

Themes of beauty in victorian art



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In discussion of ' beauty' within Victorian artwork, it is first crucial to distinguish between the contemporary understanding of both the ' subjective' and ' objective'. This is an inherent discussion of the internal and external, the author and the beholder; one way to approach this might be to consider whether the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (and followers) painted the ' beautiful' as a result of self-indulgence, or for the beholder/critic. One might perceive their work as idealistic, part of a process through which the artist can escape the society they were rebelling, or rather as a didactic tool, apt for social critique.

Because the Pre-Raphaelites were reacting with distaste to the Royal Academy and its traditions, they navigated more ' pleasing' alternative subject and style through imagination, which sought to revive a fictitious medieval society. The artist, influenced by dominant cultural expectations, will express beauty through creating work that adopts the contemporaneous aesthetic judgement of intersubjective standards. Subsequently, an artwork is a projection of a ' subjective universality' which accounts for the contemporary *sensus communis* of judgement upon that which is beautiful or sublime, which is reasoned by one's cognitive " free play" of imagination and understanding[1]. As these capacities belong to our subject and not object, aesthetic quality is a universally subjective assessment based on the artist's reaction to an object. The Pre-Raphaelite's aesthetic judgement was reactionary to, what they believed to be, the mechanistic modeling of art since Raphael. This constitutes historical variance – instances where characteristics of ' beauty' evolve with society – which Kant would argue is not ' beautiful', but merely ' pleasing'. Where that which is merely ' pleasing'

for Kant may be the manifestation of a fleeting societal zeitgeist, it is *a priori* subjective traits that are manifest within that which is true ' beauty'.

The changing paradigm of Victorian beauty standards might be witnessed through representations of Dante's Beatrice, since she is the alleged embodiment of divine beauty[2]. Because Dante's narrative necessarily depends on the imagination of the artist, to transpose verse into visual, Beatrice's representation is a product of the artist's reaction and thus hosts their subjective experience. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's posthumous portrait of Elizabeth Siddal (Fig.) presents immortalised beauty and, through indistinct nebulous brush strokes and tone, how hauntingly melancholic beauty becomes once it has transcended the mortal realm. In that this painting was an intended " ideal" which visualised " sudden spiritual transformation", it grapples with the sublimity of mystical revelation which seems to have encouraged Rossetti to paint more with feeling than accuracy[3].

Furthermore, since his relationship with Siddal was self-consciously documented via the narrative of Dante and Beatrice in his oeuvre, it could be argued that his depiction of ' divine beauty'/Beatrice is a self-indulgent reification of his own confused emotions towards romance. In fact, his choice of Jane Morris as model for later Beatrice depictions, after Siddal's death, maintains the assertion that his own portrayal of beauty was intrinsically linked to his romantic exchanges and thus, his Beatrice aesthetically constitutes Kant's notion of ' pleasing'. This argument might also be justified in acknowledging also how, particularly in *Beata Beatrix* , Rossetti falls on allegory and symbolism to carry the weight of poetic introspection and subsequently, strays from the aestheticism which largely characterised his

work during the 1870s. Arguably, *Beata Beatrix* should be viewed, not teleologically, but as a subjective 'act' in of itself; as Souriau points out, the finished work here evokes the process undertaken during its execution, and this is thus a contingent of its artistic effect – a pillar of Expressionism[4]. In contrast, William Dyce's *Beatrice* (Fig.) is more fitted to Ruskin's notion that Beatrice should be a pedagogical model for the English woman. Her simple purity, in both character and ornament, and passive attitude to the beholder, seems to project the Victorian ideal woman. Just as Pygmalion's ivory statue metamorphosed into his ideal woman, perhaps Dyce's *Beatrice* could be considered as the Victorian ideal and naturalism, like classical sculpture, as a means to encourage her potential reality. Both transformations allowed the author to express criticism of women in their contemporary environment; Beatrice here is beautiful by the prevailing intersubjective standards of her society because she represents the antithesis of all faulted in Victorian women.

Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* proposed the Associationist theory, which explains how "the Sublimity or Beauty of Forms arises altogether from the Associations we connect with them, or the Qualities of which they are expressive." [5]. Recurring medieval motifs, which are exemplified in Rossetti's particular poetic interests and majorly characterise the later work of both William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, such as medieval garment and illuminated manuscript-esque ornament, might be epitomic of Alison's theory in regard to beauty. This is because, by association, these motifs represent subjective preference of not mere aesthetics, but religio-medieval chivalric steadfastness as an imaginative

reaction to an industrial reality. In other words, beauty is achieved through concept/association rather than visual autonomy, which is an argument Ruskin attempted to refute. This might be understood through Burne-Jones' claim regarding Rossetti's *The Maids of Elfenmere* (Fig.): "It is I think the most beautiful drawing for an illustration that I have ever seen"[6]. This is because it is a drawing that showed how imagination could navigate the medieval ideal; the pictorial flatness, similar to that of an illuminated manuscript, and medieval garb is beautiful by association, rather than beauty being evident through correct perspective or proportion. It is self-conscious artwork; the maids' faces are clearly fictitious and only, therefore, refer to myth. Within Alison's framework, "the greater part of those bodies in Nature, which possess Hardness, Strength, or Durability, are distinguished by angular Forms," whilst those that embody "Weakness, Fragility or Delicacy" are curved[7]. Alison justified this theory by claiming that since proportion is delineated by habit or custom, it originates from association rather than intrinsic beauty. Because these physical characteristics exact abstract qualities, their effects can be likened to the sublime or beautiful, thus Alison also promotes the utility of art as a constituent of beauty. It seems apt to suggest that in alignment with this, recurrent medieval motif within Pre-Raphaelite work claims the authority of beauty also through the conceptual inference they possess – importantly however, these inferred concepts are 'pleasing' only by intersubjective standards.

One ought to also consider however, that the inverse may be true; external characteristics might be perceived as inherently 'beautiful' if created via abstract processes that are equated to divine 'beauty' in human activity. For

example, the collaborative work of Burne-Jones and William Morris' *Flower Book* (Fig.) recalls the medieval scriptorium whereby monastic asceticism, buttressed by the hardship of devotional work, could harness the effects of humanly-achievable ' beauty'[8]. In the context of the Benedictine teaching *labore est rare* , beauty is achieved through pain-staking religio-artistic endeavour. Consequently, the product – in this case, *The Flower Book* – is physically characteristic of abstract Christian processes that constitute ' beauty' by association. Perhaps then, the artists might be viewed as ironically modernist, in that their work emphasises process over aesthetics – an aforementioned argument of Souriau's, regarding *Beata Beatrix* . Despite popularity, the Associationist theory was contentious with Ruskin because, by allowing the contemplation of anything but beauty qua beauty, it negated the ' sublime' or theophanic quality that identifies Typical beauty. In deconstruction of this, one can see how Ruskin's religious disposition cultivated such a strict explanation for the ' unexplainable' sensation derived from experience of beauty in artifice. Alison's theory might offer a more ' scientific' explanation of how the external can instruct inward sensations, or as Francis Jeffrey argues, how external beauty is in-fact “ nothing more than the reflection of our inward sensations, and is made up entirely of certain little portions of love, pity, and affection”[9]. It is through this Cartesian understanding of how sensation is related to spirit that one can see how, because emotions are stimulated by experience, the subjective disposition of a person dictates whether one finds form beautiful.

