

“Eye of the Beholder”
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“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darken'd ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits...” John Keats (read twice through)

Beauty, that which gives pleasure to the senses or mind; harmonies of form and color; excellence of artistry, truthfulness and originality – a quality or feature that is most effective or gratifying.¹ Beautiful things are all around us: a sunset, an ocean view, a tree or the glimpse of a wild creature. We call unexpected days of warmth and sunshine in the midst of winter gorgeous. The colors of spring’s first flowers or autumn’s vibrant leaves are things of beauty. How a hawk gently glides on the air is a sight of loveliness. The birth of a child, a sound of laughter, the contour of a face; all are beautiful.

We seek beauty; we wish to hold on to it. We collect things that we find beautiful and we even create beautiful things so as to have close to us something of *beauty*. It is in our nature to attempt to recapture, replicate the beauty we see in the world around us.

¹ Webster’s Dictionary

Museums become homes of beauty, warehouses of artifacts that tell of humanity's effort to witness and recreate the beautiful. Maybe in an attempt to comprehend what beauty itself truly is.

However, what we are seeking in our endeavor to capture beauty - either through the collecting of the actual object or in the recreating it on canvas or paper, in clay or stone, in notation or sound, movement or film - is not the object itself or even beauty itself, but our experience of beauty. "Beauty is an experience, nothing else." Writes D.H. Lawrence "It is not a fixed pattern or an arrangement of features. It is something felt, a glow or a communicated sense of fineness." This is what we are searching for, a recreation of an experience, not merely the object of the experience.

I love museums. I could spend days wandering the halls and often return to the same museum over and over again. Sometimes to revisit a particular piece that haunts me or that I am continually drawn to and sometimes to find pieces I may have walked past in previous visits, but now stand out to me and call for my attention. My favorite museums are of modern art. Some pieces leave me wondering how one defines the item before me as art, but for the most part I love being surprised by an image or a color or a texture. I find that I am offered new ways of looking at the world, at nature or people or society. Modern art pushes my sensibilities and demands that I leave my prejudices at the door.

The first modern art I remember seeing up close and personal are Georgia O'Keefe's flowers. It was an exhibit at the MFA in Boston and I had to be maybe 10 years old. When I came through the door from I think it was the ancient Egyptian wing full of large, dark and intimidating figures into an open sunlit room where one of O'Keefe's flowers took up nearly the entire wall. It was white with yellow and pink and a

loud almost fluorescent orange at its center. I had no idea that it was a flower until I read the plaque that hung beside it. I think I turned to my mother and asked her what kind of flower this could be, since I'd never seen anything like it in Grandma's garden. I couldn't imagine that it was a real flower that O'Keefe had been inspired by. I was convinced that she had made this up in her head and not real at all. But it was real, a real orchid as I remember. And from that moment on I have been fascinated by how artists take things of beauty in the world around us and through their experience of these objects recreate that beauty in a new form.

“Images are important.” Writes Harold Babcock in the winter edition of the *UU World* magazine. “The more familiar they are, the more charged with meaning they become. We associate them with particular episodes of our lives. We see more than is actually in the image. We see through and over and beyond it. We see into the image. No one else will see it quite the way we do, because of the memories and meanings we bring to it. What we see is more than meets the eye: what we see is modified by us, by our own peculiar preoccupations, by our particular experiences.”

It is through the lens of our lives that we encounter the entire world, so it makes sense that our interpretation of beauty would come in the same manner. How could two people see the same object in exactly the same light? It is not possible. Humanity does not and has never agreed universally on what is beautiful, what is worthy of being called gorgeous or lovely. I look at a painting done by Matisse or Van Gogh, think what amazing use of color and shape and proportion, while some of you might think a 3 year old could paint as well as either of them. My grandma is quite fond of Renoir, where I think much of his work is stiff and boring. My husband likes big band music and I prefer

Indian pop music. That's why we have separate office spaces at home. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." (attributed to Margaret Wolfe Hungerford). What one person believes to be the quintessential representation of beauty another person finds hideous.

