

The Quiet Power of Beauty

In his book 'Going Sane' the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips describes how there are many definitions of insanity, yet none exists for the state of sanity itself. That sanity is, to all intents and purposes, defined by the absence of insanity. Beauty appears to occupy a similar ground. As both sanity and beauty are vague, elusive and somehow undefined terms. We know they are attached to the personal and appear at first glance to be purely subjective. Yet despite being amorphous, they also possess facets we instinctively know and recognise when we see them. Indeed, it is an often quoted phrase that "beauty lies in the eye of the beholder." Such as the beauty a mother sees in the face of her child, or when a lover looks upon their beloved. Yet, in looking at the world around us, we begin to notice that beauty can also be objective.

In an attempt to understand this beguiling subject a little deeper, I decided to attend a series of talks by Fr. Martin Boland titled 'Beauty, Truth and the Divine' at the Benedictine Monastery of Pluscarden Abbey, in the summer of 2019. Pluscarden was built in 1230 and lies shrouded by trees, deep in the glen of the Black Burn at the far north eastern edge of Scotland. There is a deep sense of tranquillity at the Abbey, which is enhanced by the Gregorian chants sung daily by the monks who live there. In many senses it is a perfect setting for a study on the beautiful.

In his lectures, Fr. Martin proceeded to outline a theory that beauty does not necessarily have a conclusive definition. Going on to describe how we might argue over what beauty is and is not, further discussing what it may or may not mean, and how it ultimately appears elusive. Making the case that beauty lies somewhere just beyond our reach, because fundamentally, ideas of beauty seem to vary from person to person and culture to culture. Then, in a similar vein to Adam Phillips, he said that while there appears to be no categorical answer to the question "what is beauty?" we instinctively know what isn't beautiful. To demonstrate this, Fr. Martin then proceeded to display a photograph of the Cumbernauld shopping centre in Scotland.

The Centre Cumbernauld, to give the shopping centre he described its proper title, is a post war architectural development lying to the north east of Glasgow. It became known as a "megastructure" and was first opened to the public in 1967. It also has the unfortunate appearance of looking like an enormous concrete bunker. In 2005 the Channel 4 programme 'Demolition' announced that following a poll, it had been voted "Britain's most hated building." The nation had clearly reached a consensus on this singular work of architecture. It was categorically declared the ugliest building in the United Kingdom.

Concluding his talk, Fr. Martin then read a quote by the English philosopher Roger Scruton which said, "I believe that there is a deep human need for beauty, and if you ignore that need in architecture, your buildings will not last, since people will never feel at home in them. Now, you might shrug this off and think that these changes in the world of art are without significance. But, I would argue, that what we look at, listen to and read affects us in the deepest part of our being."

Sitting in the 800-year-old abbey it was easy to sense that Pluscarden possessed something the Centre Cumbernauld lacked. Pluscarden was loved. And in this state of love, it was maintained and cherished. This was something the Cumbernauld shopping centre had been

denied in its conception, its building, and consequent continuing care. This lack of love is what presents to us as an absence of beauty. And so, Fr. Boland's had identified a concept for finding a solid definition for the vague qualities of beauty in studying its absence.

After the talk, I was reminded of a small portrait which hangs in the National Gallery, London. It is one of my favourite paintings there and had been conceived by the artist Quinten Massys, sometime around 1513. In this small picture, Massys makes an intriguing case for the concrete nature of beauty. And like Fr. Martin's photograph of The Centre Cumbernauld, he does so by omission. Massys's picture is titled 'An Old Woman (The Ugly Duchess),' and it reveals, through absence, that beauty is a universal element. A force we are all aware of, but one which we cannot quite fully quantify.

We do not know who the Duchess in Massys's painting is, or if indeed she ever was. But the lavish style and fine detailing we see in her clothes reveal we are looking at a member of the aristocracy. On their website, the National Gallery describe her as an "elderly woman with lively eyes set deep in their sockets, a snub nose, wide nostrils, pimply skin, a hairy mole, bulging forehead and a prominent square chin and rests one hand on a marble parapet. Her neck is rumpled by age and she seems to have lost all her teeth. She challenges every traditional canon of beauty."

