

## The Universal Objective Truths of Aesthetics

By Eric Fishback

From 3rd century B.C.E Greece emerges the popular proverb “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. Due to the sheer bulk of things which can be classified as beautiful, and the complexity involved in defining beauty for oneself, what one person finds beautiful another person may not. If then beauty is subjective to the individual, why is there beauty in art, music, and natural objects that appeals broadly to many people across different cultures and times? I will argue that there are objective truths to beauty outside of the merely subjective, individual opinion.

Immediately I recognize that certain entities of both natural and man-made origins have different proportions of people who regard them as beautiful. For example, I assume that a much larger number of people would find the Eiffel Tower more aesthetically pleasing or beautiful than the common landfill. Although there may be some individuals that would classify a landfill as beautiful, all that must be recognized is that a greater proportion of people would be willing to judge the Eiffel Tower by this same adjective. This phenomenon does not only occur with man-made works but also with naturally existing objects as well. Most would consider a blooming flower to be more aesthetically pleasing than a dead one. Why are there majorities in the classification of the beautiful? If there were not objective truths to beauty should it not be expected that the distribution of objects classified as beautiful should be more equal than what it is?

One might object to the argument above by citing the biasing effects prestige and value have on the individual when considering entities which are widely considered to be beautiful. Could it not be argued that many people might only consider van Gogh's *Starry Night* to be a beautiful painting because of its reputation? Could it not be argued that a diamond is only

considered beautiful because of the wealth it represents? However, artistic works are not priceless the moment they are finished, nor are they prestigious when the artist makes their last stroke with the paint brush. Rather, aesthetic entities only gain value or prestige if they are judged beautiful by many people. Therefore, to say an entity is only considered beautiful because of its value or prestige has the causal relationship running in the wrong direction.

One might argue that the consensus on what is beautiful can be explained because individuals are told what is beautiful based on notions rooted in cultural bias or upbringing. While these influences may expose an individual towards certain forms of beauty, it is clear beauty is still independently defined. First, similar to prestige, the cultural sense of beauty had to originate with a judgement that a certain form of art was beautiful before the cultural sense was established. It is also clear that works of art which originate from one culture can be found beautiful within other cultures. That beautiful pieces of art can transcend the borders of their specific culture as can be seen by the historic trading of goods for other nation's artistic works, such as the British acquisition of Chinese art in the 19th century.

It appears to me that aesthetic works have two aspects: mediums and concepts invoked by the mediums. Mediums are the respective form in which the entity expresses itself. Both physical and non-physical entities can have mediums. For example, the medium of a painting is the images and colour of paint. In a work of fictional literature, the medium is both the plot and literary devices. In sculpting the medium is the physical shape of the material which is being sculpted. The medium of mountain would be its geometric proportions and the geological and environmental conditions of the mountain. In music the medium is the rhythm and melody. The aesthetic work can use its medium as a means to express concepts. For example, a movie may use the medium of a plot concerning a war to express the pacifist views of the creator. A painter

may use dark colours and menacing shapes in an attempt to communicate anxiety and fear. It should also be noted that an aesthetic work can use its medium as a means or as an end. A wrist watch may use its medium of colour and design only to look visually appealing with no intention of expressing an idea or concept. However, just because the creator of a certain piece did not originally intend for there to be a specific idea behind their creation does not mean that an individual will not create one of their own. It is obvious however, that any aesthetic object made with the intention of creating an idea in the observer will be more successful in doing so than one which was not so made.

Now the question arises whether the internal, conceptual beauty is more beautiful than the beauty of the medium. It is apparent that not only is internal beauty more beautiful than any other kind of beauty, it is the only true form of beauty. If one examines all the entities which can be called beautiful what is it that they hold in common? Is it not the emotions and ideas beautiful objects evoke within the individual? Michelangelo's David statue and a Shakespearian sonnet share nothing regarding their mediums. What they hold in common when we call them "beautiful" are the emotions and thoughts which they evoke within us. Likewise, as mentioned before, any entity could conceivably be found beautiful by an individual. A decaying animal may be found beautiful by a biologist. Perhaps she admires the complexity of the biological process or the way nature uses death to support new life. But such judgements are about the conceptual aspect of the aesthetic object. A decaying animal would not be found beautiful if only assessed by its medium.

I noted that different aesthetic objects have different proportions of individuals who find them beautiful. I have previously argued that true beauty refers to conceptual beauty. Therefore, the only truly beautiful objects are those that are effective in creating a conceptual connection

with the observer. Thus, those entities which are better at stimulating the internal connection have the most individuals who find them beautiful. It is therefore possible to determine which objects are “more” beautiful based on how able individuals are to form conceptual attachments to the object. Because how beautiful an object appears is based on an individual assessment, and because the individual’s internal connection to the object is unique to them, it is impossible to determine if one object is more beautiful than another for that individual. All that can be determined is if an entity is better at being beautiful for a larger amount of people. Nonetheless, how successful an object is at being beautiful depends not on any one individual's opinion but characteristics that evoke internal connections for many people. Beauty is not, therefore, individual and subjective.

I think it is clear that there does indeed exist objective truths concerning aesthetic concepts. Individuals are so unique that any attempt to classify the personal experience of beauty to one objective standard will fail; there will also be exceptions. However, based on wide consensus of what is judged as beautiful, objective truths about beauty must exist. Within the variety of entities which are deemed beautiful there exists only one constant, the internal connection formed between the object and the observer, which is the objective source of beauty.