

# The Notion of Beauty

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The notion of beauty affects almost every experience we have. One has only to look at how the marketing profession uses various elements of beauty to sell every product from haute couture to breakfast cereals. That's because marketers know that we are all innately drawn to beauty; so they use beautiful people and props to draw us toward their products. They know that beauty resonates so deeply with the human heart that it has inspired some of the greatest human creations, including the arts. And, yet, when we ask what is beauty, we generally find it difficult to give a succinct answer. It's easier to say what it isn't.

While much has been written on the notion of beauty, I'd like to focus our discussion today to a discussion of two types of beauty: sensible beauty and spiritual beauty.<sup>1</sup> Sensible beauty is the beauty that we perceive through our senses. It draws the eyes and the heart. It captures our attention and our imagination. It causes us to wonder. Spiritual beauty, on the other hand, creates admiration. It prompts others to follow the same path, like the beauty of a hero.

And just as there are two types of beauty, there are two directions of beauty: towards the self or towards the other. Beauty that draws attention to the self can do so in a way that it makes the self an object. At the same time, beauty also has the power to reveal the self as a subject. We will see this developed as we continue our discussion.

In laying the groundwork for our conversation, I think we have to agree that beauty can also be extremely personal. To a certain extent, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Ask a child who the most beautiful person is in the world, and they will almost always respond, "My mother." The same is true for mothers when asked whose baby is the most beautiful. We will never find consensus among mothers on this topic. And when the lover is asked who is the most beautiful person in the world. It is almost always – and perhaps always should be – the beloved. Our relationships with others can affect how we perceive beauty and how beauty affects us.

If we reflect upon our own experiences, I think we'll find that beauty isn't simply a reaction to sense stimuli. It is a contemplation of sorts. The concept of beauty can reveal much more than the physical aspects of a person and, when determining that someone is beautiful, we usually take into account more than the proportions manipulated by a plastic surgeon. We notice a particular look in the eyes, a gesture, an action towards someone or something else. The physical beauty draws us to the integral beauty of the person. Physical beauty can and should be a sign of an interior beauty; it should reveal a harmony between the beauty of the exterior and the beauty of the interior.

When we notice beauty in a person or thing, it is our minds that perceive through our senses a reality. The realization doesn't stop with sense awareness. It is the mind that draws together all the pieces of the puzzle of

information provided by the senses. So the body works both to reveal beauty and to discern it. The body is an essential medium.

We've all heard the maxim, "You can't judge a book by its cover." And, yet, that's exactly what we do. Many of us make purchases based on packaging. I'm sure most of us have selected a wine not by its vintage, but by the label. The reason is simple. Most of us don't have enough information to give a truly educated opinion about the contents of the bottle; so we look for other signs. "Great label, maybe it'll be a good wine." Because we don't possess all the information, we look for other signs that will inspire confidence. How many people buy cars simply because they look fast? Again, few of us have any detailed knowledge of mechanics; so we look for other signs. The same is true when it comes to people. We quickly make a judgment of a person's character based on appearance. "She looks nice." Attorneys know to have their clients dressed for a jury because everything about the client's appearance will communicate something to the jury. Unfortunately, few of us ever take the time to scratch the surface to see what's beneath the appearance of the person in front of us. We understand the saying, "You only get one chance to make a first impression," because we've probably had countless situations in which we've only given someone one chance and that has sealed their character for us in our minds. Packaging matters. It matters a lot. The outward appearance gives a sign of what to expect on the inside. Take for example a beautiful diamond. Wrap it in a dirty plastic grocery bag and no one will notice its true beauty. Set it in platinum, put it in a Tiffany-blue box, and the diamond is suddenly noticed.

Our experience confirms that not only is appearance important, but so is beauty in our appearance. Beauty draws the seer towards the person seen; it invites them to know and have confidence in that person even without knowing the person intimately. When we see something or someone, our mind quickly takes in all the signs so that we may arrive at some understanding. It is a quick contemplation of sorts which forms the basis of desire and attraction towards the beautiful. When we take in that beautiful object or subject, we want to participate in the beauty in some way. That's why most of us want to be near beautiful people. Being close to them, we sense a type of participation, we can be part of the beauty. The beauty draws us.

You might recall the film *Schindler's List* in which a young Jewish woman, wanting to inform Schindler of the plight of the Jews, goes to see him. He pays her no attention. Disappointed, but not defeated, she returns to his office a second time. This time, she is carefully dressed and well-attired. Schindler, seeing her beauty, is drawn to her and gives her the opportunity to make her case, which she does and to which he responds ultimately by using his factory to save the lives of many Jews. Both times she went to see him, she went for the same purpose, with the same message. It was only the second time that she drew him towards her. Using her beauty, she caused him to notice her not just in a sexual way, but in a way that made him realize that a person was standing before him, a person who actually had something to communicate and who was inviting him to a conversation.

