

# The concept of beauty in art

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## Introduction

This chapter discusses beauty as “an artistic work with a visual component having an alluring quality that gives pleasure to those who experience it or think about it.”

Every object with a visual dimension is associated with what is known through the human’s perception of its form, thus gaining content. Form is the plastic element and draws our attention, making us think that the work is beautiful or good. Content is the second dimension in which we associate form with other information already known. Content appeals to our intellect, strengthening or weakening our perception of beauty and goodness that begins to emerge through form.

Perception is like a window of reference, which is shaped by all the baggage that a person carries and that builds them.

First section of this chapter covers such topics as the definition of art, beauty, esthetics, and taste. “Obsession with the beauty of properties” section mentions the works that we see frequently in the history of art and that give place to the beauty of possession. Still lifes and portraits displayed along the long corridors of museums are the most prestigious examples of the “glorification of the

property,” as Berger puts it. Possession is beautiful in these works; it is beautiful to make possessions visible through form and to show off with it. Content is what is owned or what is wished to be owned.<sup>1</sup>(pp. 83–112)

Art history cannot be discussed without considering “nudes.” “Beauty of nudes” section is devoted to the beautiful women of art history. This movement, which started with the naked image of Adam and Eve being expelled from Paradise, left its place to a type of art in which the female body was naked. The form is the beautiful female body. The content, on the other hand, is the female nature that is passive, obedient, and concerned only with her own beauty and perception of the image through the eyes of others. The exploitation of women is applied with pleasure in today’s advertising industry using the principles of this style. “Beauty in landscapes” section discusses the beauty of nature. The nature that we are born into and that shapes us is not only found to be beautiful and adored unconditionally, but also determines the criteria for our perception of beauty. Proportions and colors in nature form the basis of the form of a work of art. Nature, which was imitated with admiration and mastery in earlier periods, is like a laboratory for 19th-century

artists and 20th-century avant-gardes. Fifth section discusses modernism and postmodernism in general terms. In the 19th century, a new way of life came to the fore. Romantic artists of the hopeful atmosphere created by industrialization were shaken and bewildered by the World Wars of the 20th century and they reflected this in their ideals and arts. They wanted to bring art into everyday life and revitalize culture and society. The 20th century would be a period in which mass media and art began to go beyond the usual traditional forms of art.

Postmodernism, which first emerged in architecture and succeeded modernism, is a reaction against the basic features of modernism. Function and rationality are questioned and challenged. Global capitalism, mass media, and the new world order bring a new understanding of art. The distinction between popular culture and elitism, the boundary between high or elite art and kitsch art becomes blurred. "Beauty of the 21st century individual" section forms the core of this chapter with a discussion of the modern individual and their images on social media, which they post to confirm their own existence and beauty in the eyes of others.

The conclusion discusses the subject of "existence in the eyes of others" on the axis of "nude," "the female existence," "obsession with possessions," and the "21st-century individual."

### Definition of art, beauty, esthetics, and taste

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Staniszewski underlines that although the term "art" existed before the 18th century, it was only after this period that it gained the meaning we understand today. "Art was seen as knowledge or craft and set of rules and skills to be learned" in Ancient Greece. In the Middle Ages, "art" was a skill that was mastered. In the Italian renaissance, painting was included under the main title of "liberal arts." In the 17th century, science, which is based on

mathematics and cognitive facts, separated from art because art, unlike science, is based on talent and taste. In 1798, the term "beaux art" officially entered the French language and in 1880, the word "art" entered the English dictionary as "the skillful production of the beautiful in visible forms." After the 18th century, the meaning of art was "An original creation produced by an individual gifted with Genius" and the meaning of a work of art was "an object of esthetic beauty, separate from everyday life."<sup>2</sup>(pp. 11-118)

Kant defines "esthetics" as a philosophy of beauty. According to him, true "esthetic taste" is a pure, disinterested pleasure in which we only contemplate an object. Esthetic experience is a "harmonious free play" of our imagination and our understanding. Pure beauty is in nature and in art, beauty created by God is nature, and beauty created by men is art. To produce art, one must be genius and to assess art, one must have taste. Kant says that taste reflects a universal consensus and mentions about "Common Sense," whereas Staniszewski mentions that taste is not an ideal, and it distinguishes class."<sup>2</sup>(pp. 119-124)

Taste can vary from person to person, as Berger has explained; the learnt assumptions form the human perception.<sup>1</sup>(p. 11) It is like a reference interval. Just as human eyes cannot see infrared and ultraviolet light, a person cannot make sense of what they see when they encounter something unusual that is beyond the parameters that determine the person's taste range. But, while the eyes cannot be trained to see these intervals, taste can be trained. For the development of taste, an environment in which art takes place and a capacity to make sense of art are required.

