

BEAUTY, LOVE AND ART: THE LEGACY OF ANCIENT GREECE

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ABSTRACT:

KEYWORDS:

If someone were to ask you what feature was most important in judging the quality of a work of art – any work of art – I suspect that a majority would, like myself, answer “beauty”. If I were to modify the question slightly and inquire: What is the principal ingredient in the aesthetic appeal of an art work, my guess is that still more of us would identify it as beauty. This is not surprising, since the discipline of aesthetics, which arose in the eighteenth century, took beauty as its central category, the concept which it sought to analyze and explain. This again is natural enough, if we think of the visual arts of that epoch, and earlier still, in the Renaissance and all the way back to the classical era of Greece and Rome: we would not hesitate to describe many such works, and certainly the most famous among them, as beautiful.

The idea of artistic beauty came under fire, however, toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, when modernism not only distanced itself from naturalistic representation, thus calling into question the relevance of beauty to art that was highly abstract, but also launched more polemical attacks on beauty as a distraction from the true calling of art, which is not to prettify the world but to expose its ugliness and demand reform. As Arthur Danto, puts it in his book, *The*

Abuse of Beauty: “From the eighteenth century to early in the twentieth century, it was the presumption that art should possess beauty” (p. xiv). And yet, as he notes, “beauty had almost entirely disappeared from artistic reality in the twentieth century, as if attractiveness was somehow a stigma, with its crass commercial implications” (p. 7). Danto goes on to affirm: “I regard the discovery that something can be good art without being beautiful as one of the great conceptual clarifications of twentieth-century philosophy of art, though it was made exclusively by artists – but,” he adds, “it would have been seen as commonplace before the Enlightenment gave beauty the primacy it continued to enjoy until relatively recent times” (p. 58). This last comment is, I think, only a partial truth, as I shall attempt to show. But Danto’s argument concerning the lack of beauty in modern art is not as self-evident as it may seem.

Danto illustrates his claim with reference to a painting by Matisse: “Matisse’s *Blue Nude*,” he writes, “is a good, even a great painting – but someone who claims it is beautiful is talking through his or her hat” (pp. 36–37). [[Reference here to Picasso’s comment, and his own *Desmoiselles d’Avignon*](#)]



Danto quotes (p. 82) a remark by Roger Scruton: “If one finds a photograph beautiful, it is because one finds something beautiful in the subject.” Yet many critics do not agree. Alexander Nehamas, in his book, *The Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), writes: “As long as we continue to identify beauty with attractiveness and attractiveness with a power of pleasing quickly and without much thought or effort, we can’t even begin to think of many of the twentieth century’s great works as beautiful” (pp. 29–30). In particular, he replies directly to Danto’s assertion that Matisse’s *Blue Nude* cannot be

called beautiful by any stretch of the imagination, and insists: “Beauty is not identical with an attractive appearance” (p. 24).

But is that so? And in particular, is it so of works of art? Are we prepared to say that a painting of an ugly subject can in fact be beautiful *as a painting*? As a student of ancient cultures, this question takes on, for me, a historical cast: when did people first begin to speak of the beauty of a work of art, as distinct from the subject that it represents? Did the Greeks and Romans think of beauty this way? Michael Squire, in his recent book, *The Art of the Body: Antiquity and its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), affirms: “like it or not – and there have been many reasons for *not* liking it – antiquity has supplied the mould for all subsequent attempts to figure and figure out the human body” (p. xi), and he adds: “Because Graeco-Roman art bestowed us with our western concepts of ‘naturalistic’ representation... ancient images resemble not only our modern images, but also the ‘real’ world around us” (p. xiii). Thanks to the classical heritage, in other words, we think that a statue of a man or woman looks like a real man or woman; we can even imagine a person falling in love with the statue as though it were a real person – this is the basis of the story of Pygmalion, after all, and there are other examples of such a perverse passion that purport to recount real events. There is even the word *agalmatophilia*, from the Greek roots *agalma* or “statue” and *philia*, “love”; it is defined in the Wikipedia article as a perversion (“paraphilia” is the technical term used in the article) “involving sexual attraction to a statue, doll, mannequin or other similar figurative object” (accessible at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agalmatophilia>).

