

A sunset over the Appalachian mountains, a newborn baby, and a lake house at Lake Tahoe. What do they all have in common? People would consider all of these things to be beautiful. But how are all these “beautiful”? What is beauty? What determines if something is beautiful? The notions of beauty are commonly shared with every other language in the world, yet it is just as complex. Beauty is not owned by the English language; nor is it owned by Italian or French. And so, it is not the fault of a language for the complexity of beauty. What about beauty has made it complex?

Beauty. The adjective—that describes “a combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight”—is often overlooked<sup>1</sup>. We use the “word” beauty constantly throughout our lives, whether it be talking about a lover or a hike in Yosemite. We say the word “beauty” when talking about infants, artwork, and sunsets. We enjoy the beautiful, and we gravitate towards what is beautiful. What is not beautiful is associated with negative connotations and is not attractive. This sounds like a simple concept; however, beauty is complicated. All different things are considered beautiful, and what is and what is not considered beautiful directly influences our societal behavior, adding a layer of complexity. The ways in which we behave yielded by beauty has been changing over time, adding another layer of complexity. Beauty is not just a single adjective that is used to describe the things in our lives that we appreciate, it tells us how to behave what to think. Beauty has strong history, yet it is not fully understood by society.

What is “beauty”? Beauty goes beyond aesthetic pleasure; it rules our lifestyle and personality traits. What we consider to be beautiful is what we strive for in life. We strive for beautiful children, beautiful homes, beautiful experiences in which our desires are fulfilled. As Immanuel Kant argues, judgments of beauty are based on feeling, in particular feelings of pleasure<sup>2</sup>. There is a science behind beauty, and I am exploring these theories and arguments to further develop my own ideas about beauty. The two questions that guide my studies are: When does beauty change? Does “universal beauty” exist? In America, harsh beauty expectations exists—men and women are expected to look a certain way that most people cannot emulate—and it was essential for me to fully learn about why and how beauty exists and its place in society.

Why should beauty matter? It matters because of the fact that it rules us. Beauty is one of the elements that keeps us moving and keeps us motivated. We strive to create beauty, to find beauty, and show beauty in what we do. Beauty has become synonymous with success, and that is why beauty is a popular idea. We live in a society where failure is scorned and being a failure is shameful. Beauty has become a replacement for success and virtue, a replacement that seems less harsh and less black and white. Since the term is so incredibly popular, beauty is commonly overlooked, yet its importance is necessary for people to further understand their place in the world, and the place of those around them. So, beauty has a strong place in the modern world because it lessens the load of the strict societal expectations of success placed on those of all ages. Instead of forcing the adamancy of success on the new generations, we mention beauty. We say things like, “that is beautiful” or “make it pretty.” However, is what we consider beauty universal?

We are constantly asking ourselves, can anything be considered beautiful? Yes, anything can be considered beautiful, but that does not mean it is universally beautiful. If it is successful,

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary

<sup>2</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/#UniNatFre>

it is widely beautiful. This has stayed constant over time. However, beauty has also changed. All throughout our history, beauty has been changing due to the fact that beauty is an animate idea that has evolved over time. Beauty has stayed consistent over time, and no matter when, beauty has been synonymous with success. As new inventions and new advancements appear, there is new beauty, as these innovations are successful. The old beauty is never lost. The ambitious and need for success that belongs to the human race, dates back thousands of years.

The concept of beauty started in ancient Greece, after Pericles and Plato. As Athens started flourish, with a great military, economic status, and cultural power, the idea of aesthetic beauty began to take shape. The age of Pericles, “which reached its apogee in the victorious wars against the Persians, was a time of great developments in the arts, especially in painting and sculpture...Greek sculpture and painting had made enormous progress”<sup>3</sup>. As beauty began, it latched to art. This relationship is vital to understanding of beauty, as changes in beauty are directly linked to their relationship with art. In Greece, statues of naked men and women started to be considered beautiful. Sexual and social identity was directly related to the human body, and gave reason to call the human bodies beautiful<sup>4</sup>. The human body in ancient Greece resembled symmetry and perfection<sup>5</sup>. Greek sculpture sought to create an ideal beauty through the representation of the goodness of the soul. Sculptures of ancient Greece were not controversial. They were simple, yet they made the humans seem Godlike, reflecting goodness and perfection<sup>3</sup>. This was done through static (non-moving or still) forms, which caused “amazement and bewilderment”; they were beautiful.

Philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, took the idea of beauty and implemented philosophy on beauty. Socrates identified three different aspects of beauty: 1) Ideal Beauty (nature by means of a mixture of the parts) 2) Spiritual Beauty (expresses the soul) and 3) Functional Beauty. Plato identified two concepts: a) beauty as harmony and proportion between the parts, and b) beauty as splendor. Plato’s ideals showed beauty as an autonomous existence—beauty functions without the force of other factors—distinct from the physical medium (art) that “accidentally expresses it.” Plato argued that art and beauty are not directly related. Socrates fought for an inner beauty, while Plato argued that only specific individuals are capable of understanding true beauty and art helps those understand beauty who cannot fully grasp it. Plato and Socrates created the first known reasoning for beauty; they tried to explain what beauty was and is, in order to understand how beauty would affect humans in the future<sup>6</sup>. Neither of the philosophers mentioned beauty in relation to the surrounding world. As Plato and Socrates were trying to decipher beauty, they failed to acknowledge that the beauty that Greece was experiencing was a direct result of the success Greece was experiencing at that time. Greece was expecting great wealth and power, and the people needed something to strive for. Greece was the most powerful it has ever been, so what is next? That is how beauty was created. Socrates and Plato failed to see this, and as a result, their philosophies became invalid and only applicable to the time of ancient Greece.

Skipping forward to 2014, a new modern theory has arrived about the origins of beauty

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<sup>3</sup> History of Beauty by Umberto Eco

<sup>4</sup>[http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/tours\\_and\\_loans/international\\_exhibitions/archive\\_international\\_tours/body\\_beautiful.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/tours_and_loans/international_exhibitions/archive_international_tours/body_beautiful.aspx)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/arts/the-ideal-human-form-as-manufactured-in-ancient-times-as-it-is-today-as-shown-in-the-body-beautiful-exhibition-at-bendigo-art-gallery/story-fni0fcgk-1227012711379?nk=cd2677e54343496ab001e5a499309f7a>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.philosophyworks.org/content/lives-plato-and-socrates>

that contradicts Plato and Socrates. Psychologist Nancy Etcoff and Dennis Dutton offer a new theory that beauty is a mask for survival<sup>7</sup>. Dutton and Etcoff argue that beauty is the evolution of our ancient and primal survival instincts. As Dennis Dutton states, “We can say that the experience of beauty is one of the ways that evolution has of arousing and sustaining interest or fascination, even obsession, in order to encourage us toward making the most adaptive decisions for survival and reproduction<sup>8</sup>.” Our love for landscapes for example, is a subconscious thinking back to our ancient needs to have a higher view to see resources, prey, and survival plans. As humans became more modernized, and the need for survival was not a top priority, so beauty was created. The major aspect to this theory is that the survival that has caused the creation of beauty, is synonymous with success. Success is equivalent to survival, and—according to Dutton and Etcoff—survival has become beauty. However, there is a significant loophole in this theory, and that is the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution initiated a change in lifestyle, in which the previous lifestyle contradicted the ideas of Nancy Etcoff and Dennis Dutton. Before the Industrial Revolution, “most people were illiterate and rarely bathed. Their idea of healthcare was that physical suffering from an illness was God’s divine way of purifying the soul...[and] the population [was] not growing very much from generation to generation”<sup>8</sup>. At this time, it was highly unlikely that beauty in life had any prevalence. During the pre-industrialization period in Europe (starting after the Renaissance), movements such as Calvinism, the Reformation, the Great Schism, the Jesuits, and more took place or came to be, reflecting a time of religious and financial distress, not a time of beauty<sup>9</sup>. People were trying to fight back the corruption of the Church and make a living, while beauty was sectioned off for the arts and the arts alone; this was a time of “failure.” After the Renaissance, there was a time where countries were not experiencing the success of the past, and beauty faded away<sup>10</sup>. During industrialization was when beauty did become important, but not in context of survival.

