

The Aesthetics of St. Thomas Aquinas (Part 2): Aesthetic Intellectualism.

“A thing is not beautiful because we love it, but is loved by us because it is beautiful and good.”

Definition of Beauty: A Closer Look:

1. Two compatible versions of beauty:
 - a. Those things that are called beautiful “which give pleasure on being **looked at**” [beauty is defined narrowly in terms of seeing]
 - b. those things are called beautiful, “the very **perception** of which gives pleasure.” [“perception” is being applied to *all the senses* though sight is considered to be the most perfect of the senses] [mine bold].

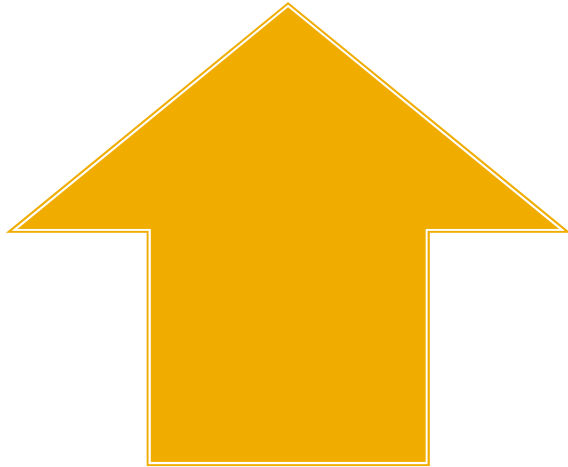
Definition of Beauty: A Closer Look:

1. Understanding that Aquinas' view of beauty should be understood widely, applied to all senses, based on visible beauty.
2. But this definition is extended by analogy to spiritual beauty because the medieval conception of beauty is not restricted to sensuous beauty.
3. The "seeing" and "perception" covers every form of direct apprehension of an object, not only by the senses, but also by intellectual contemplation.

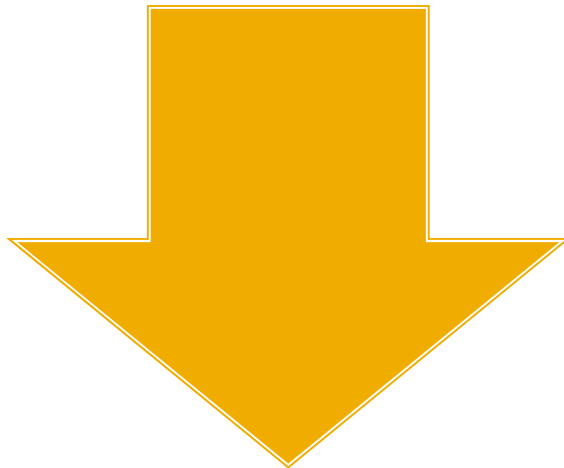
A closer look at Cognition and perception:

1. Beauty, which has an objective basis, is an object of cognition. A beautiful person arouses pleasure in which, which, though an emotion, has its roots in our perception, and thus, in perceptual cognition.
2. Perception is a sensory act whereby both our senses and intellectual powers are applied. This includes both sensuous and intellectual beauty.

A closer look at Cognition and perception:



Aquinas: We assimilate the object through our senses into our minds.



Modern Theory of Empathy: We apprehend the beauty of an object when we project our feelings into the object.

Are all our capable of apprehending beauty?

- No, not all senses are capable of apprehending beauty.
 - Aquinas attributes beauty to what we see and hear, and not to what we taste and smell.
 - The aesthetic senses are sight and hearing because they are the most cognitive, that is, they are most closely connected with our intellect.

Definition of Beauty: A Closer Look:

In sum, things are beautiful when they give pleasure, and things are beautiful when the very act of seeing gives pleasure.

On one hand, the cause of pleasure lies in things seen, and on the other hand, in the act of seeing them.

Therefore, beauty is both objective and subjective.



Aquinas' view of Aesthetic Pleasure:

Objective Beauty:

- Things are beautiful when they give pleasure.
- The cause of pleasure lies in things seen.
- Beautiful things give pleasure is the first criterion by which we recognize them as beautiful.

Subjective Beauty:

- Things are beautiful when the very act of seeing gives pleasure.
- The cause of pleasure is in the act of seeing them.
- In the presence of beauty we experience a feeling of pleasure and this pleasure has a character of its own just as some forms of pleasure are connected primarily with the sense of touch.

Objective/subjective beauty:

- These are two different ways of understanding aesthetic pleasure. --

- Interestingly, we do not call a thing beautiful if it gives us pleasure for other reasons (e.g., useful.).
- The beautiful is the object of contemplation and not desire.