At the same time, this desire to be part of beauty and for beauty to be part of us can often lead us to destroy beautiful things. We reduce beauty to

the physical, without consideration of what it signifies, what it points towards. We try to make it finite, like food, something that can be consumed and made part of us. Pornography gives us an extreme but excellent example of this. It makes a woman (or a man) an object for another (typically a man) to consume. The subject of pornography becomes an object of consumption instead of a subject to be cherished. It's no surprise that pornography creates a culture of violence that includes not only the people viewing and the people being viewed, but the people affected by those who view pornography. Those who watch pornography learn to see people as objects of consumption in pornography and thereby treat others in the same way: as disposable objects.

The example of pornography gives us a concrete example of how we actually need an intellectual participation in beauty. Again, sense stimuli are not enough to communicate true beauty, least of all raw sense stimuli.

In the 90s, we had the J. Peterman Catalog which sold clothing and accessories. Instead of typical photos to sell the clothing, the catalog contained sketches and detailed prose descriptions. Apparently, one of the more popular items was a longish blue linen skirt. The skirt was popular with women because it was popular with men, or rather its effect was. Peterman's described the skirt as being able to hint or suggest at what might lie beneath and yet would never reveal completely. The line and texture of the material suggested both the universal feminine and the individual woman wearing the skirt. The entire skirt created a mystery which used elements of beauty to draw someone to wonder just who the woman wearing the skirt might be. Perhaps this sounds overly romantic, but it sold.

Similarly, when the Victoria's Secret catalog first debuted, it was reported to be more popular than Playboy. Aside from being free (you just had to get yourself on the mailing list), it captured what might be called the art of the burlesque. It showed beautiful women in all sorts of inviting attire and poses. The trick was that the catalog didn't reveal everything. On a very basic level, it worked to draw the viewer in. This was before the catalog became what some call soft porn and clearly it was never intended to raise men's minds to noble thoughts; but it illustrates the delicate and intricate power of beauty and attire.

Based on the natural desire to be near beauty and to possess it completely, body and soul, that is, with our intellect as well as our senses, we are drawn to beautiful things and people in an effort to be one with them. However, the oneness can miss the cerebral, spiritual, or metaphysical mark and be reduced to the oneness of consumption as we see in the extreme with pornography and pornography influenced fashions.

Beauty has power and allure that are all its own. Even though we talk about beauty in many things and in men and women, women in particular are associated with beauty, and not just in the examples that I've given. It is woman who is muse to the poet, artist, and writer. She personifies the virtues, wisdom, and the graces. As many museums witness, she has repeatedly been a subject for so many people, each a woman in her own way yet still communicating that she is both uniquely and eternally feminine. After several decades of trying to prove that men and women are the same, we're coming full circle to realize that they're actually very different in their equality. Women

are now educated on par with men and in some cases beyond men since more than 50 percent of university degrees are attained by women. The same is true of women in professional life. And yet the same accomplishments still reveal that we are very different. The way in which women and the notion of beauty interrelate is indicated by the power that women can have through beauty. Feminist author Germaine Greer has commented that feminists have recognized this as well. Instead of burning bras and going without makeup, they now employ what she calls high-heeled lipstick feminism. There is a power in the beauty of a woman's image. It up to her to decide the direction it should take. The porn star uses elements of beauty to objectify herself and other women. Some women have used it to climb the corporate ladder as Melanie Griffith's character enunciates in the film *Working Girl*: "Coffee, tea, or me?" Still others have used it to bring a sense of beauty into the lives of others and even to direct attention to humanitarian issues like Audrey Hepburn and her work with UNICEF or Princess Diana and the issue of landmines. And others have used it to complement their lives and to communicate who they are to others.

The fact remains that the beauty of a woman's image can be extremely powerful not only to communicate with the masses, but in determining how a particular person, especially a man, reacts to her. She can choose to be goddess, whore, or something in between. It largely depends on her and what she decides to communicate, how she decides to package herself: as a subject or an object. In all fairness, however, many, perhaps even most, women do not know this or lack the courage to utilize the reality that beauty can communicate. The sad thing is that it not only results in our own objectification, but it also ultimately limits our ability to see ourselves as persons and to participate more fully in our own act of being.