The variety of forms and content that change over time is read with the data of the period. To be able to read art, it is necessary to understand the data of the period, such as social and cultural environment, historical events, and information about the artist. In addition to the data of the period, it is necessary to be knowledgeable

about the history of art to understand possible references to works produced in previous periods. All these make up the background of our "taste."

### Obsession with the beauty of properties

In European museums, there are aisles full of portraits, still lifes, landscapes, and more. In this context, Berger mentions the anthropologist Levi-Strauss who was the first to analyze traditional oil painting with the idea of ownership and who generalized this to Western art.<sup>1(p. 84)</sup> Oil painting is an extremely convenient medium of drawing tangible objects. It is possible to correct mistakes, apply new layers of paint, and create illusions. The picture created by depicting three-dimensional objects in two dimensions is already a kind of illusion.

In this respect, it is quite suitable for painting the tangible things, the possessions. These include estates, animals, and so on; everything imaginable in terms of possessions. Berger states that the oil painting is "Means of celebrating wealth and the buying power of money. It shows the desirability of what money could buy." Berger also states that over time, facial expressions in portraits resemble each other, because the clothes and jewelry of individuals are more important than facial expressions. The portraits seem to say that once upon a time, I was like this and I wore these ostentatious clothes. Still lifes, exotic fruits, rare foods, silverware, crystals, and the most extravagant satin clothing are there in the paintings to confirm their owners' wealth. Animal pictures of pets or livestock are also an indication of the wealth of their owners. Even landscapes with portraits or pictures of buildings placed in front of them become a painting of property.<sup>1(pp. 83-112)</sup>

The property pictures that have been made are, in a way, like exhibits of one's lifestyle. In this period before the invention of the camera, people take their place in history as depicted

by these pictures. Today's Instagram pictures are just like this; individuals decorate the virtual corridors of history with their images taken in their best conditions.

### Beauty of nudes

Nude is a category of art in which it is common to depict the naked female body even in irrelevant contexts. The female body is put on display for someone else's pleasure. In nudes, the woman is usually watched by the spectator of the painting, through the eyes of the painter. In most of the paintings, women look at their viewer and not at other people in the picture. Sometimes they have mirrors in their hand because the general belief is that women like to look at themselves and to be looked at. Berger describes this in the way the woman expresses herself. He mentions that the woman expresses herself in a self-directed and indirect way, such as her gestures, voice, thoughts, and clothes. He mentions that she is taught to constantly review herself, that she is always aware that eyes are on her all the time, that women are passive, and men are the onlookers and women are the looked. This attitude is reflected in paintings. The women in the paintings are passive, submissive, gazing at the audience or concerned with how their own beauty appears in the mirror or through the eyes of others.<sup>1(pp. 45-64)</sup>

Throughout the history of nudes, "timeless" beauty has been portrayed as young and white. There is no room for old people and people of color in this world.

As an example among nude paintings, *Susanna and the Elders* is a very good field of study. The story is briefly as follows:

A Hebrew wife, Susanna, was falsely accused by two old men. As she bathes in her garden alone, two elders spy on her. They both lust for Susanna and demand she have sex with them. When she refuses, they have her arrested, claiming that she was having sex with a young man under a tree.

She refuses to be blackmailed and is arrested and about to be put to death for adultery. Then, young Daniel interrupts the proceedings and asks that the elders be cross-examined to prevent the death of an innocent.

After being separated, the two men are cross-examined about details of what they saw but disagree about the tree under which Susanna supposedly met her lover. One mentions a mastic tree, whereas the other says it was an evergreen oak tree. The great difference in size between a mastic and an oak makes the elders' lie plain to all the observers. The false accusers are put to death, and virtue triumphs.<sup>3</sup>

Artists who want to paint this subject are expected to create pictures that will highlight the main idea of the story. The punishment of the elderly and the salvation of the innocent should be the subject of painting. However, only a few of the many *Susanna and the Elders* paintings in art history have been related to these scenes. Most of the paintings focus on the bathing scene. Based on the story, it was expected that Susanna would be portrayed as fearful and struggling with the elderly in this scene.