The article informs us that “Agalmatophilia became a subject of clinical study with the publication of Richard von Krafft-Ebbing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Ebbing recorded an 1877 case of a gardener falling in love with a statue of the Venus de Milo and being discovered attempting coitus with it.” I doubt the gardener was aware that there was a Greek precedent for his behavior, but there was. Praxiteles created a nude statue of Aphrodite, which was enough of a scandal, we are told by ancient sources, in its own right.

But a man fell so in love with the statue that he attempted to make love with it, and left a stain on it that remained visible afterwards (Pliny, *Natural History* 36.21; cf. Lucian, *Images* 4). Now, a question arises here too: did the man fall in love with a statue, and hence exhibit the perversion of *agalmatophilia*, or did he fall in love with the goddess represented by the statue, and so coupled with it in the hope, perhaps, that it would come alive, like Pygmalion’s sculpture, or indeed that it was in some sense the goddess herself? Let us remember that the Greeks carried



statues of their gods and goddesses in their religious processions, and worshipped them in various rites. When the Athenians wove the great robe or *peplos* for Athena, and carried her, dressed to the nines, in the Panathenaic festival parade, they thought of the statue not as some inanimate stone but as a living symbol, energized in some fashion by the spirit of the deity.¹ Callistratus, who lived in the third or fourth century A.D. and wrote a set of descriptions of statues, explains in reference to a particularly fine statue of Paean: “What we are seeing seems to me to be, not an image [*tu-pos*], but a fashioning of the truth [*tês alêtheias plasma*]. For see how art is not unable to represent character; rather, when it has made an image of the god it passes over to the god himself. Though it is matter, it breathes divine intelligence, and though it happens to be handiwork, it does what is not possible for handicrafts and in an ineffable way begets signs of the soul.” Art opens a window on the true nature of things.²

Clement of Alexandria, in his *Exhortation to the Greeks* (that is, pagans), observes that the pagan gods are recognized by their conventional attributes, for instance, Poseidon by his trident, “and if one sees a woman represented naked, he knows that she is ‘golden’ Aphrodite” (4.47.2). Clement goes on to explain that Pygmalion “fell in love with an ivory statue; the statue was of Aphrodite and she was naked” (4.57.3), and he went so far as to make love to it (*sunerkhetai*). He also mentions the man who was enamored of Cnidian Aphrodite and had intercourse, as he puts it, with the stone (*mignutai têt lithôi*). But Clement is puzzled by such behavior, and ascribes it to the power of art to deceive (*apatêsai*). Clement goes on to affirm that effective as craftsmanship is, it cannot deceive a rational person (*apatêsai logikon*). He grants that stallions will neigh accurate drawings of mares, and that a girl once fell in love with a painting (*eikôn*), just as the boy did with the Cnidian Aphrodite, but he explains that “the eyes of the viewers were deceived by art” (4.57.4), since no human in his right mind (*anthrôpos sôphronôn*) would have embraced a goddess, or would

¹ I recall reading somewhere that the Hebrews invented idolatry as the worship of inanimate idols, as a consequence of their faith in a transcendent deity, and the absolute contrast between the material and the spiritual; so-called idol-worshippers did not conceive of the objects of their devotion as inanimate.

