

How have beauty and the grotesque been portrayed in art



Is beauty in the eye of the beholder, or does it stem from the artists' brush?

Where can we find beauty in art; in landscape, people, myth or still life?

Camille Picasso believe that ' happy are those who see beautiful things in modest surroundings or where other men see nothing. Everything is beautiful, all that matters is to know how to interpret

In contrast, grotesque images are a different problem. It is hardly a popular opinion that ugliness surrounds us as beauty does, so we must ask ourselves, where has the numerous examples of the grotesqueness in art arisen from? Is it in the eye of the beholder or is it staring us in the face all over the world. This is not a project to investigate the psychological role in the perception of the beautiful and of the grotesque. Instead I am studying how various artists have found their individual way to interpret the world around them by using different styles and techniques, and how they created a piece of exquisiteness or of grotesque works of art.

Leonardo Da Vinci is perhaps the most recognised and applauded artist when studying the contrast between the beauty and grotesqueness the human body is able to offer. He was born April 15, 1452 in the small town of Vinci which is located near Florence Italy. He was said to be the son of a peasant woman and a wealthy Florentine notary. Sometime in the 1460's, his family moved to Florence - the artistic centre of Italy at the time - where he received one of the better educations available in the city. From 1516 to his death in 1519 he resided in France under the service of King Francis I spending his years at the Chateau de Cloux where he died on May 2, 1519.

Da Vinci's grotesque Heads are numerous and certainly live up to their title. His uncompromising depiction of human oddities proved to be extremely popular in the Renaissance. They conformed to the growing taste for grotesquery in Italian novelle from tradition of Boccaccio. The grotesque heads provided Da Vinci with a counterpart to the beautiful, and it is obvious he paid particular attention to the great prominence of idiosyncratic features in the aged. In his memoranda, it is confirmed that he sought out people with 'fantastic' features and then fused with his own varying degrees of exaggeration. Leonardo Da Vinci helps introduce to this contextual study the close-knit relationship between old age and the grotesque.

His fascination, however, did not lie solely in the power of the grotesque; it also rested heavily in beauty. Da Vinci said himself 'the eye is the window of the human body through which it feels its way and enjoys the beauty of the world.' Da Vinci is able to capture the beauty of youthfulness flawlessly as he focuses on women and places his models in quite an innocent pose to amplify the innocent idea of beauty. Soft pastels and colours are generally used to achieve a smooth effect. In contrast to the grotesque heads, which vary greatly in that their features and head shape and can be distorted in so many ways, Da Vinci's drawings and paintings of the beautiful women are very similar as they all have to conform to the idea of beauty of his time (which hasn't changed greatly in the present day)- straight nose, large eyes, a slight smile, rounded cheeks and so on.

A discreet likeness may be seen within all of Leonardo's beautiful sketches and paintings with many depictions of the Virgin Mary. This is probably

because Mary is seen by all who believe in her, as the ultimate example of purity and innocence. May be this is what we understand as beautiful.

Religion features heavily in much art conveying the beautiful and the grotesque. It is natural for us to think that Christ, God and many other religious icons are worshiped and therefore would be portrayed as nothing but striking and beautiful. This is not the case, however. If we look at the appalling way in which Christ died, many opportunities arise for a grotesque masterpiece. Graham Sutherland managed to paint the crucifixion of Jesus in a completely new, abstract and grotesque style. The fact that he was a dedicated Catholic in a way lessened the grotesqueness of his Christ, as it was clear he was not making a controversial statement against religion, he was merely expressing his own, unique vision of Christ and his death.

Graham Vivian Sutherland was born on August 24, 1903 in London, the son of a lawyer who later became a civil servant. He was primarily a painter of imaginative landscapes, portraits and still lifes. From 1920 to 1925 he studied at Goldsmiths' College School of Art, specializing in printmaking. In 1926 Sutherland converted to Roman Catholicism. The following year he married Kathleen Barry. He taught at Kingston School of Art, Chelsea School of Art, Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford, and at Goldsmiths', until after World War II when he decided to become a full-time painter. Graham Sutherland died in 1980.

Sutherland uses abstraction masterfully to conjure a grotesque image of Christ. Strict contortion of the face (as we have observed in Da Vinci's work) makes a particularly painful and striking effect. The fact that the figure is

compiled of large blocks of various colours and size draw attention to the excruciating shape the body is forced to conform to. The blood pouring from Christ's wrists and head are in sharp, straight lines that produce a powerful effect and therefore never let the viewer forget the grotesque pain that Jesus is experiencing.