What we see when we look at this portrait, is the image of a woman seeking a partner. It is in essence a 500-year-old dating profile. In her right hand she holds a small red rosebud. A detail which carries sexual implications. This suggestion is further accentuated by the provocative display of her cleavage, revealed by a low-cut, tightly laced bodice that emphasises her wrinkly breasts. However, the very idea of her sexual attractiveness is undermined by her aged and wizened appearance. The Duchesses flesh is heavily furrowed and jowls have developed around her chin. And while she appears confident in herself, we become inherently aware that we know something she does not. We can see that she is without beauty. We know the hopes she exhibits will likely never be fulfilled. Because in deliberately withdrawing physical beauty from his work, Massys invites us to pity her. And in doing so, he demonstrates that beauty exists in an objective form. Because we recognise its essence is absent in her physical appearance.

This small portrait is an unusual painting for its time. Art was expensive to make in the 16th century. So typically paintings were commissioned by wealthy patrons, like the Medici family of Florence, as a means to celebrate their status. The kind of art the Medici's typically commissioned include another fine example of painting which also hangs in the National Gallery of London. It is the portrait of Costanza Caetani by the school of Domenico Ghirlandaio and is contemporaneous with 'The Ugly Duchess.' Yet in stark contrast to the work by Massys, Costanza's complexion is flawless and her expression content. Costanza wears a tightly fitting lace up bodice, just as the Ugly Duchess. Yet Costanza's cleavage is hidden in modesty. In her right hand, we see a sprig of orange blossom, which is reminiscent of the rose bud the Ugly Duchess holds. At the time of painting, orange blossom was carried by brides as a sign of virtue. Yet where the rose bud was viewed as a symbol of sexuality, Costanza's is associated with chastity. While these two flowers act respectively as signifiers of sexuality and virtue, they also accentuate what we see. That the sitters wished to be associated with the qualities the flowers display. Indeed, flowers themselves are masters of attraction. With their petals presenting bright, attractive colours, so they might appeal to bees, who may be drawn to take their pollen and aid in their pollination.

Just as the brightly coloured petals of flowers attract bees, so Costanza has been presented in her youth to attract a suitor in the hope of marriage. Existing records reveal that Costanza de' Medici was born in about 1469 and had married by 1489. Indicating that the painting of her was probably made around this time. Her youth, beauty and flawless good looks all helped contribute to her acquiring a wealthy husband. Which in turn liberated her from anxiety, by offering her a secure future in a complex and challenging world.

What these two paintings help demonstrate is that we recognise beauty when we see it. And that the component features of beauty can be emphasised, enhanced and magnified. In addition, beauty seems aligned with youthfulness and the promise of a future. A future which, in this context, holds the prospect of children and the continuity of the family line. A future free from physical imperfection, frailty and illness. It is sadly a future which the Ugly Duchess could not offer a potential suitor.

But just as beauty can offer the promise of happiness, security and love, it can also hide malign intent. And there is a third painting, also on display at the National Gallery of London, which can help us see this in action. It is titled 'An Allegory with Venus and Cupid' and was painted by Bronzino, sometime around 1545. In it we see Venus, the goddess of love. She is presented naked, sexually alluring and posed at the centre of this intriguing composition. In her right hand, we witness how she steals an arrow from Cupid as she kisses him. While in her left-hand she holds a golden apple. The prize she won from Paris, son of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. Paris had offered the golden apple as a prize in a beauty contest between Venus, Minerva and Juno. The artful Venus had managed to place herself ahead of her competition by offering the most beautiful mortal woman in the world, Helen of Sparta, in return for the apple. Yet when we look carefully at Bronzino's painting we notice that a mask lies at the feet of Venus. This is a mask which suggests she uses sexual attraction to conceal deception.

Massys, Ghirlandaio and Bronzino's paintings all reveal a key component of beauty to us. That it is essentially amoral. Beauty, it seems, does not favour the good nor the bad. Instead, it amplifies that which we find attractive. In doing so, any negative aspects of the subject are quietened. And conversely, when beauty is removed, that which we view as undesirable emerges to occupy centre stage. Beauty, it seems, can be dialled up, and dialled down, depending upon our wishes at the time.