In both paintings by Tintoretto, there is no real anxiety on Susanna's face. There are also no traces of a struggle with the elderly in her face or in her body language. In Fig. 1, Susanna is unaware that she is being watched and watches her own beauty in the mirror through the eyes of others. In Fig. 2, Susanna's facial expression is more controversial and cannot be considered anxious. In Fig. 3 she looks into the eyes of the audience turning her head. On the other hand, the elderly people depicted are like any other old people. There is no expression or feature on their faces that suggest they have devious intentions.

In Tintoretto's paintings, Susanna is portrayed as a passive, obedient woman who admires her own image, rather than as a victim of an attempted rape.

In Artemisia Gentileschi's version, as in Fig. 4, Susanna has real fear on her face and resistance in her body language. Susanna looks neither at the audience nor in the mirror. Artemisia is a

victim of rape and one of the elders in her painting is depicted as her rapist.

This example is the reflection of the view of women in the male-dominated society. The male perspective and the female perspective on the same event can be completely different. When examining nude paintings, the subjects, the painters, and the way women and men are represented in the painting come to the fore.

In traditional nudes, the female body is on display, just as people include their own images in today's Instagram pictures, they look into the eyes of the audience as if to affirm their own images in the eyes of the audience.

### Beauty in landscapes

The admiration for the nature in which one lives must also form the basis of the perception of beauty. There is a relationship between what is called beautiful and the mood created by the colors, forms, and natural events that have been experienced for centuries.

In religious or mythological paintings, it is observed that nature takes place as a background. Even in the later periods when nature was portrayed alone, it is seen that the estates were depicted with the portraits of their owners.

Contrary to previous periods, the beauty of nature is handled with a poetic expression by the painters of the Romantic Period. The admiration for nature is interpreted with an enthusiastic expression.

At the end of 19th century, the Impressionists take the field. In this period, the images of nature, which were previously only sketched in the field and then included in the real painting in the workshop, are captured with instant impressions on the field itself.

For example, Monet, who says, "My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece,"<sup>4</sup> paints the same subject again and again in different lights (Fig. 5).





FIG. 1 J. Tintoretto: *Susanna and the Elders* (c.1555–56), Vienna.

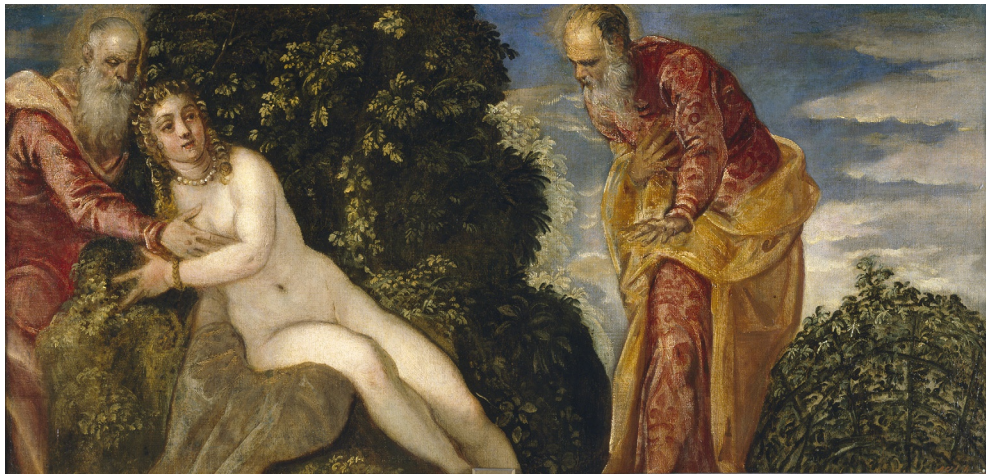


FIG. 2 J. Tintoretto: *Susanna and the Elders* (c.1552–55), Museo del Prado.

A similar attitude is seen in the post-Impressionist Cezanne. He has repeatedly painted the Sainte-Victoire mountain in different lights, as in Figs. 6 and 7.<sup>5</sup>

A linear development begins with the Romantics and Impressionists and progresses from realistic images to instantaneous representations, and then to abstract and ideal forms.<sup>2(pp. 181–185)</sup>



FIG. 3 J. Tintoretto: *Susanna and the Elders* (c.1550–60), Louvre.