² Lucian, it is true, draws a distinction between comparing human beauty to that of a statue of a god and to the deity itself; statues are manmade, and so there is no sacrilege or exaggeration involved (*Pro Imag.* 23: Τάχ’ ἂν οὖν φαίης, μᾶλλον δὲ ἤδη εἴρηκας, “ἐπαινεῖν μὲν σοι εἰς τὸ κάλλος ἐφείσθω· ἀνεπίφθονον μέντοι ποιήσασθαι τὸν ἔπαινον ἐχρήν, ἀλλὰ μὴ θεαῖς ἀπεικάζειν ἄνθρωπον οὖσαν.” ἐγὼ δὲ—ἤδη γάρ με προάξεται τάληθὲς εἰπεῖν—οὐ θεαῖς σε, ὦ βελτίστη, εἴκασα, τεχνιτῶν δὲ ἀγαθῶν δημιουργήμασιν λίθου καὶ χαλκοῦ ἢ ἐλέφαντος πεποιημένοις· τὰ δὲ ὑπ’ ἀνθρώπων γεγενημένα οὐκ ἀσεβές, οἶμαι, ἀνθρώποις εἰκάζειν). But he promptly has his character insist that tradition permits direct comparisons with gods as well, so the distinction remains blurred. See Verity Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 12: “Greek literature is riddled with examples in which gods appear to their viewer-worshippers in the form of their images.”

have fallen in love with a stone daemon (*daimonos kai lithou*, 4.57.5). It is all the more absurd, Clement concludes, to worship such things. Unlike many Church Fathers, Clement is hostile to graven images, and fails to understand the subtle, even mysterious interplay between the work of art and the figure it reproduces.

I recall marching in the Holy Week processions in Seville, where enormous floats are lifted on the shoulders of penitents, displaying larger than life figures of Jesus, Mary, and others. Mary is always adorned with a long, woven cape that is truly resplendent, and it is impossible not to see that she is beautiful.



But is it the same kind of beauty as Aphrodite's – the kind that might inspire erotic desire in a perhaps oversexed young man? Some critics would deny this absolutely. Roger Scruton, for example, writes in his recent book entitled *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): "There are no greater tributes to human beauty than the medieval and Renaissance images of the Holy Virgin: a woman whose sexual maturity is expressed in motherhood and who yet remains untouchable, barely distinguishable, as an object of veneration, from the child in her arms... The Virgin's beauty is a symbol of purity and for this very reason is held apart from the realm of sexual appetite, in a world of its own." Following in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant, Scruton affirms: "In the realm of art beauty is an object of contemplation, not desire." All very well: but this does not seem to be the way the ancient Greek man viewed Aphrodite. Scruton speaks here of *images* of the Virgin, and his comment about contemplation and desire pertains to the realm of art. But what of the figure *represented* in the work of art? Is there a difference in our response to the woman, as opposed to the representation of the woman? And if so, is this a feature of our modern perception, in which we do distinguish, in some form or other, between the beauty of the subject and the beauty of the artwork?

Scruton attempts to address this problem, and does so in connection with the beauty of children. He writes: "There is hardly a person alive who is not moved by the beauty of the perfectly formed child. Yet most people are horrified by the thought that this beauty should be a spur to desire, other than the desire to cuddle and comfort... And yet the beauty of a child is of the same kind as the beauty of a desirable adult, and totally unlike the beauty of an aged face." The point of his argument, it seems to me, is that the beauty of an adult woman, or at least of some adult women – and in particular, that of the Virgin Mary – is analogous to a child's beauty, and if this is so, then such beauty, physical and natural, nevertheless does not arouse sexual desire. Frankly, I am not convinced that a child's beauty is like that of a sexually desirable adult, so Scruton's argument does not hold. But apart from theory, is it even true that people view images of the Virgin in a purely contemplative way?