When we participate intellectually in the beautiful, that is with our body and soul, we are able to recognize in the beauty of another the gift of the reality of that person as well. There's a story of two religious brothers who were walking beside a stream, reading their prayers. They came upon a very beautiful young woman who asked their help to cross the stream which was flooded from the recent rain. One of the brothers handed his breviary to the other, picked the girl up in his arms and carried her across the stream. Upon returning, the other brother gave him his prayer book and they resumed their walk along the stream. After about twenty minutes, the other brother asked, "Do you think it was wise of you to carry that girl across the stream?" The first brother replied, "Have you been carrying her in your mind all this time?" A former professor of mine used this story to illustrate how beauty can be used or misused. The first brother recognized the beautiful girl for who she was: a subject who made a request of him and whom he assisted. The second brother saw her as an object, perhaps because of her beauty. All he saw were the sexual implications in stark contrast to his own vow of celibacy. And so she became an object of fixation in his mind that he could not see as a gift, a person to assist. She was nothing more than a temptation.

Personal beauty relays a certain uniqueness and an unrepeatable character, much like a fingerprint. After all, we can imitate style, but it's not really ours unless we permeate it with our own personality. In fact, people who

do that successfully are the ones who generally set trends and determine styles. The styles communicate something about the person that others wish to communicate as well. They want their character to reveal the same aspect. The trick is to make it unique, to make it a beauty that reveals a particular person, not everyone.

Once we start to see people as unique and of infinite value, each glimpse of that person's beauty reveals more and more of the unexampled reality that he or she is. At the same time, it starts to affect how we see ourselves because we tend to see something of ourselves in others. The example of the two brothers shows us this. The second brother's own challenges with celibacy and appreciating beauty colored the way in which he understood the actions of the brother who carried the girl across the stream. That brother, however, given his ability to see that the beauty of the girl indicated a subject, was able to see himself as a subject able to recognize and rightly respond to her as a subject. He didn't "carry" her in his mind. Just across the stream.

Generally speaking, our first experience with the beauty of a person comes by way of the body. We notice a person's body long before we notice her mind. We notice how she is dressed, the cut and color of the clothing. We also notice her gestures, her eyes and countless other aspects which combine to communicate who that woman is to others. Clothing is an essential aspect of this. It is the packaging, if you will. Of course, there's only so much that packaging can do. As Mr. de la Renta commented last night, if a woman dresses sexy and she is not sexy, well

But the fact remains that a woman's appearance greatly affects how she is perceived. How she presents her body determines who she wants to say to others that she is. In my experience of talking to various audiences, it's generally young women who feel trapped by fashion. They want to communicate one thing, but fashion (and often personal budgets) tends to limit that communication. Obviously, some women have found a way around it. But the general sense remains that it is a challenge precisely because in our culture where women have so many choices, fashion sometimes limits them. They might be able to reveal their bodies, but they cannot reveal the person that that body is part of.

On a practical note, some communities are finding ways around this. Groups of parents have worked with Nordstrom's in various cities to arrange fashion shows that offer beautiful clothes for young women that reveal personalities instead of body parts. Similarly, a young 13-year old woman wrote to Nordstrom explaining that the pant styles were too low. Nordstrom responded with a selection of pants that actually stay on and don't reveal undergarments.

In my work as an activist in DC, I've found that much can be accomplished simply by asking. Stores are in the business of making money. If customers come to them and say, "I'd like to buy such and such, can you get it for me? And, oh, here are a group of my friends who want to buy the same," stores will respond. After all, their business is also about making money. Women have tremendous power because they make the choices that generate billions of dollars in revenue. If we choose not to exercise that power, we can hardly blame other industries or the culture at large.

Women also have a power in so far as they affect fashion. Fashion is an art and, like every art, it imitates the nature perceived by the artist. In so far as the understanding of feminine dignity is changing, I think we can see fashion changing. When women first began to enter the workplace, fashion centered more on making women look like men, adopting the same styles, colors, etc. In reality, women are equal to men, but they're different. And this awareness has played itself out in fashion. Remember boxy, mannish suits with huge shoulder pads and maybe even the skinny tie? That's the point – you remember them. They – fortunately – are part of the past. Because women have become more confident with their positions in the workplace and their understanding of equality has begun to morph just a little bit, we see fashion responding. Suits are now starting to be cut for women to look like women. And we see women's clothing taking on a look that's all its own. It depends largely on the identity that women want to portray. Granted, not all women want to portray the same type of identity; but there's no reason to be quiet about our identity and the fashion world is big enough to accommodate diverse identities. Again, though, if we fail to communicate our identity effectively, we cannot fault the fashion world for not representing it. After all, fashion is also about making money. Why would an industry create a product for a buyer who doesn't exist?