There are numerable counterparts to Sutherlands grotesque depiction of Christ. Warner Sallman was a very adamant believer and produced countless paintings of the beauty he called Christ. He was fascinated by all kinds of religious art, such as stained glass windows and paintings of Biblical scenes. Below is just one example of his paintings of Christ, and we may notice he has used light colours and a lot of white (the colour of innocence), with much flowing fabrics. Even though there is some abstract design and patterns within the picture, they are generally encompassing Jesus, rather than actually creating him

Religion can be observed in vast quantities throughout the art world, but there is another branch of mystical deities and wonders that have been depicted in almost the same amount and glory. I speak of myths, be it Greek or Roman or British folk tales; there have been copious grotesque evil or stupid characters and just as many beautiful heroines and heroes. Aubrey Beardsley using his famous crisp line drawings has recreated many scenes of these mythological fables.

This picture relates back to the story of Salome and John the Baptist. It says that the King asked her to dance the dance of the seven veils, and as a reward she may chose anything she should wish for. She ordered for John the

Baptists head and to add an even more grotesque tone to the scene, Beardsley has depicted the dancer as about to kiss the dead Baptist's head. The facial expression is quite menacing and the fact that Salome is floating adds another layer of wickedness to the illustration. In fact Beardsley had such a fascination with the grotesque he once said himself " I have one aim - the grotesque. If I am not grotesque I am nothing,"

Beardsley's art has gone in and out of fashion many times over the last century. But there is no doubt he has had a lasting impression on many artists who followed him. His life was a brief one. Born in 1872, he achieved fame early, but was dead by age twenty-five. Beardsley had an amazing talent in being able to capture the utterly grotesque and the stunningly beautiful in a single line. In many of his later works, Beardsley's tendencies to the grotesque, the erotic in a corrupt way, and the amoral are more pronounced than in his earlier work. Yet throughout there is a power to his work that could not be ignored. To quote from Walter Crane:

' His work shows a delicate sense of line, and a bold, decorative use of solid blacks, as well as an extraordinarily weird fancy and grotesque imagination, which seems occasionally inclined to run in a morbid direction... ..there appears to be a strong mediaeval decorative feeling, mixed with a curious weird Japanese-like spirit of diablerie and grotesque, as of the opium-dream.'

In Beardsley's illustrations the clothing is generally long and flowing, on the females and starched and crisp on the males. This consequentially gives an air of sophistication, authority and beauty. On the more grotesque characters are long shorts that go in at the knee or more ragged clothes.

This method of using clothes to distinguish between the beautiful and the grotesque, the poor and the rich and the powerful and the weak has been used throughout the centuries. William Beech (1753-1839) adopted this technique in his painting 'Portrait of Sir Francis Ford's children giving a coin to a beggar.

In the eighteenth century the upper class regarded the lower class as almost grotesque while they remained the vision of beauty. This is powerfully conveyed through the clothes and colour of the skin. The children are seen here, giving a beggar money as the Lord Ford himself would never be seen doing it himself as this was completely against the society of the upper class. Dark, sombre colours have been used to dress the beggar in; they are torn and dirty as his skin. Grey colours have been used to paint the flesh and this sharply contrasts with the rosy cheeks of the Lord's two children. The children on the other hand have long flowing and shimmering clothes to reflect the wealth and splendour they enjoy. These clothes are beautiful simply because of the shape they fall into, with large curves and smooth bands of different materials.

Leonardo Da Vinci also realised the effect fabric can have on the portrayal of beauty. All the figurative objects of beauty within his paintings and sketches are entwined in light, cascading fabrics. It seems as if they add to the sense of innocence how they cover up the entire female body with fabric but they also manage to show off some of the feminine curves. The innocent woman intertwined in flowing fabric results in an image of beauty.

Some artists however use no accessories to the figures in their paintings, only use the figures themselves to create beauty or the grotesque. The human body can do amazing things but in art they have no restrictions. Michael Ayrton has created a truly grotesque image by stretching and distorting the body and also utilising light by fusing in fantastical colours to add to the general feeling of mystery and grotesquery.

From the many artists that have been looked at, it seems that the grotesque in figurative depictions have to be mixed with some sort of distortion or move away from reality, where as the beautiful is generally depicting the innocent side of reality. Here I adopt and adapt their various techniques and styles from the abstract Christ by Sutherland to the dramatic elongation of Ayrton to produce what I fell is a truly grotesque image.

It is not only figurative drawings, paintings and sculptures that provoke a feeling of beauty or of the grotesque. Landscapes have their own unique way of conveying an awesome feeling of power, beauty, ugliness or brutality. Constable managed to recreate perfect country landscapes and turn them into beautiful immortal paintings. Every detail was meticulously captured, using the most accurate styles and techniques to depict reality.

