

**Philosophical Aesthetics**

What is beauty? What makes something or someone beautiful? Should we think that there have to be similarities between Doric columns, poems, mathematical equations, sunsets and people if we are to understand each of them as beautiful? Or is beauty a criterion for saying that they are similar?

Trying to answer these questions is the domain of philosophical aesthetics. You may have had discussions concerning the question, “What is art?” especially if you have paid good money to see a pile of brick or a mountain of gravel on the floor in an art gallery. If so, you have been doing philosophy.

There is traditional art of the kind one finds in the National Gallery and there is modern art, some of which has the potential to invite ridicule; most of us agree, for example, that Da Vinci’s *Virgin of The Rocks* is art but we are less sure about Tracy Emin’s *Unmade Bed*. Can anything be called art today or are there still limits to what counts as such?

Certainly, art means different things to different people and different cultures; it is intelligible that someone of a deeply religious disposition may wither under the gaze of a saint depicted in a Russian icon, for example. However, to a resident of Papua New Guinea, such an icon is far less likely to hold that kind of significance. Similarly, some see conceptual art as cutting to the deepest dimensions of meaning in human life whilst others see it as pretentious junk. So, do objects have to be beautiful if they are to be considered as art – is beauty a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for something to be art?

Immediately, some will answer in the negative – think, for example, of Quentin Matsys’ (1466–1530) *Ugly Duchess* in comparison with Titian’s *Assumption of The Virgin*; others will say that there is still a certain beauty to the *Ugly Duchess* but it is of a kind that takes some time and effort to appreciate – for example, they might say that while the Duchess is obviously ugly, the work nonetheless trades on beauty; it would not have been painted if there were not something against which one could compare it, not just in an obvious beautiful face versus ugly face sense, but in a sense that acknowledges the possibility of such human form (with all the baggage that we are invited to load on to it). For all sorts of reasons, this seems a little far-fetched, but especially so since the painting was intentionally satirical. Then again, perhaps satire is art? I will leave this particular question for you to think about but it is worth remembering that there is the art of comedy (not just an art to it) in the same way as there is the art of music or the art of acting (as opposed to just an art to producing music or an art to acting).



The philosopher Robin Collingwood (1889-1943) suggested that an actual work of art is an idea in the mind of the artist which is subsequently given physical expression by their interaction with particular physical mediums – e.g. oils, watercolours, words or instruments (or a combination of many). Nevertheless, that actual work remains in the mind of the artist. This position allowed Collingwood and those who provided variants of his position to distinguish between arts and crafts (presumably this came in handy at village fetes). The thought is that works of art are not designed for any particular purpose and, indeed, are sometimes designed during the process of their creation whereas crafts (such as furniture making) do serve a purpose. Picasso's *Weeping Woman* was almost certainly not completely designed before he began to paint it, whereas the chairs and tables at which we are now sat, most certainly were. The former serves no definite purpose whereas the latter does. Of course, many works of art do require skills associated with crafts and Collingwood argues that there is not mutual exclusivity between art and craft. The main idea is that a work of art cannot be a means to an end.



There are some serious objections to this position however. Firstly, that what we see in art galleries are not the artworks themselves but, rather, physical suggestions of what was in the mind of the artist; thus we are not really seeing works of art but, instead, copies of what the artist had in mind. Moreover, how do we know whether the artist has been sincere in their depiction of whatever was in their mind? And, more to the point, how might we find out? If the artist is the only person who can, in principle, possess the work of art then how do we know whether or not he is mistaken in identifying it from one day to the next? – He might claim to remember the work accurately from yesterday and be sincere in doing so but if there is nothing against which he can check other than his own memory how does he or we know that he has remembered correctly? Moreover, this would mean that there was one correct musical performance of great musical works only available to the composer.

Secondly, if art is not a means to an end – if it serves no purpose – then that seems to rule out many of the great portraits that we see hanging in art galleries all over the world, as scores of them were created for specific reasons. Moreover, it rules out some of the world's most beautiful buildings. There are countless skilled crafts associated with constructing buildings - some of the buildings are purely utilitarian but others are conceived with beauty in mind. And, of course, sometimes the intention of the architect is not always received in the ways they anticipate – think about how Prince Charles reacted to the building of the Southbank (Festival Hall, QEH, and National Theatre etc.). Conversely, constructions that are no more than demonstrations of the techniques of engineering are sometimes considered to be artistic and beautiful – consider, for example, the Eiffel Tower which, whilst considered ugly to begin with, has now become an iconic symbol of all things French. – Is it a work of art? There is considerable disagreement about this; the philosopher Rush Rhees believes not because he thinks we do not find artistic treatment of themes in engineering. But is that enough to say that the products of such engineering are not art? Can something not become a work of art even if the initial intention what not to create one? – Suppose the intention is unknown?



So, where does this leave the idea of beauty in relation to art? To throw some light on this, let us now consider the idea of art in relation to forgeries. The most obvious types of forgeries in art tend to centre on paintings but there have also been cases of forged manuscripts (both musical and written) among other kinds.

Let us start with two obvious truisms: 1. There are perfect copies (say, if someone forged the Mona Lisa). 2. There are forgeries in the style of an artist (e.g. if someone 'manufactured' a Beethoven original or painted a subject in the style of Monet).

Should either (or both) be treated as beautiful and/or a great work of art? If we are to be consistent then the answer would appear to be yes, since if they are perfect copies then they capture what is beautiful; and, since the idea of intention has been ruled out as a defining characteristic of a work of art, there appears to be little one can criticise. Of course, there are moral arguments against forgery – many related to personal gain at the expense of others (whether that is in terms of material wealth or the pleasure of deceiving others) but a moral argument is not an aesthetic judgement. If we are to judge in terms of beauty and aesthetic value then, surely, there is little one can say. A perfect copy of a painting will be as beautiful as the original; a work done in the style of a particular artist (say Beethoven) will be just as good to listen to, as something to which the composer himself could lay claim.

Next week we will try to resolve some of these issues!