

# Beauty: The Art of War

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*“God defines himself as ‘I am who I am,’ which also means: My being is such that I shall always be present in every moment of becoming.”* — Hans Urs von Balthasar, Unless You Become Like This Child

**Objective:** What happened to beauty? What is it? Does it matter? Is it necessary, or just some kind of luxury? We will explore these questions and more as we make observations about our cultural moment, how we can make it better, the vital importance of beauty in our lives, and the profound mystery of beauty as it relates to God, art, and us as human beings.

**Intro:** *The Cellist of Sarajevo* — Beauty matters. Vedran Smailovic declared war on what was broken, and beauty was his weapon.

## I. The Nature of Beauty

A. Beauty falls under ***aesthetics***, which is a subdivision of philosophy.

B. The mystery of it all

1. Philosopher Peter Kreeft: When we try to define (beauty), “we find that it is not a problem that can be defined, but a mystery that can only be participated in.”
  - a) Note: Mystery does not mean contradiction or falsehood. It simply means we don’t yet have all of the information to wrap our heads around it. The Trinity is a mystery.
2. And so we will be less like mathematicians making an airtight proof (though there is certainly a beauty to mathematics), and more like children saying, “Wow! Look at that!”
3. G.K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*, “The Maniac”: *“Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so to make it finite. The result is mental exhaustion...To accept everything is an exercise, to understand everything a strain. The poet only desires exaltation and expansion, a world to stretch himself in. The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.”*

C. Beauty “is something, but it isn’t *some thing*” (as Greg Koukl says about evil)

1. Consider C.S. Lewis in his The Abolition of Man, making the case that the man describing a waterfall as “sublime” wasn’t describing his feelings about the waterfall. If anything, his subjective feelings were the opposite. Lewis writes, *“The feelings which make a man call an object sublime are not sublime feelings but feelings of veneration. If ‘This is sublime’ is to be reduced at all to a statement about the speaker’s feelings, the proper translation would be ‘I have humble feelings.’”*
2. Beauty as a noun vs. beauty as an adjective
  - a) If beauty is a “thing,” when we begin talking about it, we immediately begin talking about other things.
  - b) Better to understand it as an aspect of reality — like the true and the good.

#### D. Definitions of beauty as we “sense” or see it

1. Plato (in Symposium) — Beautiful things as “copies,” or “imitations.” This world is a copy or shadow of the divine world. Plato recognized that there is something beyond us, and so we have an innate desire to beget/create. But we will never be satisfied with what is here (art, for example) — mere copies. Rather, we will seek to enter what is beyond.
  - a) Note: This is not the Christian view, but there are similarities in recognizing art as imitating something transcendent.
2. Thomas Aquinas — Defines beauty this way: “That which when being seen, pleases.”
  - a) Aquinas assigns four attributes to the beautiful: unity, proportion, harmony, and the radiance of form.
3. Jonathan Edwards has a similar description, but adds other qualities, including symmetry, balance, and meaning.

#### E. But there’s more to it! Beauty has psychological effects, too.

1. Beauty does something to us. It penetrates, almost without us being aware, which is why when you read stories in which the beauty is “hidden,” they pack a powerful punch and you want to revisit them again and again.
2. Plotinus, Greek philosopher from 2nd century, heavily influenced by Plato, wrote the Enneads: “[Beauty] is something that is detected at the first glance — something that the soul, remembering, names, recognizes, gives welcome to, and, in a way, fuses with. When the soul falls in with ugliness, it shrinks back, repulses it as disagreeable, alien. We therefore suggest that the soul,

being what it is and related to the reality above it, is delighted when it sees any signs of kinship or anything that is akin to itself, and is stirred to new awareness to whence and what it really is.”

- a) Plotinus talks about a literally kind of ecstasy, the soul standing outside of its skin. As when you’re engrossed in a story you’re reading. When you encounter beauty, you forget yourself for a time. (“The Ecstasy of St. Teresa,” Bernini, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, ~1650)
3. In The Weight of Glory, C.S. Lewis speaks of a longing, a pining, that beauty stirs within us. As he so eloquently writes, that longing is indicative of something beyond that can meet and fulfill that longing. We are on the outside, yearning to get in. In a sense, beauty breaks our hearts because of that longing. Some have said that it reminds them of something like home.
  - a) God has given us the Morning Star, Lewis writes, and we may see it on any fine morning. *“What more, you may ask, do we want? Ah, but we want so much more — something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and the mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words — to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it...**What would it be to taste at the fountainhead that stream of which even these lower reaches proves us intoxicating?**”* Indeed.
4. The definitions of beauty above seem incomplete. They do not take into account the irregularities. What of the harmonies we hear that aren’t being played or sung? Or the dissonant note that makes the melody shine? Or of subjects being slightly off center to draw the viewer’s eye? (Like the human heart, which G.K. Chesterton notes in Orthodoxy).

