

Concept of beauty according to the western philosophers



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Concept of Beauty according to the Western Philosophers “ Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” John Keats Beauty is an emotional element, a pleasure of ours, which nevertheless we regard as a quality of thing.

The ideas of beauty is found in almost every culture and at almost every time in human history, with many similarities. Beauty was and still is a term of great esteem linking human beings and nature with artistic practices and works since the early civilizations. From the early cultures, beauty, goodness and truth are customarily related. Beauty here carries a double meaning, inclusive and exclusive. In the inclusive sense, beauty pertains to anything worthy of approbation, to human virtues and characters, to nobility and goodness, to hidden things and truth, to the natural and divine worlds.

In the exclusive, restricted sense, it pertains to how things appear, their manifestations, and to the joys human beings experience when presented with beautiful things, human bodies, artifacts, natural creatures and things. When we talk about the beauty in works of art, we are talking about this latter beauty, and experiencing this beauty refers to the aesthetic experience. Such beauty is the higher degree of it and the experience of it last in us beyond the time and space. The nature of beauty and its role in philosophy and aesthetics was explained from the early periods and its evolution as described by the philosophers and writers as follows: ~PLATO~ (428 or 427 - 348 or 347 B. C) Plato had a love-hate relationship with the arts. He must have had some love for the arts, because he talks about them often, and his remarks show that he paid close attention to what he saw and heard.

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He was also a fine literary stylist and a great story-teller; in fact he is said to have been a poet before he encountered Socrates and became a philosopher. Some of his dialogues are real literary masterpieces. On the other hand, he found the arts threatening. He proposed sending the poets and playwrights out of his ideal Republic, or at least censoring what they wrote; and he wanted music and painting severely censored.

The arts, he thought, are powerful shapers of character. Thus, to train and protect ideal citizens for an ideal society, the arts must be strictly controlled. Plato had two theories of art. One may be found in his dialogue *The Republic*, and seems to be the theory that Plato himself believed.

According to this theory, since art imitates physical things, which in turn imitate the Forms, art is always a copy of a copy, and leads us even further from truth and toward illusion. For this reason, as well as because of its power to stir the emotions, art is dangerous. Plato's other theory is hinted at in his shorter dialogue *Ion*, and in his exquisitely crafted *Symposium*.

According to this theory the artist, perhaps by divine inspiration, makes a better copy of the True than may be found in ordinary experience. Thus the artist is a kind of prophet.

Here are some features of the two theories: 1. Art is imitation This is a feature of both of Plato's theories. Of course he was not the first or the last person to think that art imitates reality. The idea was still very strong in the Renaissance, when most people thought that a picture must be a picture of something, and that an artist is someone who can make a picture that "looks just like the real thing". It wasn't until late in the nineteenth century

that the idea of art as imitation began to fade from western aesthetics, to be replaced by theories about art as expression, art as communication, art as pure form, art as whatever elicits an “aesthetic” response, and a number of other theories. So art is imitation.

But what does it imitate? In the Republic, Plato says that art imitates the objects and events of ordinary life. In other words, a work of art is a copy of a copy of a Form. It is even more of an illusion than is ordinary experience. On this theory, works of art are at best entertainment and at worst a dangerous delusion. Whereas in the Symposium, he talks of art as imitation of the divine beauty and eternal truth. 2.

Art is powerful, and therefore dangerous Poetry, drama, music, painting, dance, all stir up our emotions. All of the arts move people powerfully. They can strongly influence our behavior, and even our character. For that reason Plato insisted that music (especially music), along with poetry and drama and the other arts, should be part of the education of young citizens in his ideal republic, but should be strictly censored to present, at first, only the good. Plato's influence came into the medieval European tradition through the filter of Neoplatonism, a much later modification of Platonic teachings that flourished in the centuries just before and after the time of Jesus.

The most famous neo-Platonist was Plotinus. Plotinus and the other neo-Platonists made much of the idea of Beauty, and the soul's quest for it, as described in the Symposium. Through neoplatonism, Plato's second theory (art as imitation of eternal Beauty and eternal Truth) became the channel of his influence on the western middle ages and the renaissance. ARISTOTLE~ (

384-322 BC) In The School of Athens, the fresco by Raphael, Plato and Aristotle stand side by side.