Let me return to the Easter procession in Seville. As the grand image of the Virgin, borne on the shoulders of a dozen strong men, progressed in its stately march along the streets lined with worshippers, while others gazed down from the windows and balconies of their apartments, from time to time a man, in the throes of rapture, would compose a spontaneous song to the Virgin, called in Spanish a *saeta*. The word itself is an abbreviated form of the Latin *sagitta*, or "arrow" (hence Sagittarius), and evidently the songs were imagined as being shot forth; and indeed, they do give that impression. Others in the crowd, equally moved but perhaps less gifted as poets, shouted out words of adoration, and frequent among them one will hear "Guapa!," that is, "Beautiful!" Now, *guapo* or *guapa* (masculine or feminine) is a special term in Spanish: it refers only to human beauty, and is never applied to such things as landscapes or works of art or creatures other than human beings. This does not necessarily mean that it connotes, in the context of the Holy Week procession, sexual attractiveness (one can call a child *guapo*), but neither does it pertain to a special

territory of artistic beauty, of the sort that, according to Scruton, elicits contemplation rather than desire. Might it be that worshippers of the Virgin recognize that her beauty is not essentially different from that of ordinary women, and that sexual desire is repressed or absent not because she is perceived as having the beauty of a child, but for much the same reason that we recognize sexual attractiveness in certain women – our mothers, sisters, daughters, or our neighbors' wives – or, as the case may be, in certain men, and yet discriminate between those who are legitimate objects of desire and those who are not?

If the ancient Greeks and Romans did not think of works of art as beautiful, independently of the figures represented in them – and we may recall that they were almost obsessed with the human body, and the great majority of their sculptures and paintings, if we can judge from vases and surviving wall decorations, were of human beings and gods – then they might not have worried about whether paintings like the *Blue Nude* were beautiful; they would have enjoyed representations of beautiful things, of course, and responded in other ways to representations of things that were not in themselves beautiful. As for the effect that beauty, whether as represented in art or in life itself, had on them, it would likely have been what beauty normally inspires, namely desire. And indeed, our evidence points in this direction: when the Greeks spoke of beauty, especially human beauty, it was most often associated with sexual attractiveness. To be sure, ancient Greeks, being rather philosophically disposed, might stand back and wonder what it was that made a body beautiful, and in this sense treat a beautiful person or object as matter for contemplation.³ But the double perspective on beauty that has troubled modern aesthetics did not arise for them, or rather, where it did it took a different form, namely, the tension between transcendent beauty, invisible to the physical eye, and the ordinary beauty of worldly creatures. But this was an issue above all for mystically minded philosophers like Plato and for Christian theologians, who were concerned about whether and how one might ascribe beauty to so elevated a figure as God. Ordinary beauty, and even divine beauty, aroused desire, and insofar as a work of art captured such beauty, desire was the natural reaction.

But who was considered beautiful? Aphrodite, for sure; and Helen, too. So too Paris, with whom Helen fell in love and eloped to Troy, setting off the great war, described in the *Iliad*. In general, the Greeks applied the term beauty precisely to those individuals who had sexual allure. Some women might be what we would perhaps call handsome or dignified or powerful, but they did not seem primarily pretty. I am thinking here of a goddess like Athena, in full military garb with spear and helmet and the gorgon-faced aegis on her chest; and indeed, where Athena is so represented,

³ Cf. Gombrich review: "Painting an exact copy of Titian's *Venus* an artist may well disregard the erotic effect of the picture and so may the restorer who examines its state of preservation. What is even more relevant: the art student in the life class may have to disregard his response to the model and to concentrate on getting the shapes and proportions right. Maybe it is this shift of attention that has led to the aesthetic doctrine of disinterested contemplation."

the texts that describe her seem not to attribute beauty to her. At all events, her other attributes, such as wisdom, skill at the arts, and military might, are the ones that are usually emphasized. With such an imposing presence, there was perhaps less emotional conflict among viewers as to her potentially erotic attractiveness.

But was desire the only response to a work of art, as the Greeks understood it, or could art also arouse other sentiments? Indeed, Greek aesthetic ideas embraced a wide variety of reactions to art, which I may briefly outline here. But these responses were not necessarily conceived of as inspired by the beauty of the work, or the object in the work. There are, after all, other qualities that are characteristic of art, despite the narrow focus of eighteenth-century aesthetics.