In looking at these three paintings of the past, we see a world very different from our own. A world which favored the enhancement of beauty. It was a world where paintings were predominantly made by men. Men who were attracted by beautiful things. The paintings they produced generally display power, wealth and privilege. And where women do appear, many would argue, they are presented as socially privileged. But it is a social privileged which is bestowed upon them by powerful men. Beauty in this context acted as an attractor to the powerful in society. And just as the colour of a flower acts to attract a bee, so beauty acted to attract powerful men.

The English artist William Hogarth took a slightly different view in his 1753 book 'The Analysis of Beauty.' In this, Hogarth argued that the shapes we find most beautiful are those which most closely align with performing their function. The primary example he used was of the "serpentine line," which is an elongated s-shaped curve found in nature. For Hogarth, this is perfectly expressed in the forms and muscle structure of racing horses. These shapes,

he believed, are the most beautiful because when shape most closely adheres to its specific function, then beauty itself becomes manifest.

Some 200 years later, the automotive industry adopted a version of serpentine lines known as spline curves to help design the external appearance of cars. The term “spline” originated in East Anglian, in England, and refers to the thin wooden strips boat builders employed by to help shape and form smooth flowing curves when designing a hull. Car manufacturers then began to notice that when they used splines in their designs it caused light to reflect off the body in a fashion that made them appear to be of superior quality, which ultimately meant they could charge higher prices. This was then mathematically formulated as “piecewise polynomial curves” and is widely used today in computer aided design.

What Fr. Martin and the philosopher Roger Scruton offer us are examples of man-made art. An art which has first been imagined in the mind’s eye, then fashioned into existence by human hand. Meanwhile, Hogarth and the mathematics of polynomial curves place a focus on beauty as it appears to us in nature, which is probably more closely related to ideas of the sublime.

It appears then, that we are looking at two distinct categories when we think of the beautiful. There is the sublime, which is separate from, yet related to beauty, and beauty itself. The sublime is often experienced as a feeling of awe in the presence of nature. In literature we might think of the Brontë Sisters, Mary Shelley and Lord Byron, while in painting perhaps J. M. W. Turner or Caspar David Friedrich with works such as ‘Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth’ c.1842, ‘Chasseur in the Forest’ 1814 and ‘Wanderer above the Sea of Fog’ 1818. In ‘Wanderer above the Sea of Fog’, for example, which is perhaps Caspar David Friedrich’s most famous and iconic picture, we witness a lonely figure from behind. He is seen standing, paused on top of a mountain in Saxony, wrapped in a dark green coat with a walking stick in his right hand. Ahead of him, mountains shrouded in mist stretch off into the distance. He has the look of an individual lingering on the precipice of something far bigger than any one person. In seeking out the natural world he appears to have happened upon the defining boundary of human existence, a place where our individual lives can be set into some greater reassuring context.

The English dramatist and critic John Dennis believed that the sublime could be considered as an aesthetic quality, separate from, yet complementary to beauty. In his 1693 journal ‘Miscellanies’ he recalled an emotional response he had experienced one time whilst crossing the Alps. In it, Dennis describes how the majesty of the mountain landscape created a sense of terror which also strangely elicited a “pleasure to the eye as music is to the ear.” Edmund Burke also argued how the sublime and the beautiful are mutually exclusive, with either one able to produce pleasure. He did this in his 1756 treatise ‘A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.’

What Caspar David Friedrich’s ‘Wanderer’ and John Dennis demonstrate is a sensation of awe in the presence of nature. Awe appears to have the ability to make us feel content, because it makes us feel small in the face of the grand scheme of things. It diminishes our individual problems by placing them in a universal context.

At this point we might ask ourselves the question: “Is truth inherently connected to ideas of beauty and the sublime?”

Truth appears to be as difficult a concept to define as beauty. Until the 19th century truth was generally regarded as an “a priori reality” which could be known by reason. This was challenged by Immanuel Kant in his 1781 ‘Critique of Pure Reason’ which led to a shift in our understanding towards interpretations based around forms of subjectivism. At the dawn of the 21st century subjective truth is popularly expressed as “my truth” or “speaking my truth” which seems to be centred upon how we each understand our individual lived experience.