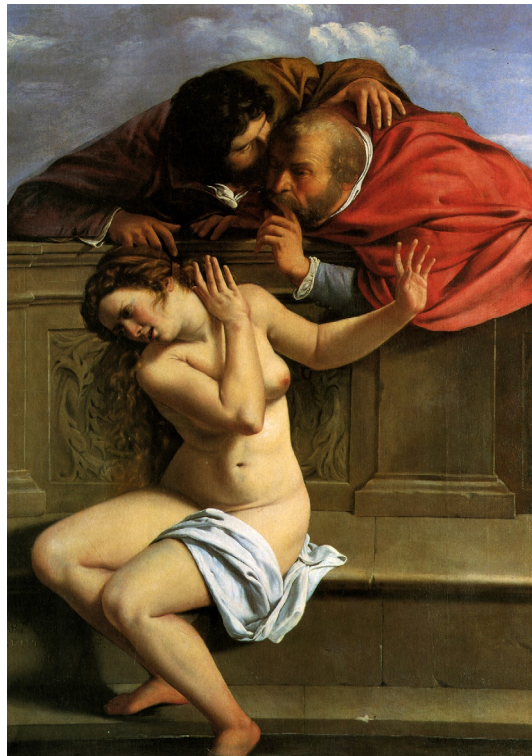


FIG. 4 A. Gentileschi: *Susanna and the Elders* (c.1610), Schloss Weissenstein.

#### I. Beauty and aging





FIG. 5 C. Monet: (1897–99) *Water Lilies and Japanese Bridge*, Princeton University Art Museum.



FIG. 6 P. Cezanne: (1882–85), *Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct of the Arc River Valley*, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



FIG. 7 P. Cezzane: (1887), *Mont Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine*, Courtauld Institute of Art.

The reflection of the landscape in today's virtual environment is embodied in the sharing of images of places whose beauty is admired, but with the addition of insinuated declaration of "I was there, I witnessed that."

### Beauty in modernism and postmodernism

After the Romantic Period, when the hopes started with the Industrial Revolution were portrayed with enthusiasm, it was realized that industrialization did not serve the welfare of the society. This affects artists, who want to revitalize the culture and society and want to introduce art into daily life. Therefore, "Avant-garde" which is a series of art movements consisting of submovements such as "Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, and so on, was born.<sup>2(pp. 227-232)</sup>

Modernist artists idealize nature, target an elite consumer, celebrate human craftsmanship, benefit from classical culture, and try to add wisdom, beauty, and refinement.

After two great wars, as Arnason and Mansfield mentioned, because of these experiences, "the Abstract Expressionists can be seen as responding to philosopher Theodore Adorno's 1945 declaration that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Art could never—should never—be the same. As Adorno stated in clarifying his dictum: "perennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream."<sup>6(p. 377)</sup>

Contrary to the times when beauty was sought after in form and/or content, beauty is now sought in simplicity and in the essence of the material. With increasing simplification rather than usage of traditional formal connotations, artists adopt a variety of unconventional expressive styles.

Modernist artists aim for a universal language, rejecting national and local references to remind them of the conditions that made wars possible. They sever their ties with the past and the local.<sup>2(p. 227)</sup> As a result, modernism alienated people from their culture, and postmodernism developed as a reaction.



A new era begins, technology develops, and there is global communication, which makes global capitalism possible. Jameson explains postmodernism as the global logic of late capitalism.<sup>7(p. 3)</sup> In postmodernism, technology is blessed; it is possible to produce works of art with any kind of technology. Art targets mass audiences, draws on popular culture, and seeks to create sensual stimulation rather than intellectual admiration. Art is no longer just admirable fine art that appeals to our senses; it has gained a conceptual dimension.

Simulation is one of the key characteristics of postmodern culture and society where the difference between real and virtual becomes blurred. The difference between real and representation disappears and, as Jean Baudrillard said, "originality becomes a totally meaningless concept."<sup>8</sup> With this perspective, curated, retouched pictures of the 21st-century individual in the virtual world become almost separate identities.

Consumerism is another key concept of postmodernism. The new economic model after the wars is about consumption. Overproduction requires overconsumption. Therefore, consumption is blessed, and the beauty of the objects consumed in the real world is shared in the virtual world, which is just like the European nobility who had their possessions depicted on canvases in the past.