To begin with, a work of art may inspire pleasure. But the pleasure deriving from art was typically understood to derive from its technical excellence, above all in fidelity to the object, which was called in Greek *mimêsis*, that is, “imitation.” The word is familiar today largely from the discussion in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (4, 1448b4-27). Aristotle explains that there are two reasons why poetry came into being. First, imitating is innate in human beings and everyone enjoys simulations; that is why we enjoy watching the exact likenesses of things that are in reality painful to see, “for example the figures of the most contemptible animals and of corpses.” Now, we may remember that Aristotle is discussing tragedy, which one might think is not in itself very pleasant to see. It is worth remarking that he nowhere says that tragedy is beautiful, save perhaps when he suggests that plays should have a reasonable length, neither too long nor too short, in the same way that bodies cannot be fine or handsome (*kalós*) if they are too small to make out their individual parts or too large to take in at a single look (1450b34-51a15). So why do we enjoy tragedy? Because we enjoy seeing good representations, irrespective of whether the object represented is pretty or ugly. Aristotle’s second reason is that it is pleasurable to learn, and when people see likenesses they realize the connection with the real thing. Aristotle is, as I mentioned, explaining here why poetry came into existence, not why people enjoy representations of repugnant things, but his account illuminates the source of tragic pleasure. What is more, his theory presupposes that art does not deceive in the way Clement argues; to enjoy a work of art, one must recognize that it is a representation and not the real thing.

Some centuries later, Plutarch, in his essay, *How a Youth Should Listen to Poems*, observes that poetry, like painting, is imitative, and that the pleasure poetry provides is due not to the beauty of the thing represented but rather to the faithfulness of the reproduction (18A). This is why, he says, we enjoy in imitations of sounds that are by nature unpleasant, such as a pig’s squeal, a squeaky wheel, the rustle of the wind or the beating of the sea (18C). As Plutarch puts it: “imitating something fine [*kalón*] is not the same as doing it well [*or finely: kalôs*]” (18D). Plutarch is seeking here to prevent young people from thinking that the satisfaction they derive from a good imitation means that the person or thing represented is good. But he explains inci-

dentally why people derive pleasure from images of ugly things. Once again, pleasure is not associated with beauty.⁴

There were other explanations for why tragedy is pleasurable. A comic poet named Timocles, who was a slightly later contemporary of Aristotle's, has a character in one of his plays affirm (*Dionysiazousae* fr. 6 Kassel-Austin = Athenaeus 6.2) that tragedy takes our mind off our own troubles and we enjoy seeing that others are suffering more than we are. Others maintained that our pleasure derives from the knowledge that the actor is not really being harmed: again, this view depends on awareness that what we are seeing is a representation. Pleasure is also said to result simply from novelty. As Telemachus tells his mother Penelope in the *Odyssey* (1.346-52): "People praise whatever song circulates newest among the listeners" (351-52). But none of these accounts mentions beauty in particular.

Apart from pleasure, which the Greeks regarded as a sensation, a work of art may also elicit various emotions. Aristotle affirmed that the emotions proper to tragedy were pity and fear, and he presumably supposed that others were suitable to other genres. Aristotle seems to have meant that these emotions are a response to the entire work, that is, the plot or story as a whole, and not to individual events or moments in the action; that is why he maintained that we should be able to experience pity and fear even upon reading a summary of a good tragic plot. Much later, in the eighteenth century, some philosophers would argue that the response specific to any work of art is a special kind of aesthetic emotion, and even that we are equipped with an aesthetic faculty for appreciating great art. This idea is foreign to classical thought, so far as I know; the emotions we feel in response to works of art are the same ones we experience in real life, with the difference, however, that we know that the events we are witnessing on the stage or reading in a book are not actually happening.⁵

⁴ In Cicero's *On the Orator* 3.178-81, Crassus argues that anything whose structure is in perfect accord with utility and necessity has charm (*venustas*) and indeed beauty (*pulchritudo*), and produces pleasure; examples are nature itself, the human body, a seaworthy ship, architectural monuments, and a well-turned and convincing speech (3.181: *hoc in omnibus item partibus orationis evenit, ut utilitatem ac prope necessitatem suavitas quaedam et lepos consequatur*). The emphasis here is not on imitation but on service to a function. On *pulchritudo*, Mankin compares *N.D.* 2.58 (Balbus speaking), and notes that in Balbus' account of human anatomy (*N.D.* 2.123-01, 133-45), "the emphasis is on *utilitas*, not *venustas*" (271 ad 179).