For myself, regardless of whether truth is considered as objective or subjective, and whether we can pin it down to something solidly known or not, I believe if we ask ourselves what is the opposite to truth, in the way Adam Phillips seeks to pin down the definition of sanity, then we may again find something useful. The opposite of truth we know categorically to be a lie. And lies we know, because lying requires us to make a conscious decision to construct a falsehood. What we notice in this context is we do not have to consciously adhere to truth. Truth is a default setting. And I think this is where our ideas of truth, beauty and the sublime become connected. These three concepts are somehow elusive, they are not easy to define and we sense them at a core human level to be fundamentally important. They appear to be part of the greater mysteries of the universe which we have no answers for: Why is there life? Why do we dream? What happens after death? This is the realm philosophy, art and creativity occupy. It engages with those parts of ourselves we don’t fully understand and which we have no easy or logical understanding of. The parts of our world which lie beyond scientific reason.

When we reflect on this a little further, we begin to see that there are a couple of solid observations we might make. Sublime beauty is located outside of ourselves, primarily in the natural world and we have had no part in making it. Whereas handmade beauty emerges from inside ourselves and only exists because we have personally synthesised it into being. In a sense we might think of these two concepts as objective beauty and subjective beauty.

When Massys removed physical beauty from his portrait of the ‘Ugly Duchess’, he foretold the direction western painting would take as an artform at the beginning of the 21st century. This new direction in painting witnessed through the work of artists such as Marlene Dumas, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Tracey Emin, Chantal Joffe and Lubaina Himid, has sought to abandon the traditional modes of beauty in art. This new art is underpinned by post-modernist thinking and is largely founded on the work of intellectuals such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Central to their belief is a consideration that “reality” is an intellectual construct. As such it rejects the idea of universal truths and instead focuses on the belief that truth is relative to each and every person. And just as Massys removed beauty in his painting to reveal something profound to us, so too post-modernism has dismantled a variety of social constructs to reveal something else of significance. In stripping away a complex history of western colonialism, male domination in politics, commerce and the arts, post-modernism has revealed to us something of ourselves.

As we have seen, when beauty is used to amplify the positive attributes of a person, it distracts us from the negative. When we turn down the volume on sound we are left with silence. And in that silence we become aware of ambient sounds and the voices inside our minds. We are left alone with our thoughts. In post-modernism the reduction of beauty has left us with the realism of our thoughts. And an inward looking reality has been revealed. Post-modernism has abandoned beauty in the arts and in doing so has abandoned hope. Instead it has replaced it with the realism of brutal honesty and the presentations of the

starkness of human existence. Where the renaissance placed a focus on how we as people fit into the larger structures of society around us, post-modernism has sought to explore how society affects us. And in doing so, it has essentially moved from a religious focus to a human centredness.

The desire to dismantle and deconstruct everything it places its focus on is what philosophically underpins post-modernist thinking. It is an ideology which guides much painting of the 21st century. Where the principles of beauty have largely been rejected, because they are seen to express power, and as such, are identified with the powerful.

In the painting 'Stern' by Marlene Dumas, from 2004, at the Tate Gallery, London, for example, we see fully the contrast between the paintings of the past and present. In order to make her painting, Dumas has borrowed a newspaper photograph to paint a portrait of Ulrike Meinhof. Meinhof was born in Oldenburg, Germany and joined the Communist Party in 1959. Following this she co-founded the Red Army Faction terrorist group and committed a number of bank robberies and murders. After being caught and sent to Prison. Dumas's portrait depicts Meinhof in her Stammheim prison cell where she was found hanged with a strip of towel, leaving burn-marks on her neck in May 1976.

In her painting 'Stern,' Dumas has presented us with the opposite of Ghirlandaio's portrait of Costanza Caetani. Where Costanza was presented for male attention, youthful, alive and full of hope for the future, Dumas depicts Ulrike Meinhof at the end of life, all hope gone. In her image, Dumas makes no concession to the male gaze. Meinhof is presented beyond the sexual, with a concentration on the fragile and human. Here we see how post-modernist art has dialled beauty down. It focuses instead on the harsh "realities" of life. Some things that perhaps we would rather forget or ignore.