The Industrial Revolution was a time of new inventions, urbanization, and big cities; and marked a new change in lifestyle that brought up the importance of beauty. Not only were people finding beauty in machines, the arts flourished during this time. Artists and writers were either rebelling against the new technology, or they supported it. During this time, great philosophy and literature was produced, especially around the topic of beauty. For example, Walt Whitman, Charles Dickens, and Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote internationally recognized literature, while Immanuel Kant, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and Henry Adams offered critiques and philosophy on the time period<sup>11</sup>. This illuminates a pattern in history that during times of great advancements, beauty becomes important. The machines gained beauty, not from their aesthetic look, but because of their power. The new machines that were coming into the workforce—such as the steam engine, the seed drill, the “spinning jenny,” the water frame, and the steamboat—all gave people a better ability to either make more or sell more<sup>12</sup>. People began to work with the machines to make a final product; the machines had a higher power of the people. The machines were epic, revolutionary and powerful, qualities humans lacked. This idea was commonly understood by the masses, and the struggles and teamwork between human and machine was the

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2013/04/19/174724704/what-is-beauty>

<sup>8</sup> <http://webs.bcp.org/sites/vcleary/ModernWorldHistoryTextbook/IndustrialRevolution/PreIndus.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.history.com/topics/reformation>

<sup>10</sup> <http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/1500-1600-End-of-the-Renaissance-and-the-Reformation.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.enotes.com/topics/industrial-revolution-literature>

<sup>12</sup> <http://industrialrevolution.sea.ca/innovations.html>

cause of many philosophical insights.

Most notable for commenting on beauty at this time was Immanuel Kant, and Kant offers a unique perspective on beauty and success. Kant states that judgments of beauty are based on an individual's feelings, yet it is different than pleasure, desire, and moral goodness. When we find something beautiful, we appreciate it, and have no agenda to want or take ownership of what is beautiful; we are only in awe. Kant mentions, "Whereas the beautiful is limited, the sublime is limitless, so that the mind in the presence of the sublime, attempting to imagine what it cannot, has pain in the failure but pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt<sup>13</sup>." By calling beauty "limited," he offers that pleasure of beauty is the result of our abilities to imagine when perceiving an object; it is comprehensible, therefore limited. With this, Kant argues that the sublime is distinctly different from beauty; he states the sublime is too big of a concept for us to understand, and so we match the sublime with reason, opposed to imagination; therefore the sublime is unlimited<sup>14</sup>. Beauty is comprehensible, and when we comprehend or understand, we reach success. Kant reasons that beauty is success. Even though Kant separates beauty from the sublime, he infers that we can comprehend beauty, and when we do comprehend beauty we are successful.

This separation between beauty and "the sublime" is a perfect reflection of what was taking place during the Industrial Revolution. Innovations were appearing left and right, and these innovations were technologies, machines, and engines that took people away from nature. Factories became larger, lands became big cities, and people were working all day long<sup>15</sup>. However, Kant's take on beauty was only applicable to that time period. Now, as we are in the technology age, we find machines beautiful for different reasons and we do not separate beauty and the sublime. The sublime is considered beauty. Beauty and the sublime are not different; beauty is the umbrella and the sublime falls under it. His philosophy does not explain how beauty changes over time, although Ralph Waldo Emerson tries.

In Emerson's essay on beauty, Emerson offers a different argument than Kant, while also trying to explain the concept of consistency. Emerson argues that beauty is a part of nature, and beauty is not needed for survival, but is used for "restorative properties." Emerson states that beauty is synonymous with perfection; all art pieces maintain perfect order that highlight inherent beauty and "the landscape which [artists] compose, is round and symmetrical<sup>17</sup>." To be beautiful, there must be symmetry according to Emerson. Although, symmetry is not a measure of success, and therefore symmetry cannot be leveled as "beautiful." Along with this, Emerson argues that there is a powerful force—a god-like figure—that must be present for anything to be considered beautiful<sup>16</sup>. Similar to Kant, Emerson also tried to provide people with an opportunity to think more about beauty than machine, but Emerson differs from Kant in that Emerson is indirectly noting the importance of nature over innovation. Kant gives the people the opportunity to think about machines, while Emerson does not mention it once. Emerson talks only about the true beauty in nature, arguing nature is pure beauty. Although, Emerson does touch upon something that Kant does not, and that is consistent beauty. A significant aspect of beauty is seeing when it changes, but Emerson explains how beauty doesn't change. Perfection, God, order, and nature are beautiful and will always be beautiful according to Emerson. What about beauty in people or ideas? While discussing beauty, Emerson proposes "that the primary forms,

