

The Wonder of Beauty

When we go to a museum, do we know what we ought to look for in art, or somehow to recognize it when we see it, or how to distinguish the real thing from an imitation? Why do we call something ugly or beautiful? Does it depend on our mood, our inner feeling? Do we like this or that, and if so, why? Do we find one work of art pleasing and another abhorrent? Is beauty perceived by the mind or emotions only? Does beauty apply to any kind of thing? Different questions are likely to evoke different answers.

Many people admit that they do not understand art. They are unable to interpret or evaluate what they see. They may say, "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." "What I like" may involve a perception of beauty. On the other hand, the statement often obscures the important distinction between "what I like" and "what is good."

Aesthetics

The study or philosophy of the beautiful in nature, art, and literature is called Aesthetics. The term was introduced only in 1750 by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762), who developed the theory of aesthetics. In his *A History of Aesthetic* (1892) Bernard Bosanquet defined "Aesthetic" as the "philosophy of the beautiful."

Western ideas about beauty may be traced back to the great Greek philosopher, Plato (c. 428-347 BC). He proposed that what is beautiful is synonymous with the truthful and the divine. For generations since Plato, the greatest and sharpest thinkers have struggled to answer the questions: How do we arrive at the idea of beauty? Is an objective view of beauty possible? What difference does it make what we think about beauty? The history of aesthetics shows a change from the objective to the subjective. Many now believe there is no standard for beauty. Since the later half of the 18th century, many factors combined to produce the idea that artistic work, for centuries the expression of the beautiful, should now be the expression of the artist's interior responses to himself and to the world.

Various Approaches to Aesthetics

As we try to understand the meaning of beauty and the works of art, we have to reckon with world views- such as - evolutionism and postmodernism.

1. Darwinism

At the 1959 Centennial Celebration of Darwin's Origin of Species in Chicago, Sir Julian Huxley spelled out the creed of the evolutionist. He said, "In the evolutionary pattern of thought there is no longer either need or room for the supernatural. The earth was not created; it evolved. So did all the animals and plants that inhabit it, including our human selves, mind and soul as well as brain and body. So did religion." If for Darwinism matter is the only reality, what then is beauty? Darwin himself regarded play and beauty as natural phenomena. He rejected the limitation of the sense of beauty to the world of human beings. He believed that a sense of beauty is also found among animals. In his *State of the Arts: From*

Bezalel to Mapplethorpe, Gene Edward Veith Jr. observed, "Materialism can hardly value art. There is no room for the pursuit of beauty in a totally mechanistic universe. If Darwin is correct, what is the survival of the value of art?" The Oxford Professor, Terry Eagleton, a committed Marxist, argues in his book *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) that a materialist aesthetic takes "its starting-point from the actual needs and desires of individual human beings." He calls art a critique of alienation. In typical Marxist rhetoric, he says that liberated from cramping theological constraint, knowledge may now steam ahead and probe into what was previously taboo, relying on no authority but its own critical, sceptical powers. He even states that Aesthetics in modern Europe is at the heart of the middle class' struggle for political hegemony. Interestingly, in Eagleton's book, you won't find an examination of actual works of art. His book is not only dense reading, it also shows that Marxist materialism fails to appreciate beauty. In *Truth Decay*, Douglas Groothuis comments that creation can express aesthetic excellence far "beyond the brute possibilities of mere evolving matter."

2. Postmodernism

When materialism triumphs and God is rejected and man enthroned, the assumption is that good and evil, truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness are terms without meaning. Consequently, individual opinion is the only evaluator. If this were true, the 18th century atheist, David Hume, was right when he said, "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty." Although Hume lived before postmodernism, he summed up what today's postmodernism confesses. If intellectual honesty compels us to recognize "man is the measure of all things" in a meaningless universe we inhabit, then beauty refers to nothing, since there is nothing to refer to, and hence all statements about beauty or about things beautiful are, strictly speaking, meaningless. Sadly, postmodern's relativism in the aesthetic realm dominates and confuses the art world, which has lost its criteria for making aesthetic judgments.