Since it is clear that subjectivist aesthetic shifts the responsibility to determine ' beauty' from author to beholder, an objectivist reading can be

understood as asserting the author's creation of intrinsic beauty. For Ruskin, utility is a mere symptom of beauty in-so-far as it allows for the contemplation of beauty qua beauty, and so aesthetic perception is disinterested[10]. If custom is a determining factor of beauty, as Adam Smith claimed, then one is unable to distinguish it from the familiar and thus it is an insufficient explanation[11]. Rather than artwork appeasing the beholder through moral congenial, Ruskin, informed by evangelical piety, instructed that artwork should be the expression of the moral being of the artist and beauty an invariant Divine 'truth'. If then, his theory of Typical beauty is based on the relationship between the Divine and man, the presentation of botanically accurate detail within the artwork of the Pre-Raphaelites constitutes a tangential natural theology through its proportional correctness, or in Ruskinian dialect, 'truth'. Shaftesbury too conceded that "all beauty is truth" and that 'truth' can be understood, in the aesthetic conditions of the eighteenth-century, as correctness of perspective and proportion[12]. One might think about this simply in terms of how a dialectic is created between nature and artifice, whereby the synthesis is Typical beauty. However, this presents a tautology which negates the success of art because it implies that art's fundamental objective is to merely excite the contemplation of beauty in a non-intellectual way. This lack of intellectual meaning is precisely why Greenburg believed that the Pre-Raphaelites regressed the 'plastic arts' by prioritising detail over 'thought' and submitting art to the 'dominant art' of literature[13].

If through the sublime or beautiful, society can be moralised, then art for art's sake should perhaps be viewed as a didactic tool. Consequently, the

Victorian notion of beauty in art can be perceived as a conduit for social reform and the responsibility of the artist. Despite this, Johnathan Jones argues that Burne-Jones' aestheticism proves that “ beauty is boring”[14]. Subsequently, it may be true that *a priori* traits within Burne-Jones' work constituted the Victorian understanding of objective beauty, however, one can retrospectively identify the preference of beauty itself as historically variant.

In order to understand the concept of beauty within Victorian art, it is useful to use the notion of objective beauty to navigate the idea of subjectivity. Objective beauty, made tangible by the artist, can only be realised through the psychological experience of the beholder. Though Ruskin argues this to a certain extent, he contends that people respond to particular visual stimulus with a universal emotion, in a similar way to how taste and language works; this is a prominent justification for his theory of Typical beauty. However, though emotion is an objective sensation, its association or meaning is historically variant. For example, the Victorian domestication of emotion was an epistemological tool, “ a way of defining not just male and female, public and private, but also subject and object, human and nonhuman, determined and free.”[15]. As a result, the pictorial intrinsic beauty of for example, sexual love, may go unacknowledged by a Victorian audience because their emotional response is a societal suppression or misinterpretation.

Ruskin's appeal to a metaphysical order to support his theories of beauty means that he would have had to refute derivations of beauty that earlier eighteenth-century aestheticians believed had viable psychological explanations[16]. Samuel Johnson, for example, proposed that since one is “

more accustomed to beauty than deformity, we may conclude that to be the reason we approve and admire it... Though habit and custom cannot be said to be the cause of beauty, it is certainly the cause of our liking it.”[17]. In an increasing industrial environment, Victorian England promoted a capitalist environment where the notion of ‘ beauty’ was controlled and attainable through compliance with mechanisation. One is indoctrinated to aspire for a particular ‘ beauty’ and in doing so, one is working for a system of economic and political state gain. Because subjective judgement dictates the preference of ‘ objective’ beauty, one can understand therefore how art is judged beautiful “ in proportion to their fitness for the use of man”[18]. This utilitarian function of art can also explain how Morris’ furniture represents how his ideological value of beauty is founded in use rather than mere aestheticism or ornament. For example, his *Sussex Chair* (Fig.) has been constructed in linear simply to suit the practical requirements of a seat. Smith furthers the belief that utility is a prescription of beauty, by arguing in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that use is valued more as an aesthetic quality than the “ conveniency or pleasure” derived from its actual function[19]. In light of this, one might then perceive Morris’ design endeavours to be just as self-indulgent as Rossetti’s employment of Dante’s narrative to glorify his own biography. Morris and Philip Webb’s well for the Red House, situated in the Pilgrim’s Rest courtyard (Fig.), exemplifies Smith’s proposition that the value of aesthetic utility overrides function because the well was not used, as there was running water in the house. Instead, it was a relic of a time forgone which reminded Morris’ guests of their geographical location, on the route of Chaucer’s Pilgrims; the object defines artifice.