⁵ In Cicero's *On the Orator*, Crassus argues that even those who are not masters of an art can judge whether a work succeeds or fails (3.195-96): *Illud autem ne quis admiretur, quonam modo haec vulgus imperitorum in audiendo notet, cum in omni genere tum in hoc ipso magna quaedam est vis incredibilisque naturae. Omnes enim tacito quodam sensu sine ulla arte aut ratione quae sint in artibus ac rationibus recta ac prava diiudicant; idque cum faciunt in picturis et in signis et in aliis operibus, ad quorum intellegentiam a natura minus habent instrumenti, tum multo ostendunt magis in verborum, numerorum vocumque iudicio; quod ea sunt in communibus infixis sensibus nec earum rerum quemquam funditus natura esse voluit expertem. (196) Itaque non solum verbis arte positae moventur omnes, verum etiam numeris ac vocibus. Quotus enim quisque est qui teneat artem numerorum ac*

Ancient thinkers, from the fourth-century B.C. orator Isocrates to Saint Augustine, puzzled over why we sometimes react more sensitively to purely fictitious events than to real life catastrophes. Isocrates wrote, for example, that “people consider it right to weep over the misfortunes composed by poets, while ignoring the many true and terrible sufferings that happen on account of war” (4.168). And Augustine asked in his *Confessions*: “What kind of pity is there in fictional stories and dramas? For the listener is not moved to offer help, but is invited only to feel pain, and the more he suffer the more he approves of the author of these imaginings” (3.2; cf. Dana Munteanu, “*Qualis Tandem Misericordia in Rebus Fictis? Aesthetic and Ordinary Emotion*,” *Helios* 36 [2009] 117-47). But even if the emotions elicited by literature are not quite real emotions, they are nevertheless analogous to such emotions, and do not constitute a distinct aesthetic feeling; nor are they responses to the beauty of a work.

Seneca believed that our responses to theatrical events are almost instinctive, like shivering when we are sprayed with cold water or the vertigo we experience when looking down from great heights, or again blushing at obscenities. He meant that we do not give rational approval to any of these reactions: we no more judge that a battle we read about is cause for fear than we decide to feel ashamed when someone tells a bawdy story. Seneca calls these automatic responses “the initial preliminaries to emotions” (*On Anger* 2.2.6), and other Stoics refer to them as “pre-emotions.” One of Seneca’s examples, indeed, is the feeling of pity we may experience even for evil characters who are suffering: this runs counter to the classical definition of pity, adopted by Aristotle and the Stoics, which holds that we feel pity at the sight of undeserved suffering, not suffering per se. In any case, whether emotion or pre-