Plato points to the heavens, to the ideal world of the Forms. Aristotle is shown with his hand open toward the earth. The painting shows how passionate Renaissance intellectuals were about the views and achievements of the ancient Greeks and Romans. It also accurately portrays the difference between Plato and Aristotle. It's a difference that shows up in their approaches to the arts. Aristotle took time and change more seriously than did Plato.

Not surprisingly, he was also somewhat friendlier to the passions than was Plato; though he, too, thought that the moral virtues were various habits of rational control over the passions. Like Plato, Aristotle thought that art involved imitation (mimesis), though on this point as on many others he was flexible and allowed for exceptions. He also thought harder than Plato about what art imitated. For example, he says that Tragedy is an imitation "not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery" (Poetics 1451b). Thus he leans toward the "art as imitation of the ideal" theory that Plato might have developed, but never did. Aristotle's Poetics is largely devoted to drama, in particular to tragedy.

Aristotle provides both a history of the development of poetry and drama, and a critical framework for evaluating tragic drama. The Poetics is the first systematic essay in literary theory, full of insight, and showing a high degree of flexibility in the application of its general rules. Like many of Aristotle's other attempts to systematize knowledge about an area, this framework has

had a strong influence up to the present day, and was particularly influential during the Renaissance and the early modern European periods. Aristotle stresses the need for a work to be unified. The plot should be unified, portraying, in effect, one extended action which is set up, develops, and comes to a climactic conclusion.

The character of the protagonists should be consistent, and the action should be the sort of action those characters would produce under those circumstances. The time of the action should also be unified, so that the plot can be held in memory as one action. Aristotle thought this would usually imply that the action would occur within one day. These “Unities” of action, character, and time were developed and added to by Renaissance writers to produce a code of “decorum” for dramatic productions, and failure to observe the “Unities” was often taken to mean failure of a work. Of course this brought a rebellion against Aristotle, who was not in fact responsible for the excesses of this code, and no doubt had no intention of producing a set of rules for dramatists in the first place. His critical standards no longer rule the evaluation of plays and novels, let alone other works.

But the Poetics remains an impressive accomplishment, and many of its insights continue to ring true. It still seems a good general rule that a plot should be unified; that in a drama character should be revealed by action; that surprising turns are a great help to a plot, as long as they are not implausible; that one should not try to cover too great a length of actual time within the time of the play. The idea of catharsis is a potent one; and so is the idea that art portrays the universal, “not a thing that has been, but a kind of thing that might be. ~RENE DESCARTES~ (1596-1650) He described <https://assignbuster.com/concept-of-beauty-according-to-the-western-philosophers/>

the beauty and perfection of god's works and the divine light. As late as the eighteenth century, beauty retained its relation to divinity and perfection, expressed in art.

Even so, with Descartes and his time a transformation of the world began that included alterations in the practice and understanding of art and in the thought of beauty and beautiful things. In a universe made by god, the beauty and perfection of the world are immediate and infinitely important.

~GEORGE BERKELEY~ (1685-1753) A man needs no argument to make him discern and approve what is beautiful; it strikes as first sight, and attracts without a reason. And as this beauty is found in shape and form of corporeal things, so is there analogous to it, which is a beauty of another kind; an order, a symmetry, and comeliness in the moral world. And as the eyes perceive, so do by a certain interior sense perceive the other, which sense, talent or faculty is ever quickest and purest in the noble mind. " George Berkeley (1685-1753) is Irish philosopher and critics.

He had moral sense theory of ethical judgment, which eliminates the traditional conception of moral rules as divine commands known by revelation as a main target of Berkeley's attack. Francis Hutcheson offered his account of the sense of beauty as an introduction to his theory of the moral sense, Berkeley extended his attack to Hutcheson's aesthetics. He exclaimed his response to beauty need not always be a response to the appearance of usefulness; e. g. Greek columns are tapered to look stable even though they would actually be stable with being tapered.