Upon reflection, the Victorian notion of objective beauty is reactionary to intersubjective standards of aesthetic appreciation. However, such evaluation is largely contingent on an atheistic understanding of sensation and spirit, both of which are affected in the presence of beauty. Because all visual creation is inherently aesthetically sensitive, prevalent socio-historical or political significance dictates how and why beauty is visually manifest.

[1]Guyer, P. 2005. Values of Beauty. New York: Cambridge University Press. 14.

[2]" The beauty that I saw transcends all thought of Beauty [...] for, like sunlight striking on the weakest eyes, the memory of the sweetness of that smile deprives me of my mental powers." Alighieri, D. 1472. Canto XXX. The Devine Comedy. 19-20, 25-27.

[3]McDonnell, Patricia & Rodgers, Timothy R. 2007." Beata Beatrix". victorian web. org.

[4]The Many Faces of Time. 2000. Ed. John Brough, Lester Embree. Kluwer Academic Publishers. 241.

[5]Alison, A. 1817. Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste. Edinburgh. 2 vols. I, 317.

[6]Burne-Jones, G. 1906. Memorials. The Macmillan Company. 119.

[7]Alison, A. 1817. Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste. Edinburgh. 2 vols. I, 318.

[8]Crossman, Colette M. " Art as Lived Religion: Edward Burne-Jones as Painter, Priest, Pilgrim, and Monk." PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2007. 42-3. Medieval scribes were particularly seen to practice endurance; it is documented that one scribe lamented, " the whole body labours".

[9]Jeffrey, F. 1846. Contributions to the Edinburgh Review. Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London. I, 30.

[10]Ruskin's objection to the utilitarian theory of beauty was arguably influenced by Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757). Burke contended that if the useful can be derived from beauty then, " on that principle, the wedge-like snout of a swine, with its tough cartilage at the end, the little sunk eyes, and the whole make of the head, so well adapted to its offices of digging, and rooting, would be extremely beautiful". Burke, E. 1757. Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Idea of the Sublime and the Beautiful. 104-105.

[11]" custom is the sole principle of beauty", the subject cannot please " if quite contrary to custom, and unlike what we have been used to in that species of things". Smith, A. 1759. Theory of the Moral Sentiments. II, 15.

[12]Shaftesbury, A. A. C. 1963. Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, ed. John M Robertson, 2 vols. I, 94.

[13]Greenburg, C. 1940. Towards a Newer Laocoon in Francis Frascina (ed). 1985. Pollock and After: The Critical Debate. London. 3.

[14]Jones, J. 2018. " Edward Burne-Jones Review: Art That Shows How Boring Beauty Can Be". The Guardian. <https://theguardian.com>.

<https://assignbuster.com/themes-of-beauty-in-victorian-art/>

com/artanddesign/2018/oct/22/edward-burne-jones-review-pre-raphaelite-tate-britain.

[15]Ablow, R. 2008. “ Introduction: Victorian Emotions” in Victorian Studies. Vol. 50, No. 3. 375.

[16]Landow, G. P. 1971. Ruskin's refutation of " False Opinions Held concerning Beauty” in Aesthetic and Critical Theory of John Ruskin. Princeton University.

[17]Johnson, S. 1759. “ No. 82 The True Idea of Beauty” in The Idler.

[18]Quoted in Hipple, W. J. 1957. The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory. Carbondale, Ill. 40.

[19]Smith, A. 1759. Theory of the Moral Sentiments. I, 406 - 408.