Constable was born on June 11, 1776, (one year after Turner) in East Bergholt, Suffolk, the son of a prosperous corn merchant with two water mills and 90 acres of land. After leaving Dedham Grammar School, he worked in the family business but his real desire was to be an artist. In 1795 he met Sir George Beaumont an amateur painter, who showed him a landscape painting by Claude Lorrain, enticing Constable to study art and in 1799 his

father allow him to attend the Royal Academy. He exhibited his first landscape paintings in 1802 after which he developing a distinctly individual style. In 1816, on the death of his father, Constable became financially secure and married Maria Bicknell, whom he had courted for seven years and was the guiding passion in his life. The couple moved to Hampstead Heath, London, in 1821 and had seven children, five of whom became artists.

All that Constable hoped to achieve through his art is summed up in a revealing comment he made in David Lucas's 'English Landscape Scenery'; "to increase the interest for ... and study of the Rural Scenery of England with all its endearing associations, its amenities, and even in its most simple locations; abounding as it does in grandeur, and every description of Pastoral Beauty."

The Royal Academy refused Constable full membership until 1829, his work received little recognition in England. In France, however, where his famous Haywain (exhibited RA 1821 see below) and later exhibited in the Salon, Paris in 1824, was much admired by the romantic painter Eugène Delacroix, by the Barbizon painters, who, following Constable's example, began to paint outdoors, and by the Impressionists, who sought to capture the effects of light. He died in London, on March 31, 1837.

Constable manages to capture beauty by using light and detail as a tool to convey the mood. Are grotesque paintings or drawings of landscapes formed using the same devices? Paul Nash has studied the most grotesque aspect of man - war. We have torn apart the beauty that is nature and created barren, cold land that has no use for us or for animals. Nash manages to create

images that are so powerful that they may even be beautiful, but overclouding any beauty that may be present is the feeling of war and grotesqueness of what man is capable of creating.

Paul Nash, the son of a successful lawyer, was born London in 1899. Nash was educated at St. Paul's School and the Slade School of Art. Influenced by the work of William Blake, Nash had one-man shows in 1912 and 1913. On the outbreak Nash enlisted in the Artists' Rifles and was sent to the Western Front. Nash, who took part in the offensive at Ypres, had reached the rank of lieutenant in the Hampshire Regiment by 1916. Whenever possible, Nash made sketches of life in the trenches. In May, 1917 he was invalided home after a non-military accident. While recuperating in London, Nash worked from his sketches to produce a series of war paintings. This work was well-received when exhibited later that year.

Nash sums up his thoughts on the scene he observes extremely well with every picture he constructs. 'The great stones were then in their wild state, so to speak. Some were half-covered by the grass, others stood up in cornfields or were entangled or overgrown in the copses, some were buried under the turf. But they were wonderful and disquieting, and as I saw them then, I shall always remember them.' This kind of feeling is conjured whenever I look at his paintings and I can only feel sadness, pity and awe.

Nash has depicted perfectly the destruction man brings upon this world. I have observed the same theme -less dramatically- around the area where I live. If a lush, full forest is compared to the car parks and Tesco's of urban London, I feel appalled at how ugly and grotesque we have made our world.

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We have faded out organic shapes and greenery and brought in strict symmetry and dull colours. The buildings surrounding Hammersmith have harsh lines and are built purely for convenience and practicality rather than for any form of aesthetics. Even though the architects may push at incorporating the idea of beauty, they have failed miserably when their creations are put side by side with the immense beauty of nature.

It is possible that the reason something is beautiful in the figurative world is similar to what makes a landscape beautiful. Organic curves and shapes with no harsh lines or symmetrical straight edges. A grotesque landscape -similar the grotesque figure-, however, is distorted and battered with dark colours associated with decay and gloom.

Countless artists have tackled beauty and grotesqueness using many techniques and styles. There is one clear theme running through all aspects of art depicting one of these two extremities; this is that beauty takes its own form in the real world, in nature, in youth, in women and in organic, whole shapes. Beauty's opposite however, takes the form of decay, the effect of age, haggard lines and crumbling images. Whether applying it to faces, landscapes or the clothes people wear, beauty and grotesqueness lie in the same places. Maybe this is not a question of art, but one of psychology. Possibly the artists draw on all the aspects that each human being inertly regards as grotesque or utterly beautiful and it is then easy for them to conjure up a desired grotesque or beautiful image.