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<sup>13</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant

<sup>14</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/#UniNatFre>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.history.com/topics/industrial-revolution>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.emersoncentral.com/beauty.htm>

as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves*; a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, and grouping<sup>17</sup>.” There is never a mention to beauty in people. Emerson and Kant both elaborate on beauty in context to art and the sublime. Kant implicitly relates aesthetic to machines, but nowhere does Kant and Emerson talk about the beauty of people. This is the major fault in their philosophies, especially since beauty in people became incredibly prominent after the industrial revolution.

After the Industrial Revolution, the world entered “the modern age,” the second Industrial Revolution, which yielded electrification, mass production, and the assembly line. The second Industrial Revolution, which went from the 1860’s up to World War I, was the mark of “the modern age”<sup>17</sup>. It was this point in time when people and ideas became beautiful, and commercialism was born. In 1900, beauty products were born and advertised<sup>18</sup>. Now, there were societal expectations on men and women to be outwardly beautiful. Products like *Jonteel* Face Cream, Pond’s Extract Co.’s Pond’s Extract, and more<sup>19</sup>. In 1901, the Edwardian Era began—King Edward VII in Great Britain—and his rule directly influenced the role of women in society. During this time, “Americans were experiencing new-found wealth and indulging in cuisine, fashion, entertainment and travel as never before. Perhaps the Edwardian Era was best captured in the Titanic, the grand ocean liner which embodied human progress, opulence, and the excesses of the time<sup>20</sup>.” The Titanic embodied the successes and beauty America was experiencing and exemplified the strong connection between the two<sup>21</sup>. At this time, America just established themselves as a world power, and were experiencing great success<sup>22</sup>. The notion of opulence, greatness, and power has always been linked with beauty. For this reason, beauty then evolved.

What does beauty look like now? Once the 1950’s hit, modern beauty was created. In the 1950’s, we developed new technologies, products, and expectations were developed and placed on members of society. In the 1950’s, beauty became a desired element or aspect to have, and people were deliberately changing, competing, and striving for beauty. There is a battle between the beauty of people and objects vs. the sublime and nature. *Lamborghini*s are competing against Mt. Everest in a beauty contest that may or may not end. Being in the technology age, our lives are changing so quickly; people can communicate with others around the world, travel by hover board, buy a ticket to a commercial space travel flight, have devices that let us access the internet wherever we’d like. Things are always changing; things are always becoming beautiful. Significant expectations have been placed upon both men and women to look and act a certain way.

In Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*, she states how “[a woman] wins who calls herself beautiful and challenges the world to change to truly see her.” Beauty has become a competition. People strive to look different and be different in the name of beauty. When one reached beauty, unfortunately, one reaches success. Beauty is, and always has been, a reflection of success, and that is why beauty is important to the understanding of human behaviors over time. Humans are competitive and aggressive—and in America—anything but success is scorned.

Beauty is much more than an adjective; it is a fundamental part of life that acts as a partner to our daily affairs. There is a saying that “art imitates life,” but it can also be said that

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ushistoryscene.com/uncategorized/secondindustrialrevolution/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.allwalks.org/2011/05/the-ever-changing-female-ideal-1900-1950-part-1/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/beauty-and-hygiene-ads-1900s>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/manorhouse/edwardianlife/introduction.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.history.com/topics/titanic>

<sup>22</sup> <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/papr/nycamcen.html>

“beauty imitates success.” We strive for beauty in everything we do and for everything we want. We want beautiful homes, beautiful children, and beautiful lives. Beauty is synonymous with success. Students who are thought to be beautiful get better grades: in the workplace, those who are beautiful get paid more; good-looking patients get more personalized care from their doctors; and handsome criminals receive lighter sentences than less attractive convicts<sup>23</sup>. In times when countries thrive, the notion of beauty blossoms and changes. However, what we consider to be beautiful is not always set in stone. It is adaptable. It changes as we change, and there are some elements that stay. We have created a game, a battle for beauty, in which everyone is involved. When there are times of opulence, accomplishments, and success, we look towards beauty and how we can best achieve it.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/Careers/07/08/looks/>

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