The arguing issue raised remained a live one for aesthetics theory entities radical transformation in the post- Kantian period. ~IMMANUEL KANT~ (1724-1804) Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), German Enlightenment philosopher whose original and powerful philosophy has shaped most subsequent western thought. He was a popular lecturer, and was capable of a lively, readable style; although his major works are as dense and difficult as they are influential. (Kant defended this as a deliberate choice, since he wanted to examine what could be known about the mind in itself, or a priori, without depending on particular examples. Kant produced an early treatise on aesthetics, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1763), and did not write on the subject again until the end of his career, in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

In between the two works came the development of his influential critical philosophy. Although Kant saw the *Critique of Judgment* as the key work which connected his writings on epistemology (the theory of knowledge) in the *Critique of Pure Reason* with his writings on ethics in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, it is not necessary to know these other works in order to understand the most influential parts of Kant's aesthetics. Like many other writers on aesthetics before him, Kant's main interest was not in art per se, but in Beauty (and along with other eighteenth century writers, in the Sublime). Thus most of his remarks are as relevant to the beautiful or sublime in nature as in art. Like other Enlightenment writers, (e.g. , Hutcheson and Hume), Kant also thought that Beauty or Sublimity were not really properties of objects, but ways in which we respond to objects. And like these other writers, Kant was concerned to show that this focus on the <https://assignbuster.com/concept-of-beauty-according-to-the-western-philosophers/>

subjective aesthetic response did not make aesthetic value a mere function of individual or personal taste. Kant's way of working out these problems is what makes his aesthetics original and influential.

He claimed that judgments of taste are both subjective and universal. They are subjective; because they are responses of pleasure, and do not essentially involve any claims about the properties of the object itself. (What matters is not the picture I see; rather it is the pleasing effect of the picture on me.) On the other hand, aesthetic judgments are universal and not merely personal.

That's because in a crucial way they must be disinterested. When I am appreciating a painting aesthetically, I am not thinking about how much money it's worth, or whether it is a portrait of a family member, or even about who painted it, except in so far as knowing the painter helps me see what's in the work. These non-aesthetic interests are extraneous to my appreciation of the painting. Rather I am pleased by the painting just for what it is, apart from anything I may get out of it. In fact I do not even take an ethical interest in the painting's subject (that is, any ethical interest is separate from this disinterested pleasure I take in the painting). Taste that requires an added element of charm and emotion for its delight, not to speak of adopting this as the measure of its approval, has not emerged from barbarism".

Kant thought that for aesthetic judgments to be both subjective and universal, they had to be about form. Beauty should be " a question merely of the form". More specifically, the object being contemplated (e. g.

, a work of art, or an actual landscape) must display a kind of undefined purposive ness, such that it seems to be organized with a final purpose in mind, although it is not possible to say what that purpose is. Thus a work of art, or a beautiful natural object, displays a kind of free play of forms, consistent with the presence of a purpose to which we don't have access. So intent was Kant on emphasizing the formal properties of the objects of aesthetic attention that he was unwilling to include color among the aesthetically relevant properties of an object. Color, in his view, is mere decoration; design and composition are what really matter . To sum up this point about form in Kant's own words: " A judgment of taste which is uninfluenced by charm or emotion (though these may be associated with the delight in the beautiful), and whose determining ground, therefore, is simply finality of form, is a pure judgment of taste. " Kant divided the kinds of aesthetic response into responses to the Beautiful and the Sublime.

The one represents a pleasure in order, harmony, delicacy and the like. The other is a response of awe before the infinite or the overwhelming. While the beautiful presents the appearance of form, the sublime may often seem formless. The pleasure it gives us derives from our awareness that there is something in us that transcends the overwhelming power or infinity outside us. Finally, Kant had things to say about genius. In short, he thought that genius has its own rules, and one cannot dictate to it.

How Kant arrived at his conclusions is not easily shown; and it is no surprise that the philosophical reasoning that grounds those conclusions did not follow them into the cultural mainstream. But the conclusions themselves proved quite influential. His remarks on genius, and on purposive ness in art <https://assignbuster.com/concept-of-beauty-according-to-the-western-philosophers/>

and nature, had an impact on the development of Romantic aesthetics.

Later, the idea of a disinterested appreciation of form became a watchword for philosophers and critics like Clement Greenberg who defended abstract art. In literary criticism, the New Criticism which focused on the text itself, and its philosophical defense by Beardsley and Wimsatt, were similarly inspired.

~HEGEL~ (1770- 1831) Hegel was perhaps the first western philosopher to take time, change and history seriously, in the sense that he took them to be essential to what philosophy studies, rather than a distraction from the realm of the ideal, the essential and the rational. In that respect he was the very opposite of Plato. At the same time he was an idealist, which means (in his case) that he thought that all that truly existed was rationality. In his famous words, “ the real is the rational and the rational is the real.