## II. A Snapshot of Our Cultural Moment

- A. We live in a culture that thinks it’s obsessed with beauty, but really it is starved for it. The air we breathe is ugly, even toxic, like The Upside-Down.
- B. A Google search on “beauty” or “beautiful” will, aside from the dictionary definitions, clutter your screen with any number of ads for cosmetics.
  1. Beauty as “physical appearance” Yes, but...
    - a) The view of what is considered acceptable in this already sliver of what beauty truly is is drastically narrow. And we buy the lie.

- b) This is closely tied with bioethics and functional value. We live in a culture of death disguised as a culture of life — obsessed with avoiding death such that individuals will do *anything* (even kill) in order to chase youthfulness, immortality.
2. Trading the real for the artificial
    - a) Enhancement technology
    - b) Plastic surgery
    - c) Artificial food ingredients, colors
  3. Our Cities (suburbia, cars)
    - a) Architecture for utility, function. Europe vs. suburban America. We tend to build strip malls and hide beauty/art away in museums. Every house looks the same. We drive everywhere. Friends are somewhere else instead of next door or a short walk away. Schools look like sterile institutions — conducive for learning?
  4. Our Churches
    - a) The Gothic cathedrals, built so that stone was manipulated to be as light as air and soared. Our churches now serve purposes, but how many are built with their shape and appearance and city in mind? Such that the building itself draws the soul heavenward? What does that even look like in our time and place?
  5. Our Homes, or personal spaces
    - a) Designed with others in mind? Or just for utilitarian, self-serving?
  6. Our Stories
    - a) Do the stories we read or watch or tell offer the whole story? Is there hope?

### III. What happened? (A [very] broad overview of the history of these ideas)

- A. Beauty, along with morality and religion, was considered objective for most of history. A major shift happened during the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, when thinkers (with David Hume leading the charge) posited Empiricism and other “isms” that came from this period. Empiricism deals with our epistemology, or “how we know what we know,” and Hume believed that the only things that were real and knowable at all were the things one could study empirically, or with the senses. Values aren’t something you can study

empirically, so in what Francis Schaeffer calls the “Fact/Value Split,” values, religion and morality were relegated to the realm of the unknowable — to be determined by each individual *subjectively*. Beauty was discounted as something not really *real* — just “in the eye of the beholder.” The Industrial Revolution only compounded the problem. This fracture caused a number of reactions, one of which was the rejection of science (or facts) as the basis of all that is real. Romanticism (and other “isms” that came in response) turned the tables and posited, very generally, that values should be the basis of what is real. But they bought Hume’s premise — that values were purely subjective. The Romantics very much saw art as a form of self-expression, and elevated the artist as having some kind of special sensibility, “better than” the average person. The objectivity of beauty was thrown by the wayside, and we still suffer from the consequences of the ideas of those who came before us. Art, and artists, suffer, as do the rest of us. (For more about this, I recommend starting with Nancy Pearcey’s Total Truth, or Saving Leonardo.)

#### IV. Beauty and God

- A. Emphasis on “spirituality” *only* came, mistakenly, at the cost of the physical world and the senses. (Gnostic ideas crept in.) But God teaches us to affirm the richness of living here in this world, at this time.
- B. Creation: Genesis account tells us that God is the Supreme Artist. He “imaged forth” all that was in His grand imagination, and declared all of it “good.” Human beings he infused, endowed with His own image, and declared us “very good.” Every grain of sand, every leaf, every flower, butterfly, bird is artfully made. When theology was still considered the “queen of the sciences,” scientists understood well that to study science was to “think God’s thoughts after Him.” How wonderful!
  1. Consider: Psalm 8; Psalm 19; Job 38-41; Psalm 148; 1 Timothy 4: 1-5; Romans 1
  2. Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Pied Beauty,” and George Herbert’s “The Elixir”
  3. Even Post Fall, the natural world is brimming with wonders.
    - a) God’s perfection: Looking at Creation under a microscope exposes us to new levels of intricate beauty and perfection of form. Our works aren’t that perfect.
    - b) Diversity: Every sunset is different. Snowflakes. Clouds. Leaves. Human beings.
    - c) Profusion: The sheer number of stars, or flowers, or sunrises.

d) Inventiveness: Every new design from the mind of God. Every day being made new.

C. Common grace — God cares for ALL creation.

1. He made all of this for our enjoyment, and outfitted us with the capacity to be able to enjoy it, and to enjoy it uniquely. Our shared perspectives enhance our enjoyment, because we've also been gifted the capacity to communicate about it, whether in conversation or through the art that we make to image forth our experiences! Wonder!
2. Consider Jesus' invitation in Matthew 6:26-29 — "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

D. We see that God cares about beauty in his instructions for the building of His dwelling place, the Tabernacle in the desert. In Exodus 31, God called by name Bezalel and Oholiab, filled Bezalel with His Spirit (may be the first time that kind of language is encountered in the biblical account), and gifted him with skill, intelligence, knowledge, and craftsmanship. The following chapters depict the tent's construction in detail that an artist can appreciate! God cares about beauty.