God the Artist

I believe Christians offer a stronger basis for aesthetics than all the competing worldviews of modern times. It is meaningless to talk about beauty apart from the Triune God. He is the measure of all things. Man is either in the hands of God, or alone in a meaningless world. The knowledge of God is the foundation for true knowledge, including aesthetics. In his *Confessions*, Augustine had already noticed that God's truth is never the private property of a philosopher: "Your truth," he says to God, "does not belong to me or anyone else, but to us all whom you call to share it." The secret of the wonder of beauty is revealed in Scripture, which is for all humankind. It reveals God as the Creator of beauty: "He has made everything beautiful in its time" (Eccl. 3:11). Beauty is valuable in itself because it is a quality of God. David longed to see "the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. 27:4). In *Waiting for God*, the French mystic Simone Weil (1909-43) observed, "All good proceeds from Christ. All good has its source in God." The very fabric of the universe expresses God's presence with majestic beauty and grandeur (Ps. 19:1). Nature has been called the "aesthetics of the infinite."

God's Work of Art

The major premise of a Christian worldview, including a Christian aesthetic, is that God is the Creator, the Great Artist who called the world into being. He is the Potter; we are the clay (Isa. 64:8). God created the world according to His will and desire. Beauty, therefore, is not discovered through our subjective feeling. It is viewed with eyes of faith in the context of the Creator's divinely ordered universe.

The created world is the showcase of His mighty work. The simple natural beauty of the earth, the seasons, the weather, trees, birds, fruit, and rivers reveal God's glory. As Calvin indicates, the created universe is a theatre for God's glory. Torrential waterfalls, majestic mountains, routinely evoke a human aesthetic response. We don't talk about an ugly sunset. We talk about a beautiful sunset. When we lived in the Philippines, the spectacular tropical sunsets of breathtaking beauty always gave me a sense of wonder and awe, which led to adoration. God made all this beauty. And we may enjoy it. God delights in His creation. World history begins with paradise. In this garden of perfect beauty lived Adam and Eve, the crowns of God's creation. Surveying the work, even before they were created, God looked at His finished work and saw it was aesthetically good (Gen.1: 31). It was beautiful, pure, and brim full of potential. Augustine reflects on God's creation in the last book of the City of God and celebrates its astonishing beauty. In his *Divine Comedy*, the greatest of all single poems in the Christian tradition, Dante (1265-1321) describes the marvellous beauty of paradise. The pull of love toward the beauty of what is good and true is the unbroken thread that runs through the whole *Divine Comedy*. In Paradise Dante thrills in its beauty. He testifies of:

The glory of the One who moves all things
Penetrates the whole universe and shines
In one part more and in another less.

In his classic *Paradise Lost*, John Milton (1608-74) exults in the beauty of God's creation, not just in the garden, but also in the innocent blessedly consummated love of Adam and Eve before the fall.

Man the Artist

Why can man create works of art and appreciate beauty? Because we are not things but image bearers of God (Gen.1 :26). We have been given the task to develop the world. God made us rulers over the works of His hands (Ps. 8:6). Dorothy Sayers rightly observed, when we "turn back to see what [the author of Genesis] says about the original upon which the 'image of God' was modeled, we find only the single assertion, 'God created.' The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things." She noted that the idea of art as creation is one important contribution that Christianity has made to aesthetics.

God, the Creator, a lover of the beauty in His created world, invited Adam, one of His creatures, to share in the process of "creation" with Him (Gen.2:15). He has invited those made in His image to exercise their creative capacities to the fullest possible extent. In other words, since we are God's image bearers, we too are creative.