"The park bench was deserted as I sat down to read beneath the long, straggly branches of an old willow tree. I was feeling particularly disillusioned by life since the world seemed intent on dragging me down. And if that weren't enough, a young boy approached me. He stood right before me and said with great excitement, "Look what I found!" In his hand was a flower, it was frankly a pitiful sight, with its petals all worn and drooping. Wanting him to take his dead flower and go, I faked a small smile. But instead of retreating he sat next to me and placed the flower to his nose and declared with surprise, "It sure smells pretty and it's beautiful. That's why I picked it; here, it's for you." The weed before me was dying or dead, but I knew I must take it, or he might never go away. So I reached for the flower, and replied, "Thank you." But instead of him placing the flower in my hand, he held it midair. It was then that I noticed for the first time that weed-toting boy was blind. I thanked him for picking the flower for me. 'You're welcome,' he smiled, and then ran off."

This ability to see things differently is what makes beauty so hard to define. If beauty is truly in the eyes of the beholder then we are left with the question: is what we find beautiful, beautiful because from our personal experiences and histories and personal inclinations we imbued an object with beauty or is an object beautiful in its own right regardless of our witnessing? Who is to say what is beautiful? If I behold beauty and cannot expect you to regard the same item as beautiful as well, then is beauty merely subjective? Can we ever reach a common understanding of what *is* beautiful?

Plato writes, “What is beautiful is good.” Beautiful things are good things. Or maybe he meant beauty itself is something good, pleasant, to be appreciated. What if we twisted that idea ‘what is good is beautiful.’ A good meal is beautiful, a good book is beautiful, and a good person is beautiful. Is there a relationship between moral goodness and beauty or is beauty above morality? If beauty is above morality then what about ugliness, can something that is ugly be beautiful?

“There is nothing ugly;” writes John Constable, “I never saw an ugly thing in my life – for let the form of an object be what it may; light, shade, and perspective will always make it beautiful.” It seems Constable is suggesting that the ugliness perceived in something or someone has more to do with our inability to see the beauty before us than in the essence of the thing being observed. So maybe beauty is in the eye of the beholder only if the beholder is attuned to witness beauty around him or herself.

This would seem to indicate that beauty is then subjective only in as much as an individual has the capacity and willingness to see the beauty that surrounds us. Plato believed beauty to be inherent within an object apart from our reflections and interpretations and perceptions of it. Marcus Aurelius wrote, “Anything in any way beautiful derives its beauty from itself and asks nothing beyond itself.”

The beauty that is beholden is then not an imposition upon an object but is a recognition of something innate and essential within it. Much like our story of Beauty and the Beast. The beast’s beauty lay hidden beneath anger, pity, fear and a finally, a monstrous form. And yet the monster himself was beautiful too. Beauty saw through her own fear and trepidation and into his heart of kindness and tenderness and love. Beast’s beauty resided within him all along.

“Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not,” wrote Emerson. Beauty then becomes an attitude of spirit, an orientation of the heart and soul toward the beautiful in another. And thus points us, directs us toward that which is beyond us. Beauty then also becomes an instrument of the Holy drawing us into its presence through our senses.

The act of seeing something beautiful is akin to a religious experience. Often the same language is used to describe our experience of beauty as an experience of the Holy: splendor, exquisite, magic, awe. So beauty then becomes a conduit through which the Holy, God engages in the world. Or that beauty is the evidence of the divinity that resides in all creation. “Most of us have had moments,” writes David & Bruce McArthur in *The Intelligent Heart*, “in childhood [or even adulthood] when we touched the divine presence. We did not think it extraordinary because it wasn’t; it was just a beautiful moment filled with love. In those moments our hearts were alive, and we saw the poignant beauty of life vividly...” In the moments when we encounter beauty it is not only the object we see, but also its essence which is divine and which in that moment reflects back to us our own essence. “...yes, in spite of all, some shape of beauty moves away the pall from our dark spirits...”