### Beauty of the 21st-century individual

A personality disorder is named after Narcissus who falls in love with his own image. Today, individuals displaying and retouching their own images in the virtual environment may suggest a similar form of behavior. Or, from a more exaggerated point of view, when a person places their image on social media, they can be said to be displaying exhibitionist behaviors. When a person looks at the images of others, they can be said to be displaying voyeuristic behaviors.

These behaviors, which are serious personality disorders when clinically present, to some extent form the identities of individuals.

Lacan said "the gaze is part of a desire for completion of oneself through the other."<sup>9(p. 122)</sup> The most guaranteed way for an individual to affirm themselves is by the "likes" received. Even ordinary individuals put their best self on social media. Various editing and photoshop-ping features are available even in the simplest applications.

Virtual images are more perfect than real ones. The more professional users create completely different "identities." Technology has done what nature or plastic surgery could not. Everyone can be younger, prettier, slimmer, and taller on the Internet.

In the past, culture and beauty were documented by artists through art. Today, individuals do this themselves and document culture and beauty in this parallel universe. The images of people have been disconnected from their originals and have become avatars. The videos that include very tall body images of young people are like mannerist pictures of the past. Just as Michelangelo exaggerated the body forms while painting the Sistine Chapel to make the forms more magnificent, today's youth are attracted to being thin and tall and use extreme editing to appear as such.

Faces and bodies transform into a reality of their own in the virtual environment. What appears may no longer be what is believed. If the sense of beauty and value judgments of the virtual and the real world stay in their own channels, it will not be a problem. However, these impossible images can turn into objects of desire, as the virtual image replaces reality and thus creates new beauty norms. Everyone who has been intervened in the real or virtual world begins to look alike.

There are few who can bring themselves closer to their avatars with esthetic interventions, sports, and diets. Those who cannot stay in an ambivalent state between their "identities"

created in this dual personality environment and their complicated “subjectivity.”

Berger mentions that, according to Durer, the ideal nude consists of the face of one woman, the shoulders of another woman, legs of another woman, and hands of another woman.<sup>1(p. 62)</sup>

Therefore the woman who has become an object is now an abstraction rather than a real person.

Years later, Manet breaks these rules with Olympia. Olympia is real and imperfect, her face is out of symmetry, and her color is dead white. Years after Olympia, today’s images that have been edited in the real or virtual world remind of Durer’s approach. Reality cannot be tolerated. Beauty should be idealized. Women have become stereotypes once again in history.

## Conclusion

This chapter examined beauty in terms of the passion for the beauty of the objects owned by noble Europeans, the interest in beauty of the female body, the process of portraying the beauty of nature, and modernism and postmodernism analyses. It discussed the individuals of today’s consumer society who are passionately attached to the beauty of their own images presented to the gaze of others on social media. These individuals resemble the nobles of the Renaissance period when the beauty of wealth was portrayed with passion and obsession. Just as they painted the objects they ate, drank, and owned, today’s individuals share them on social media.

Today’s individual presents themselves to the audience, much like as in nude paintings in which the female body was commodified. The modern individual shares their most beautiful and charming selfies on social media. This attitude is adopted by both men and women. Everyone seems to wish to take their place in history with their best look. With the curated images, proportions have been modified; an illusory body composition has become normal.

Social media are filled with selfies, much like the portraits that fill the aisles of European museums. In the portraits painted in the past, the glorification of owned objects came to the fore and the portraits of individuals looked similar. Likewise, today esthetic interventions in real life and retouches in social media make individuals look like one another. While the beauty in nature is desired to be shared on social media, the fact that the person is there, witnessing that beauty and having that distinction is also documented with selfies.

Before the invention of the camera, it was only possible to document the beautiful through art. Nowadays, beauty is documented by the camera of our mobile phones. “Beautiful” is affirmed with the likes received, which ensures the acceptance of beauty norms by large masses. The individuals have not changed; they are just like the Renaissance nobles in this context. Or, they are like the “nudes” looking into the eyes of the audience, wanting to be admired by them.

In today’s postmodern world, “images” do not exist physically. They are not printed or put into albums or frames as before. Now, they are stored in virtual albums, in the clouds. These “images” are now independent entities. They are virtual states of the image of the “real” in a moment of time, altered by messages, music, and other enhancements, and are detached from the real. These independent beings are like avatars of individuals in their most beautiful and perfect states.

As a result, when it comes to documenting beauty, it has been technology and narrative style that has changed and not the human character.

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