Beauty Distorted

But if God is the source of beauty, why is there so much ugliness? How can we say, "This is a

beautiful world when we see the horrors in nature: devastating hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, and the like?" But the existence of catastrophic forces do not negate the positive presence of God in His creation. Adam and Eve failed. Instead of developing beauty, they worked on tarnishing it. The harmony of creation is now broken. Darkness battles light. Since the Fall and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise, all human culture has become a complex admixture of good and evil. A human being is a Jekyll and Hyde: a noble image-bearer and a morally crippled creature. A bent and twisted nature has emerged. "Our world is cursed," observes Groothuis, "and our world is blessed; we must divine the difference between the two lest we bless what is cursed or curse that what is blessed." As the prophet Isaiah (5:20) warns: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter."

When our Western culture began to drift away from its Christian roots, moral relativism began paralysing the intellectual world. Someone commented that the past century is perhaps the first century in which the very existence of beauty has been categorically denied. It also has seen the most violent repudiation of beauty by some creative artists. They were prepared to dispense with beauty to achieve their own visions of truth. They expressed the feeling of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934). "This is not a book in the ordinary sense of the word. No, this is a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty."

Beauty and Redemption

If sin has distorted beauty, why can we discover and enjoy beauty today? The cross and the resurrection are central to the understanding of beauty. Beauty is in harmony, which still can be witnessed in this chaotic world. This harmony comes through the Gospel. The heart of the Gospel is that the Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, was in Jesus Christ reconciling the fallen world unto Himself through the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:19). What the first Adam distorted in the fall, the second Adam came to restore. The poet, George Herbert (1593-1633) let Christ speak this message on the cross:

O all ye who pass by, behold and see;
Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree;
The tree of life to all, but only me.

We cannot grasp the majestic sense of beauty without the pain and the cost of discipleship, which Flannery O'Connor (1925-64) has called "the sweat and the stink of the cross." Through the cross sin and death are overcome. Through Christ's poverty we became rich. He restored harmony and beauty. The darkness of Calvary beams light in the world. In the light of Christ there is the absolute standard of beauty.

There is still a spark of the image of God in which we are made. Augustine was astounded by the beauty he could observe in a fallen world. He said, "The brilliant wit shown by philosophers and heretics defending their very errors and falsehoods is something which beggars imagination!" An artist does not create something out of nothing. He works with the powers and talents God has given him. He works with the impression he has in his mind. He can either idealize it, or degenerate it. It all depends on his view of the world, his religious orientation. Even those who don't know God as the source of beauty still can produce works of art. What should our reaction be if God gives us an aesthetic experience - a glimpse of a

sublime landscape, the satisfaction of a good novel, the pleasing forms of a painting or sculpture? We may not cover our eyes, spurning God's gift of beauty. Gene Edward Veith, Jr. notes, "We are obligated to linger over it, to enjoy it fully, and to glorify God."

The Second Coming

Now we see often more ugliness than beauty. Paul says, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom. 8:22). But there is hope. A new world will be coming. The world was once a paradise, which came under the curse, but the original beauty of paradise will not only be restored, but even surpassed when the Lord returns in glory. God will renew the earth (Isa. 65:17). The time will come when we will see and experience perfect beauty. We shall see the beauty of our God, "Your eyes will see the king in his beauty," prophesies Isaiah (33:17). In his vision John sees the glory of God (Rev. 1:12-16).

Conclusion

Someone asked me, "Why are you going to write an article about beauty? Is the answer not simple? Is it not a matter of what you like or dislike?" The aesthetic dimensions of life have not received much attention. The late evangelical scholar, Carl F. Henry, observed that the Bible does not say much about aesthetics (as we understand the term) and for good reason. But he also said that evangelicals have long said even less, and in the present cultural context, they pay heavily for this neglect. And I believe if we do not see beauty from the Biblical perspective, we only further the "truth decay" already so rampant in our culture.

The Christian worldview widens our horizons, floods our world with divine light and sharpens our focus. The transforming vision of the Gospel allows us to gaze outside of ourselves. This is what the apostle Paul had in mind. A strong theology of creation and objective beauty informed his famous imperatives: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). May it be so with us, who confess to serve the Lord of all glory and all beauty.

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