

From the Editor

Does Beauty Matter?

by Kirsten Hively

I meant to write this last night, but I put it off. I was hypnotized by three rotund little pears, pistachio green and blushing crimson. The pears lay (once I stopped them from rolling around) on a blue plate. They weren't remarkable, but the more I studied them, the more I could see how unique they were—one had a stubby little stem, another a small scar on one side, and the third was plumper than the others. I felt compelled to sketch them in watercolors (for which I have no particular talent) just because they were, well, beautiful.

I've been thinking about beauty and aesthetics a lot lately. I just finished reading *On Beauty And Being Just* by Elaine Scarry, which is thought provoking, despite sometimes flawed arguments. I've been wondering if beauty could be a central issue in Williamsburg—as both a central facet of living well and the crux of art—or if it's just frippery, distracting us from more important issues like health, safety, and justice. I've been leaning more towards the former and, as the title of her book implies, Scarry would undoubtedly agree. (I've also been searching high and low for a copy of Dave Hickey's book *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, but it's nowhere to be found...does that mean no one else is interested in this topic?)

One of the keys to deciding whether or not beauty is important can be found in the deceptively simple question: what is beauty? I think there are two kinds of beauty: inherent beauty and conditional beauty. Inherently beautiful objects, people, or places possess in themselves the quality of beauty. While the beauty may grow or fade (in fact it often does), it is a state of being. Conditional beauty, on the other hand, is found in a situation or juxtaposition, and is far more fleeting than inherent beauty. This difference is illustrated by the different forms of the verb "to be" in many languages. In English, when you say "the apple is green," for example, it's not clear whether you mean the apple is unripe or the apple is a Granny Smith, which is always green. In Spanish you can say "la manzana *está* verde" or "la manzana *es* verde." In the former, you express the idea that the apple exists in a conditional state of greenness (which may change), while in the latter you convey that the apple is inherently green.

Conditional beauty can be made up of inherently beautiful things, but is present only in the moment. It's unique to the viewer, the moment, the place—something we happen upon, by chance. Inherent beauty, on the other hand, is beauty created—either by nature or by people. One of the effects of inherent beauty is to teach us to see conditional beauty. When confronted by an oil painting in a frame on a white wall (all traditional signs in our culture of the presence of beauty), I know to look for the painting's beauty (even if it's not immediately obvious). Enough looking at paintings in frames on walls (regardless of whether or not they all succeed in their claims to beauty), and it becomes almost a reflex to see the beauty of three pears on a blue plate. Artistic standards—stages, frames, formats, forms, traditions, institutions—help to remind us to look and listen for beauty. Art which lacks these doesn't necessarily lack beauty, but it may be harder for people who are out of practice to see it.

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

To understand beauty, it is also necessary to understand its opposite. Ugliness is what we call the opposite of beauty, but like beauty, there are two kinds of ugliness: the lack of beauty, and the overwhelming evocation of emotions (hatred, fear, revulsion, anger) which make it impossible to tell if beauty exists or not. When strong emotions are evoked, we may learn to dig deeper and judge for ourselves whether beauty is present, or we may decide that the battle is not worth it and look elsewhere. I think that is a personal decision and a conditional one. But the lack of beauty is a more interesting condition worth further investigation.

What is ugliness the lack of? What is beauty the presence of?

I think the crux of the answer lies in one of the fundamental contradictions of humanity—our contradictory desires for solitude and society. Integrating the gregarious and independent aspects of our natures is one of the central tasks of being human and beauty shows us how these two opposites can coexist.

Another key to understanding beauty is seeing its close relationship to uniqueness. Inherent beauty depends upon uniqueness. Conditional beauty also depends upon uniqueness, not of the object(s) viewed, but of the viewer's perception, of the place, and of the moment. Mass produced things which aspire to beauty stop short at mere prettiness. There is nothing wrong with prettiness—it has a power to satisfy, though not as deeply or enduringly as beauty—but we have become awash in it. Prettiness is often pejoratively connected to femininity (being called a pretty boy is usually not a compliment). Did that come from the cookie-cutter "beauty" women are taught to aspire to? Clichéd beauty becomes prettiness; beauty multiplied by 30,000 becomes prettiness—although prettiness has its own charms and can remind us of beauty and can allude to beauty's abstractions.

An interesting aspect of beauty is its relationship to the senses. We often use the word beautiful to describe visual experiences, but less often for other sensory experiences. In particular, conditional beauty seems to be almost entirely visual. We never speak of found sounds as beautiful, although a beautiful sonata or nocturne is certainly possible in the concert hall, and while our senses of touch and taste may serve to emphasize a beautiful experience, we don't refer to textures or flavors as "beautiful." The sense of smell is a special case. Like sounds, beautiful smells are generally inherent to something, whether a wild rose or the sea. But unlike our other senses, our noses are hardwired into our brains, bypassing our great sorter and filer, the hippocampus. Because of this, smells are very strongly evocative and yet superlingual, which means that they may remind us of a conditional moment of beauty without actually creating one.

Beauty is not the sole province of art and nature. Scientists and mathematicians speak of beautiful equations, beautiful solutions, beautiful proofs. And scholars of all allegiances speak of beautiful ideas. How can beauty, which seems to be so dependent upon our sensory experiences, be abstracted in this way?

So where does art fit into this discussion? The most interesting art for me is art which explores, rather than attempting to avoid, these questions. And the most interesting life for me is a life which explores them, too. Aesthetics—the philosophy of art and beauty—shows how they come together. And while in the past aesthetic debates have often ended up bogged down in academic and elitist jargon, perhaps the time has

come to bring the debate down to earth, and maybe Williamsburg is the place where the discussion can best happen.

I have many unanswered questions about beauty: Is everything beautiful, or does everything have the potential to be beautiful? Is beauty purely subjective, or are there absolute truths about it? Is the sublime separate from beauty, or a kind of beauty? Does beauty relate to morality? Is understanding beauty important? Does beauty matter? But I've rambled on long enough on a theme in which I am surely no expert. It's an immense subject, and this is barely the tip of the iceberg. But is this all a ridiculous (or worse, pretentious) waste of time? Or a central question of humanity? Should we be talking about it more, or moving on to other things? Fascinating or deadly dull? What do you think?

Kirsten Hively is the editor and producer of wburg.com. She can be reached at editor@wburg.com.