So far I've focused on the identity we want to communicate through the way we display our bodies, particularly with regard to clothing. But there's another element – how we come to know ourselves. For each of us, I'm willing to bet that experience confirms that we are not wholly independent. How other people see and treat us affects us. Most of the things that make us sad or joyful are triggered by other people. When it comes to fashion and appearance, we start to see ourselves as other people see us and we are affected by what we wear. One of the most frequent examples of this has been the implementation of uniforms in some high-poverty, low-performing schools. When a child is well dressed (I don't mean haute couture), he or she acts differently.

There was a Chicago elementary school in which a teacher instituted a dress code and also made sure that the children had warm jackets for the winter. The children started to take pride in their actions and began to do better in school. Now there were several factors involved, but this group of low-achieving, high-risk, high-poverty boys became a top class by the end of the year. Part of it was attributed to the dress code. The uniform gave them an appearance of which to be proud. Others saw them as little gentlemen and the boys started to act as such.

Sure clothing doesn't determine character, but it can affect us a great deal, especially insofar as we respond to how others see us. I recall a story about a man in the middle ages who lived far away and came to a village to find a wife. There was a woman who was plain, maybe unattractive. The villagers, having some connection to the man but not wanting to offer one of their choice women, said that he could marry the unattractive woman. Years passed and one day some of the villagers were traveling when they came to the great house that belonged to this man. They stopped to see him, curious to see whatever happened to the woman from their village. He welcomed them

and introduced them to his beautiful wife. The visitors were shocked. Where was the ugly duckling? What had he done to her?! It was only when the woman spoke that they were assured of her original identity. Her husband's love for her had caused her to transform herself. She had responded to his love and had become the beautiful person that he saw in her soul. Her hometown had seen only a plain girl so that was all she had revealed, covering up the beauty that reflected her soul. The change had been prompted not by the woman but by her husband's love for her and her decision to accept that love. The way that he saw her changed her.

So, for better or for worse, we are affected by how other people see us. That is one of the ways in which we choose to reveal ourselves to our selves. Fashion should be a conscious decision. Who am I? Who do I want to be? How do I want to be understood? These questions are often determined simply by the image we create through our bodies and the way that we present them to the world.

Now, it might sound like beauty is wholly material, maybe even a little too worldly. But the backdrop for beauty is actually our concept of eternity or maybe even infinity. Beauty attracts because it points upwards in a metaphysical sense. It raises the mind and heart to contemplation. Think, for example, of the prostitute. Her dress and demeanor affect only the immediate senses. They don't communicate the dynamic reality of a unique human being. They don't engage the mind and the heart.

On the other hand, picture a beautiful bride. Her dress and appearance communicate that she is a person, that she loves and is loved. The material things count for a lot because they communicate so much.

I think the fact that beauty can escape our comprehension and our expression points to the fact that there's something eternal about it. We use words and images to describe beauty. Yet in the end, they often fall short. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it can rarely express beauty fully. It gives an aspect, but we're left knowing that there's more, especially if it's a picture of someone we know.

Beauty can't be captured because it is unique to each person, to each woman. Every major world religion believes to some degree that there is something of the divine in the human person. I think this is due in part to our natural experience of beauty. True beauty reveals the human person who has something of the divine in her. That beauty points to the eternal.

One of my favorite images of a woman in literature is Dante's Beatrice. We know that she was beautiful and that Dante fell in love with her when he was eight or nine years old. Describing his own spiritual journey, Dante explains that Beatrice led him. Both her character and her physical beauty directed Dante's focus to higher things. He wrote, "She was looking up and I at her."

Women, through their various gifts, especially beauty, have the power to direct the attention of others. They can make people take notice. Now, it's not just about other people. It's also about the individual woman herself. Dante, for example, made it clear throughout his writings that he considered Beatrice to be his superior in every way.

There's a painting depicting Dante and Beatrice which I think explains the choice of how women can use beauty. The painting shows Dante standing on the Ponte Vecchio, a bridge in Florence, Italy. There are three women walking towards him. One looks rather lusty and is dressed in red. She's looking at Dante. The second is a little less lusty looking. She is dressed in blue. She, too, is looking at Dante. The third is Beatrice, beautiful, dressed in yellow. She is not looking at Dante. She is looking slightly upward, at something else. Dante is looking at her.

The woman in red represents hell, the woman in blue purgatory. Both are looking at Dante. Beatrice represents heaven. Dante is looking at her.

Now, I don't mean to over-spiritualize beauty or women. I think this painting gives us an image of the power that women possess. Especially through beauty, women can direct the thoughts and actions of others. This power can transform culture, for better or for worse.

Beauty, because it resonates so deeply with the human heart, has the power to transform. Today's women, like the women of every age, will be the arbiters of whether or not that beauty is used in a way that communicates with the culture. In essence, women need to decide whether or not they want to communicate their identity to others and whether or not they want to know themselves.

**End**

### **Notes**

1. Cf. Seward, John, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1997.

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