modorum? At in eis si paulum modo offensum est, ut aut contractione brevius fieret aut productione longius, theatra tota reclamant. David Mankin, ed., Cicero, *De Oratore*, Book III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 286 ad 195, renders *tacito quodam sensu* as “a kind of inarticulate feeling” (following James M. May and Jakob Wisse, trans., *Cicero on the Ideal Orator* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001]), and comments: “the phrase may be meant to approximate Greek *alogos* [‘irrational’ but also ‘unspeaking’] *aesthesis*, and compares *Orator* 203 on verses *quorum modum notat ars, sed aurae ipsae tacito enim sensu sine arte definiunt*. (cf. also *Brutus* 184). Stefan Büttner, *Antike Ästhetik: Eine Einführung in die Prinzipien des Schönen* (Munich: Beck, 2006) 119, sees in the expression *sensus tacitus* an anticipation of Kant’s conception of an aesthetic response: “Damit sind wir schon ganz nahe an einem Geföhlsvermögen [feeling-capability] angelangt, das – in nicht-rationalem, gleichwohl intersubjektiv-allgemeingöltigem Urteil – das Kunstschöne mit intereslosem Wohlgefallen [pleasure] goutiert; also bei einem ästhetischen Konzept, das Kant in seiner *Kritik der Urteilskraft* vorschlagt. Man darf wohl vermuten, dass Kant, der rein gutter Cicero-Kenner war, sich von Passagen wie diesen beim Schreiben seiner *Kritik der Urteilskraft* und der Bestimmung des Kunst- und Naturschönen hat inspirieren lassen.” But this is reading too much into Crassus argument; he means simply that a person can recognize a well-made speech or other artifact (there is no mention of beauty in this passage) without having a professional or scientific knowledge of the art in question. *Sensus* is better rendered as “awareness” rather than “feeling.”

emotion, Seneca does not list here the response to artistic beauty, and in this, he is in accord with ancient ways of speaking about art generally.

There are still other ways to respond to art. One is awe, the feeling elicited upon an encounter with the sublime or “lofty,” to use the Greek term (*hupsos*) adopted by Longinus in his essay that is conventionally translated as *On the Sublime*. Longinus writes that “what is extraordinary draws listeners not to persuasion but rather to ecstasy [*ekstasis*]” (1.4), and he affirms that what is marvelous (*thaumasion*) and accompanied by shock (*ekplêxis*) overwhelms all else.⁶ In modern romanticism, the sublime came to replace beauty as the primary feature of art, due in large measure to the influence of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant; beauty was too insipid a quality for the grand vision of artistic genius that took hold in the nineteenth century. Insofar as Longinus himself speaks of beauty, it is as a feature of style that can have good effects or ill (5.1); it is associated with figures of speech (17.2, 20.1) and the choice of appropriate words, which can contribute, when properly deployed, to the effectiveness of the whole work. In this respect, Longinus is in accord with the major writers on style in antiquity, who regarded beauty as one feature of style. Demetrius (second or first century B.C.) identified four basic styles: plain, elevated, elegant, and forceful. Beautiful effects, according to Demetrius, can be in tension with and undermine forcefulness (252, 274). Hermogenes of Tarsus (second century A.D.) expanded the number of styles to seven: clearness, grandeur, beauty, poignancy, characterization, truth, and mastery (the last is the combined virtue of the first six; the translations of the technical terms are those of Rhys Carpenter). Beauty here is one device among others; Hermogenes defines it as “symmetry of limbs and parts, along with a good complexion,” in a clear analogy to the beauty of the human body.

Finally, one can respond to a work of art with approval or disapproval, that is, with an evaluation its moral content. This is the basis on which Plato excluded certain art forms, such as epic and tragedy, from his ideal republic: they provided bad examples of comportment among gods and heroes, and would corrupt young minds.

My review of the various responses to art recognized in antiquity suggests that the beauty of a work was not the primary consideration, as Danto indeed remarked. True, certain features of style might be called beautiful or, more precisely, “beauties,” and the same is true for certain colors and other devices in painting; but it was very rare to call a work of art as such beautiful. Much more commonly, the beauty of a work of art was equated with that of the figure in the work: just for this reason, the kind of problem that arises with a painting like the *Blue Nude* was not a subject of inquiry in our classical texts. What is more, there does not seem to have been any systematic effort to distinguish between kinds of human beauty. To be sure, writers sometimes spoke of the beauty of the soul, as opposed to that of the body. I have found that when they do so, they often make the contrast explicit. Aristotle, for example, in arguing that physical beauty is not necessarily a sign of excellent character,