E. The Incarnation — Jesus, the 2nd person of the Trinity, became a real man, and not just for his brief time on earth, but for all of eternity. This may be the most remarkable affirmation of the physical.

F. Bodily resurrection, as expressed in 1 Corinthians 15, and 2 Corinthians 5:1-5

G. The new creation — A new earth with the curse removed, when God comes to fix all of the broken things.

V. Beauty and Art

A. We are "sub-creators." That is, we don't create ex nihilo, as God did, but we work within what he made. In Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts, Jerram Barrs writes, "We might say that our dominion over this earth means that we 'till the garden' of color, words, form and texture, sound and harmony, stone and clay, and imagination; of God's works in creation and of human works in history and in society.

B. Then Barrs quotes Sir Isaac Newton, who compared our 'ruling the earth' with the arts and sciences to a child playing: "I do not know what I may appear to the

world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

- C. Artists are particularly gifted to comprehend what is apprehended. From the priest and poet, Malcolm Guite — consider the wording in Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” in Act 5. Theseus gives a beautiful, poetic argument as to why poetry is useless. He says: “The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven, and as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen turns them to shapes and ***gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.***”
- D. Art, properly understood, *does not exist for its own sake*. That’s a lie leftover from Romanticism. Art serves as a kind of finger pointing to God. Or a fragrance, and God is the source. Art helps us remember who we are, and makes us long for home, fulfillment, rest. Great art is like a hole in the universe that we can see *through*. If we stop at the work itself, we fall into idolatry. We must look along it, as Lewis so beautifully articulated in his “Meditations in a Toolshed,” when he compared looking at the sunbeam to looking along it. To look at and to look along are very different experiences.

## VI. Beauty and Christ

- A. Jesus Christ is the most beautiful thing that’s ever been on this earth. If you read the Gospels you’ll notice that no one who ever met him was bored by him. Maybe that is part of our problem! Encounters with Jesus in the New Testament are oftentimes accompanied by a Greek word, “Thauma,” which can be translated “wonder.” They wondered at him. Were astonished by him. Indeed, his words incited his enemies to murder him, and his friends to die for a cause greater than themselves. People were either intensely attracted to him or repulsed, but his personality was absolutely magnetic. No one, whether they liked him or not, could stay away from him. He challenged every stereotype, every boundary, every man-made rule. He turned the world on its ear. And when history tried to, in the words of Dorothy Sayers, “do away with God in the name of peace and quiet” because they had deemed him much too unsafe for the status quo (Aslan is NOT a tame lion), he took the most hideous and humiliating death and, refusing to be forgotten as his executors intended, made the hideous something beautiful. In his time here, he had “a daily beauty that makes us ugly.” (Sayers, again).
- B. Similar to people then, we are either intensely attracted to this tremendous drama (the greatest drama ever staged), or we are terrified by it, like someone who has sat in darkness and is dragged into full sunlight. There are those who, by choice, won’t be able to stand in the beauty of heaven. It will be too much for them to bear.

## VII. Our lives as fragrant offerings — “Little Christs”

- A. Next to Jesus, the most beautiful thing in the world is a saint, a “Little Christ.” That’s those of us who adore him. There is something intensely attractive about an individual so very grounded in Christ that the world seems to have little affect on him or her. The saints who walk in the freedom and grace that the Gospel offers seem unflappable.
- B. Jesus and the woman in Mark 14:3-9 — “And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, ‘Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than 300 denarii and given to the poor.’ And they scolded her. But Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a *beautiful* thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.’”
1. Her act of adoration was so beautiful, it drove some to adore Jesus even more, and others (Judas Iscariot) to, in the words of Peter Kreeft, kill the only two people he ever loved and couldn’t escape — Jesus and himself.
- C. Something happened that converted most of the practical, powerful Roman world. Twelve largely uneducated men experienced something and, as we do with intensely beautiful things, had to show it to others so they could experience it too. Think of the wonderment of the Roman soldiers as they watched the Christian martyrs in the Coliseum and elsewhere.
1. Perpetua (and Felicitas), martyred and reportedly died with a smile on her face.
- D. Our lives should be fragrant offerings — we should live beautiful lives such that others see the love of Christ in our love for one another and in our childlike wonder of the world God gave us. Our lives ought to be such that we can, as Blaise Pascal described, make good men wish that it were true, (then prove that it is). Dorothy Sayers wrote, “It is the dogma that is the drama — not beautiful phrases, not comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to lovingkindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death — but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world, lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.”