In his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction?' Walter Benjamin described how all original works of art possess an "aura", which he located within "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." He argued that this "sphere of authenticity is out-side the technical" which makes original artworks independent of copies. He also believed that in reproducing something, something else is lost from the original by the change in context. Benjamin saw this removal from the original as a positive, because he felt the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture had been produced for, and consumed exclusively by, a ruling elite. With the advent of mass reproduction, Benjamin believed art could become democratised and made available to everyone. That reproductions fail to possess the "aura" of the original art object was, for Benjamin, a price worth paying.

The "aura" of a work of art remains intact only if the artwork was originally designed as a reproducible piece, like a musical composition, poem or a novel, but becomes absent in duplication if the original was designed as a one off. This has perhaps found its perfect expression in the work of the American Abstract artist and art theorist Ad Reinhardt's 'Black' paintings of the 1960's. In his works, subtle colour changes were made between one slightly off-black square alongside another, which can only be seen by the naked eye. In reproduction these differences vanish. Looking at a print of one of these paintings is like looking at a photograph of a garden or a sunset as oppose to experiencing one in real life. Instead, all we are left with is a memory of the original, because reproductions make it difficult to see and connect to the restrained individual engagements of the hand which have brought it into existence. This is not the case for something like a poem or novel because here, every

element of the structure remains intact. That said, if we see an original hand written manuscript by Jane Austen we know we are in the presence of something special, something more.

What Benjamin reveals is that original works of art possess a special quality, an “aura”. This “aura”, may or may not be an expression of beauty, but I believe it is special, because it contains the emotional fingerprint of the author. As viewers our feelings connect to this emotional fingerprint in a similar way to how we sense awe when we stand in front of natural phenomena. If we choose only to live with reproductions then we remove ourselves from the world of things and live instead with a world of phantom images.

In 2010, while visiting Boston, Massachusetts, I was intrigued to see the strange phenomena of people photographing grave stones at the Granary Burying Ground, next to the Park Street Church. The graveyard was founded in 1660 and contains a number of famous and historic headstones, including those of Paul Revere, John Hancock and Samuel Adams. Alongside them are the graves of some of the early pilgrims who had sailed to the US from England, and it was these I was interested to see. As they had been born close to where I myself live in East Anglia. Yet, what really began to interest me, was how many of the other visitors to the cemetery went directly up to certain headstones without pausing and then photographed them on their phones. I came to realise that they knew in advance where the relevant graves were, because they had researched them ahead. And then this is what struck me; if you’ve seen the photograph of a grave beforehand there is no particular need for you to take your own photograph in addition to the one which already exists. Except there is. Seeing a photograph on-line appears to prompt a desire in some to want to engage with the real thing, because when we encounter the real, we experience an emotional connection with it. It was not the particular graves themselves visitors were recording; it was an attempt to capture a memory of the feeling of the visit itself.

When we go hiking in the mountains, like Caspar David Friedrich’s ‘Wanderer above the Sea of Fog,’ or walk to a beach to watch a sunset, we are going with the expectation we will have an experience, that we will feel something relating to our place in the natural world. When we settle down to read a book, watch a movie or make a visit to an art gallery we are also preparing to have an experience - that we will feel something in relationship to another person’s inner world. In essence, we wish to connect to the “aura” of the original artwork which contains the emotional fingerprint of the creator. Following Walter Benjamin’s essay, we have increasingly become separated from the “aura” of the original, whilst simultaneously witnessing its emotional fingerprint become more and more detached from ideas of beauty.

When we look back to objective beauty, the beauty we find in the sublime, we sense it has the reassuring effect of contextualising our lives within in the universe. Meanwhile, within subjective beauty, the beauty we make by our own hands, we are reminded that people can and do love. When other people demonstrate love, we know that we can too, and that is a beautiful thing.