” He saw history as the process in which Spirit or Consciousness comes to self-realization. This historical process occurs in dialectical stages. The first stage is a thesis; a contradictory antithesis follows this; and finally a synthesis reconciles or “ mediates” the two and becomes, in turn, a new thesis. At the most general level the stages are Spirit In Itself (the thesis), Spirit For Itself (the antithesis), and finally Spirit In and For Itself (the synthesis).

This was Hegel’s version of the Christian Trinity. Hegel was an art lover and a student of the arts, and developed a more complete philosophy of art than most philosophers before him. In keeping with his emphasis on the historical development of ideas and of consciousness, he claimed that: 1) Art

expresses the spirit of particular cultures, as well as that of individual artists and the general human spirit.) There is progress in art (no surprise here, as Hegel thought that history in general was moving forward to a climax). When he first began thinking about the philosophy of art, Hegel was influenced by the ideas of Kant, Schiller and Schelling.

He was inclined to think that artistic expression and artistic consciousness were a kind of climax of the history of the human spirit, and that art reveals truth in a direct, intuitive way. In his more mature work, from the Phenomenology of Spirit through the Lectures on Aesthetics, Hegel backed away from Kant's position, and held that the climactic stages of human history were purely rational, and did not involve intuition, emotion or image as the arts do. The three main stages of art history recognized by Hegel in his lectures on Aesthetics are symbolic, classical, and romantic art. Each of these is defined by the relationship between idea and form that is common within it. In the first or symbolic stage, a powerful idea is expressed in a variety of forms that are felt as not really adequate to its expression. As a result, the form is distorted in the attempt to accommodate the transcendent power of the idea.

Hegel took ancient Egyptian and Indian art as examples of this, with their animal-headed gods and monstrous demons and heroes. Equally powerful examples could be seen in traditional African and in ancient Inca art: e. g. , fertility gods with exaggerated sexual characteristics, protective deities with ferocious animal teeth or claws. The second stage is exemplified by classical Greek sculpture.

Here the perfect, idealized human form embodies the ideal without any sense of distortion. But while the perfection is evident, the depth of the idea expressed is limited. Hence the third stage, romantic art, stresses inwardness. When it uses images, it often emphasizes the inadequacy of the image to carry the idea, now apprehended more adequately in an inward way.

Much Christian art has this character, focusing as it does on the crucifixion, on martyrdoms and sufferings. Along with his division of western art into periods, Hegel also arranged the particular arts hierarchically, from those most tied to image and the physical, and hence most suited to symbolic art (e. . , architecture) to those most suited to inwardness and the self-realization of Spirit (e. g.

, poetry). However, he did not stick woodenly to these categories, and recognized the ability of artists in each of the arts to make works representing each of his three stages. Perhaps the most famous of Hegel's claims about art is that art comes to an end. As Spirit reaches its full self-realization, the need for images and symbols withers away, and with it goes the need for any art that uses physical means to express itself. This " end of art" thesis is puzzling in somewhat the same way that his " end of history" thesis itself is puzzling. Hegel does not seem to have meant by it that art would stop altogether; but rather that the need for it, and its role in the development of spirit would be fulfilled.

~FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE~ (1844-1900) German Philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche's famous response in the birth of tragedy to Hegel's claim

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concerning the end of art was that art represents the highest task and the truly metaphysically activity of this life (1968). His insistence that tragedy was originally both Apollonian and Dionysian associated the Apollonian with order, perfection, appearance, and light, Dionysian rapture, frenzy, intoxication, and terror, closer to sublime. The theory requires both; beauty may be understood to include rapture and frenzy, to include the excesses of the sublime. The distinction between them (art), beauty and sublimity, bringing beauty back to infinity as excess, beyond measure.

One response of the issues in that beauty is the idea and art the practice that has most resisted this separation. Beauty means something more than appearance, but pertains to something fundamental in works and things to him. ~SCHOPENHAUER~ (1788-1860) Schopenhauer claimed that art provides knowledge of eternal Platonic Ideas and also results in temporary relief from the pressures of willing. Arthur Schopenhauer's aesthetics flow from his doctrine of the primacy of the Will as the thing in itself, the ground of life and all being; and from his judgment that the Will is evil.