VIII. Getting Practical: How can we begin to train ourselves to see beauty, and to practice and integrate it into our everyday lives?

- A. What is your creative capacity? Find it. And create. I write, speak, try to cook, and I dabble in visual arts (especially drawing or painting). My daughter writes stories and plays. Tripp brings order to chaos, and builds (my desk and our bench on our deck, bookshelves, etc.). Rogan draws as well, and, as a little athlete and acrobat, the way he moves has its own kind of grace. (When I asked him what comes to mind when I say “Beauty,” he replied with, “Well, maybe something pretty. Like mountains. Or a dress. Or a motorcycle.”)
- B. What about your living space? House? Apartment? Bedroom? If someone came in, what would it say about you? Create a space that you can rest and think in, and that makes others feel thought of before they came.
- C. Spend time outside. Take walks. Notice things, large and small. And notice people. Pay attention. And begin practicing the discipline of longer stretches of silence. If that happens in a beautiful place, all the better.
- D. Invest in the arts in your own community. There are musicians, painters, play writes, etc. right in your own back yard. Support them. Join them. Talk to them about Jesus.
- E. Learn what your church is doing and why. Study the liturgy, aspects of the service, the songs chosen, etc. Ask your pastor(s) about your church’s theology of beauty. They may provide a wonderful response, and you can better understand and be involved, or it may spark a vital conversation.
- F. Bring order and repair and leave things better than you found them. This is how my husband relaxes. I call him “the task master.” When I’m mentally exhausted, I want to read a great story or watch a film. He wants to tinker with his motorcycle. His brother-in-law has a huge garage/workshop where he works on high performance vehicles, and I’m pretty sure he’d talk about a pristine Subaru STI engine in the same way I’d talk about Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus.”
  1. Need a bookshelf? Make one. Something around the house need repairs? Fix it with skill.
  2. Recall that in earlier times, including the account of building the Tabernacle in Exodus, there was not a distinction between artist and craftsman. Was a time when people built staircases with exquisite attention to detail. They painted bowls or carved the backs of rocking chairs because it mattered. It matters now, too.
  3. Be a producer, not a consumer. The culture has labeled you the latter and treats you as someone who consumes to no end. Don’t fall for it, and let your

stewardship and excellence and attention to detail be your beauty contribution.

G. Pay attention to how you choose to spend your leisure time. That says more about you than what you do for work or school. If you have a free hour, spend it in a way that nourishes your soul.

1. Things that have stood the test of time have done so for a reason. That's a good place to start exposing yourself to beauty. Great books, great art, great architecture, great poetry, great music...listen to it. Bach demands a lot of you. The Beatles not as much, but more than pretty much anything on the radio today. There are a few exceptions. I'm impressed with Twenty One Pilots — Tyler, the main lyricist, is someone who pays attention to his cultural moment.
2. Find someone doing it well and ask to learn from them. Can't cook but want to? Find someone to teach you. See someone whose life is attractive? Ask to spend time with them so they "rub off." Want to make your space more beautiful on a budget but don't know where to start? Ask a friend who has an eye for decorating, or ask a pro. Don't know a lot about how your car engine operates? Find someone who knows and learn from them.

H. Feast. Celebrate. We don't take the time, or go the proverbial extra mile often enough to celebrate in life. But when we do, it means something. And there's usually food involved, whether you're celebrating a birthday, an anniversary, an accomplishment, or a life well lived at a funeral. When you give that little bit extra, it means something. Coffee in a real mug in the warmth of your or your family's kitchen. Tea in a real china cup. Flowers on the table, or cloth napkins that make dinner seem a little more special and meaningful. It is others-centered.

1. In a college setting? Initiate a monthly tapas night with friends, or try delicious cheeses and age appropriate beverages together. Practice hospitality, and connect people in your community. Form a book or poetry club. Take a class for fun.
2. If this is the Kingdom, what is it exactly that we're inviting people *into*? Shouldn't it be beautiful? Christianity certainly is.
3. How did the animals in Narnia know that Aslan was on the move and the White Witch's power was waning? Father Christmas arrived with gifts and a feast in the forest while it was still winter. And the witch went ballistic. Why? The thaw had begun. Her reign was coming to an end. The animals' feast declared it.

IX. When we do these things, when we contribute or make beauty, when we are beautiful, when we feast...we declare war on the prince of this world. Think about it!

When we participate in worship, or liturgy, or attend church on a given Sunday, Peter Kreeft called it a meeting of spies, plotting a revolution against the prince of this world, where Christ comes to meet with us in disguise. Annie Dillard wrote: “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, making up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies hats, and velvet hats, and straw hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may awake someday...and draw us out to where we can never return.” (Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk)

- A. Vedra Smailovic’s cello playing was his act of war, of defiance. And it caught the imagination of the world.
- B. What will yours be? Today? Tomorrow? After that?