When a work of art has been contrived into being with love, like Derek Jarman’s garden, Jane Austen’s novel ‘Pride and Prejudice’ or Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘Mona Lisa’, we recognise it instinctively. Loved objects, like a highly polished motorbike, well-crafted novel or carefully tended garden attract us. Attractive things made by hand appeal because we can see additional time has been taken to nurture them. The well realised garden is free of weeds, plants have been carefully selected so the leaf shapes complement each other and they are

designed to offer a varied display over the course of the seasons. A beautiful painting demonstrates a love of materials and a sensitivity for the subject. This is further enhanced when each brush stroke is applied with the feeling of a caress which strokes the canvas – because this is like witnessing the surface being loved into existence.

When something has received devoted attention, we know it must be for a reason, and that reason is because it is special to the person who has given it time. Someone has spent more time on this one project that it would ordinarily deserve and this arouses our interest, because if it is special to them, then it might also be special to us. When we think about this, we become aware that beauty inevitably finds varying forms of expression in different cultural traditions and periods, yet a core tenet underpins all of them, they have all been loved into being. The things we see around us which we consider beautiful are the things we form a connection of sensitivity to. This is an aesthetic appreciation which enables us to gaze closer at places, people and objects, because it slows down our engagement with them.

This does not mean that all creative works are beautiful, indeed as we have witnessed in the art of the 21st century, like those of Marlene Dumas, has seen a significant shift away from the concerns of beauty. Which leads us to realise that an artwork born of the imagination can also be an expression of hate or fear, it might represent the synthesis of something we wish to destroy, or, be a detached exercise in intellectualism. Only those things which have been imagined and then loved into existence offer an expression of beauty.

Close by the paintings of Massys, Ghirlandaio and Bronzino's at the National Gallery of London is another intimate painting which measures only 44.5 x 45.8 cm. It was produced between the years 1307-11 by the 14th century Italian artist Duccio and is titled 'The Annunciation'. This beautiful masterpiece depicts the moment when the Archangel Gabriel descended from heaven to reveal to the Virgin Mary that she would give birth to the son of God.

As with all great art, every aspect of Duccio's painting is the result of a deliberate consideration by the artist. It synthesises a series of ideas into a single coherent object which represents a universal vision as he saw it. In order to achieve this Duccio has employed a number of signifiers which include placing a copy of the Old Testament in to Mary's left hand. This she holds open at the pages the prophet Isaiah wrote which predict the event we witness. Standing between Mary and Gabriel we also notice a vase of white lilies which allude to her purity, whilst hovering overhead a white dove represents the Holy Spirit. In the background we see gold leaf instead of paint which symbolises the glory of heaven whilst we also observe how the Virgin Mary is dressed in blue robes. This blue is lapis lazuli, a pigment so expensive, it cost more than gold and provides testament to Mary's importance in the painting.

As well as these symbols, renaissance artists like Duccio made use of geometric principles to help compose their paintings so that the mathematical order observed in the movement of the stars would be reflected upon the earth. In this way, the adoption of the golden section rule and Euclidian geometry were engaged to mirror the divine order of heaven on earth, which in turn placed human actions at the centre of a celestial symmetry. Just as the infant Christ was born into a culture which pre-existed him, we are also born into a pre-existing world of objects, places, languages and social structures which we slowly learn to make sense of. The ability to see beauty in this allows us to perceive patterns and make connections more readily,

so that our environment becomes a personal place rather than an alien world of chaos and estrangement.

In this work by Duccio we see how beauty can be amplified through the application of differing layers of technical and intellectual consideration. With the use of lapis lazuli on the Virgin Mary's robes Duccio adds a layer of beauty. The gold leaf sky another. While the application of the golden section rule and delicate brush work, yet more. In the hands of a post-modernist artist, each one of these considerations is slowly and consistently stripped away. By taking a position which is aligned to the beautiful, Duccio is making a powerful statement that our desire to appreciate colour, form and harmony is hard wired into our psyche. In heightening and presenting this aesthetic, he creates an opportunity for all of us to look again at our surroundings and re-connect to the spectacle of things, so that we, like the Virgin Mary, can stand at the center of a universe of beauty and wonder.

Robert Priseman, August, 2025