⁶ See Timothy M. Costelloe, *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

observes that it is “not equally easy to perceive the beauty [*kállos*] of the soul and that of the body” (*Politics* 1254b38-39); one has the sense that the metaphorical extension of beauty to the psychological realm is facilitated by the comparison with corporeal beauty. Plato makes a similar move in the *Symposium* (210B), when he declares that one must value more highly beauty in souls than in the body (cf. Plutarch *Amatorius* 757E). But beauty is more generally seen as a specifically physical attribute, as when Socrates states in Plato’s *Philebus* (26B5-7): “I am leaving out thousands of other things in my comments, such as strength and beauty [*kállos*] together with health, and in turn many other lovely [*pankala*] things that are in souls.”

Toward the end of the fifth century B.C., the sculptor Polyclitus published a work called the “Canon” or “Measure,” in which he sought to explain the characteristics that rendered a work of art beautiful. In addition, he illustrated his principles in a statue, called the *Spearbearer* (*Doryphoros*), which became famous as a model for subsequent representations of the human body.

Although Polyclitus’ treatise, like the original statue, is lost, we know from numerous later citations that he emphasized above all symmetry and harmony among the body’s parts as the essential to beauty, a view that was dominant among classical thinkers – we have seen one example of its application to rhetoric, in the citation from Hermogenes – and has remained so right down to today. But here again we have to ask, as we have done two or three times so far today: do these precise proportions render the artwork beautiful, or the human figure that the sculpture represents? Indeed, would Polyclitus even have seen a difference between these two questions, or would he have replied: The work is beautiful because its proportions capture those of a beautiful human being? What is more, although the figure represented in the statue is that of a young male, there is no apparent reason to assume that his beauty is in some sense a reflection of his virtue or other spiritual qualities. In classical Greece, male youths were considered to be sexually attractive, and the nude statue of the beardless, spear-bearing young man might well have been viewed, not like an image of an immature child or divinity somehow sheltered from male desire, but as sexually alluring.



I have been arguing that the problems and paradoxes associated with beauty, art, and desire in modern aesthetics, including the contemporary rejection of beauty as an artistic ideal, did not arise in classical antiquity, or at least did not assume the same form. There was no tension between the beauty of the work of art and that of the object represented, because artworks as such were not deemed beautiful. Of course, the ancients knew perfectly well the difference between an imitation and the

thing imitated, and an awareness of this distinction entered into their interpretations of the pleasure we take in representations, as well as their theories concerning our emotional responses to art. But when they looked at a representation of a beautiful figure, they responded to its beauty as they would to that of a live person, much the way we can feel a certain kind of desire at the photographic image of a beautiful man or woman. Needless to say, normal people did not think that they could satisfy an erotic desire with the represented object, any more than they ran out of the theater, or sought to intervene in the action, when they saw a frightening event on stage. The stories of exceptional cases, such as the young man who attempted to have intercourse with the statue of Aphrodite, testify, I think, not so much to a confusion between art and reality as to the direct appeal of the beautiful body represented and a kind of fantasy, encouraged by the cultic role of statues and paintings universally, that in some sense the statue was an embodiment of the deity herself.

Maurizio Bettini, in his engaging book, *The Portrait of the Lover* (trans. Laura Gibbs, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), documents a wide variety of tales all based on what he calls the “fundamental story,” which involves three elements or, as Bettini calls them, a “restricted set of pawns – the lover, the beloved, and the image” (p. 4). To take one of the most striking examples, in Euripides’ *Alcestis*, after the king Admetus’ wife elects to die in his place so that his life may be prolonged, Admetus declares that he will never marry again, but will rather have craftsmen create a likeness of his wife, and he will keep it in his bed and embrace it and call out his wife’s name, “and imagine that I have my wife, although I do not have her” (vv. 348-52; cf. Bettini p. 19). The theme here is conjugal love rather than erotic desire, and nothing is said of Alcestis’ beauty in this context (a servant girl describes her skin as lovely in an earlier scene, v. 174). But it suggests how porous the boundary may sometimes be between art and life.