Schopenhauer held that art offered a way for people to temporarily escape servitude to the Will, and from the suffering that such servitude entails. For Schopenhauer, the Will is an aimless desire to perpetuate itself, the basis of life. Desire engendered by the Will is the source of all the sorrow in the world; each satisfied desire leaves us either with boredom, or with some new desire to take its place. For Schopenhauer, a world in thrall to Will is necessarily a world of suffering. Since the Will is the source of life, and our very bodies are stamped with its image and designed to serve its purpose, the human intellect is, in Schopenhauer's simile, like a lame man who can
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see, but who rides on the shoulders of a blind giant. Schopenhauer's aesthetics is an attempt to break out of the pessimism that naturally comes from this world view.

Schopenhauer believed that what distinguished aesthetic experiences from other experiences is that contemplation of the object of aesthetic appreciation temporarily allowed the subject a respite from the strife of desire, and allowed the subject to enter a realm of purely mental enjoyment, the world purely as representation or mental image. The more a person's mind is concerned with the world as representation, the less it feels the suffering of the world as will. Schopenhauer analyzed art from its effects, both on the personality of the artist, and the personality of the viewer.

~BENEDETTO CROCE~ (1866-1952) Croce was an Italian idealist philosopher. His idea an art can be found in his work "Breviario di estetica" (The Essence of Aesthetic). In this theory, he first set the definite position of art as supreme realm through a process of negation whose theory is thus, called tautological.

He insists the importance of art than any other realms that it can not be included in that of any others; logic, history, economics, physics, mathematics, religion, politics, and even morality, truth, sensation, pleasure and emotion. Art is a valuable subject than others like science, because it is the art alone that can edify us. According to him, our knowledge can be reduced into only two categories; logic and imaginary and art belongs to latter. Art is the objective expression of imagery, and this imaginary is not a super natural one but has its source in our deepest inner life.

It is inward, the mental images and that human intuition is the only source to form this ideal imaginary. Beauty, in fact, is the expression, the crystallization of this human imagination in its ideal state. By expressing his inner vision into the work of art through respective mediums, artist liberates and frees himself from it. In this process, artist gains the state of both; the maximum sensibility or passion, and maximum insensibility or Olympian serenity.

When artist is able to express his inner vision successfully, the work of art is called beautiful. If the artist fails to do so, then the work of art appears as 'Ugly', and for Croce, this 'Ugly' is the result of unsuccessful expression of man that it can not be considered under the category of aesthetic. Beauty for Croce, totally depend on the human expression which has a main source in his intuition. Intuition is free from any concept.

The power of art lies on this intuitive expression. He distinguishes the work of expression from that of representation, saying that it is by the work which gives expression that connoisseur is allowed to gain a unique experience. Thus for Croce, the representative art and art of mere imitation of natural beauty are derivative. ~SIR HERBERT EDWARD READ ~ (1893-1968) " Art is an attempt to create pleasing form" According to Read, art is the expression of aesthetic sensibility, key factor that man objects his subjective feeling and emotion to the objective world.

Further, art is a psychological process that had evolved simultaneously to the evolution of human consciousness. Art is therefore a biological phenomenon. His account on concept of beauty can be found in his work, "

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Education through Art". In this philosophical work, he assumed that beauty is the essence of art, and tries to unite various accounts on beauty, but fails to do so; on the one hand, he is a Platonist claiming that beauty consists in the conformity of forms to mathematical norms which also underlies the appearances of the natural world; but on the other hand, he insists that pleasure is the essence of beauty, reducing judgment about beauty to mere expression of personal likes or dislikes. ~CONCLUSION~ Through ages the popular concept of beauty has evolved considerably from being considered a material feature of a form to the concept of the ideal eternal beauty.

I believe in the existence of an ideal supreme beauty. It must be this ideal that every artist thrives to reach. However I believe that as an integral feature of the world of limited perceptions that we humans exist in, it is absolutely impossible to achieve that ideal. What we can aspire to achieve in this existence is just a thin slice of the actual absolute beauty permitted by the limited dimensions we can perceive. On a seemingly contradictory note, I consider beauty as entirely subjective and is not associated to the object on which the aesthetic value is assigned to. My idea of an absolute beauty is not objective in nature.

It is not an objective entity towards which all aspirations point to. It is rather a level of aesthetic experience which could have been achievable through individual subjective approach if humans could transcend the boundaries of our own existence. It is in fact absurd to discuss about an absolute ideal beauty which is inherently out of our reach by the very intrinsic nature of our existence. However it is our idea of the nature of the ideal which makes our quest for it, though futile, worthwhile.

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