introduced by Arthur Danto, although both of them, like many others, do not elucidate the difference between beauty and artistic value, and according to their examples, they refer to beauty and agreeableness interchangeably, and determine the beauty of the work according to the beauty of the object or the agreeableness of the work’s constituent elements.

Danto sets out to show that in modern art in particular, engagement with the ugly was widespread, and therefore beauty must not be ascribed to this art. Engagement with the ugly, distorted, flawed, and disconcerting, however, has been typical of art works in every field and every era. The sight of the crucified Christ, blood oozing from his arms and legs nailed to the cross, is not a pleasant sight, but it was nevertheless a prevalent theme which has given rise to beautiful works in European art for centuries.

III. The third misconception stems from the belief that rejection of some image of beauty is a rebellion against beauty as such. While modern art rejected 19th century bourgeois images of beauty, this does not imply that it did not
create beauty. On the contrary, rejection of prevalent images typifies good art, which introduces new images. If these images are convincing, making the spectator see the world or some aspects of it with fresh eyes, then that rebellion must not be construed as a rejection of beauty, but rather as the introduction of a new image of beauty instead of the former one.

Images of beauty change according to the beliefs, interests and ideals prevalent in society in a given period. This explains why fashion changes; why styles which appeared beautiful at one time, might appear grotesque later on: the change in the dominant values caused a change in the status of the images of beauty founded on these values. For example, when corpulence was considered a manifestation of health, serenity and fertility, women of size were considered beautiful. When these beliefs changed, and life styles with them, thinness became a dominant ingredient in the image of female beauty. Does the rejection of a certain image of beauty imply a sweeping rejection of beauty and preference for the ugly? Not at all. Modern art created new images of beauty which are incongruent with the classical ones, but this does not imply that an Impressionist or a Cubist painting is ugly only because it was not conceived according to the classical academic format. Duchamp, who adorned the Mona Lisa's face with a moustache, indeed uglified her as a female figure, yet it does not follow that the beauty or ugliness of the depicted figure determines the value of the painting. If we deem Duchamp's irony and the artistic criticism arising from his variation on Leonardo da Vinci's painting innovative, engaging and teaching us to look differently at the familiar, then it may be said that although the depicted woman has grown somewhat ugly,
Duchamp’s work is beautiful. Images of beauty are dynamic in every field – the beauty of people, objects, and landscapes. There is no point in clinging to the idea that art's images of beauty are fixed, and that deviation from them produces ugliness.

Notes

2. The expression originated in a 16th century poem praising the qualities of the ideal wife whose external beauty is the least of her qualities: “And all the carnal beauty of my wife / Is but skin-deep.” (Thomas Overbury)

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