Aquinas' view of Aesthetic Pleasure:

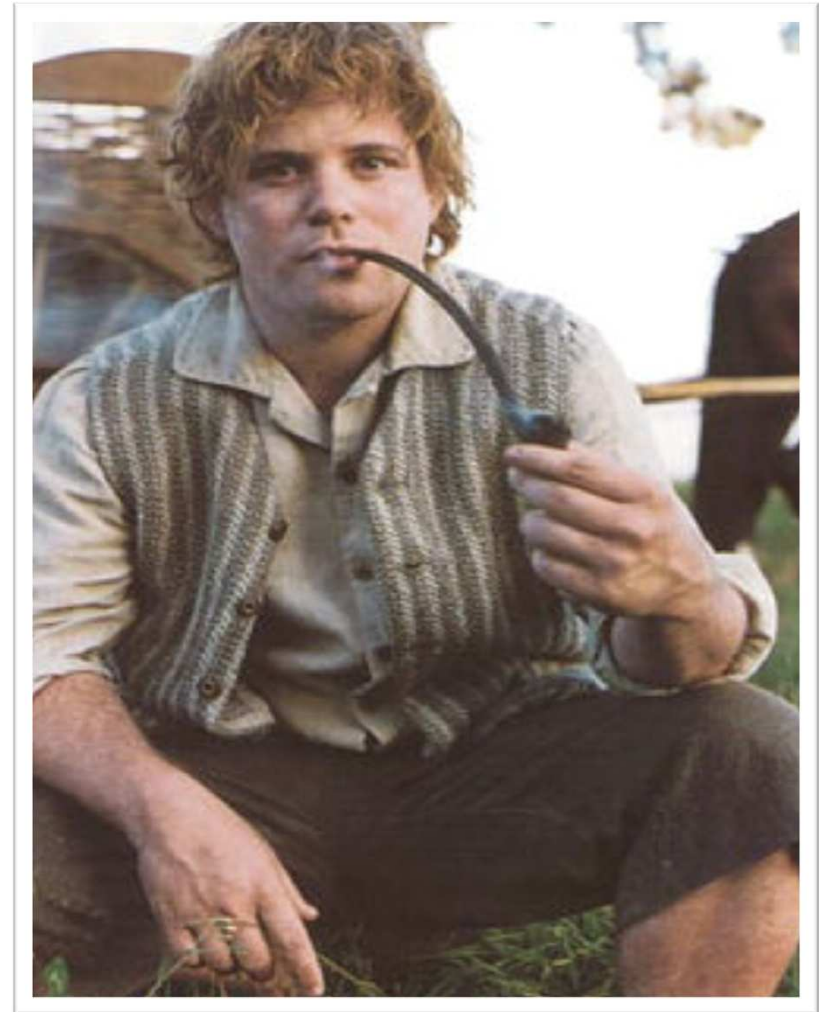
“The voice of the stag is pleasant both to lions and to men, but for different reasons. It pleases the lion because it promises food, but it is because of its harmony... that it pleases men. The lion enjoys audial sensations because he connects them with other sensations of biological importance to him, while man enjoys them for their own sake. The pleasure which man experiences from harmonious sounds has no connection with the preservation of life. Though it has its source in sensory perception, in colour and sound, it is not derived from their relation to biological activity, but from their harmony. Aesthetic feelings are not as purely sensuous as certain biologically important feelings; but neither are they as purely intellectual as moral feelings; they fall halfway between.”

~ Wladyslaw Tartarkiewics, *History of Aesthetics*, volume 2, 250.
Author drawing upon an illustration Aquinas used.

Aquinas' view of Aesthetic Pleasure:

Two types of aesthetic feelings:

1. Purely aesthetic and are evoked by colors, shapes, and sounds- all enjoyed for their own sake.
2. Mixed aesthetic feelings- both biological and aesthetic. They are derived not only from colors, sounds, or other sensory impressions, but also from the satisfaction of our natural needs and desires (e.g., perfume).



Starting Point regarding Beauty:

- Instead of taking perfect divine beauty as his starting point, and from there, proceeding to the beauty of created things, Aquinas took the beauty of creation as his point of departure, and apprehended beauty by analogy with the beauty of creation.
- He emphasized the multiplicity of beauty.
- He emphasized the distinction between spiritual and physical beauty.



Definition of Beauty: A Closer Look:

- a. Those things that are called beautiful “which give pleasure on being **looked at**”
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Relationship between beautiful and goodness:

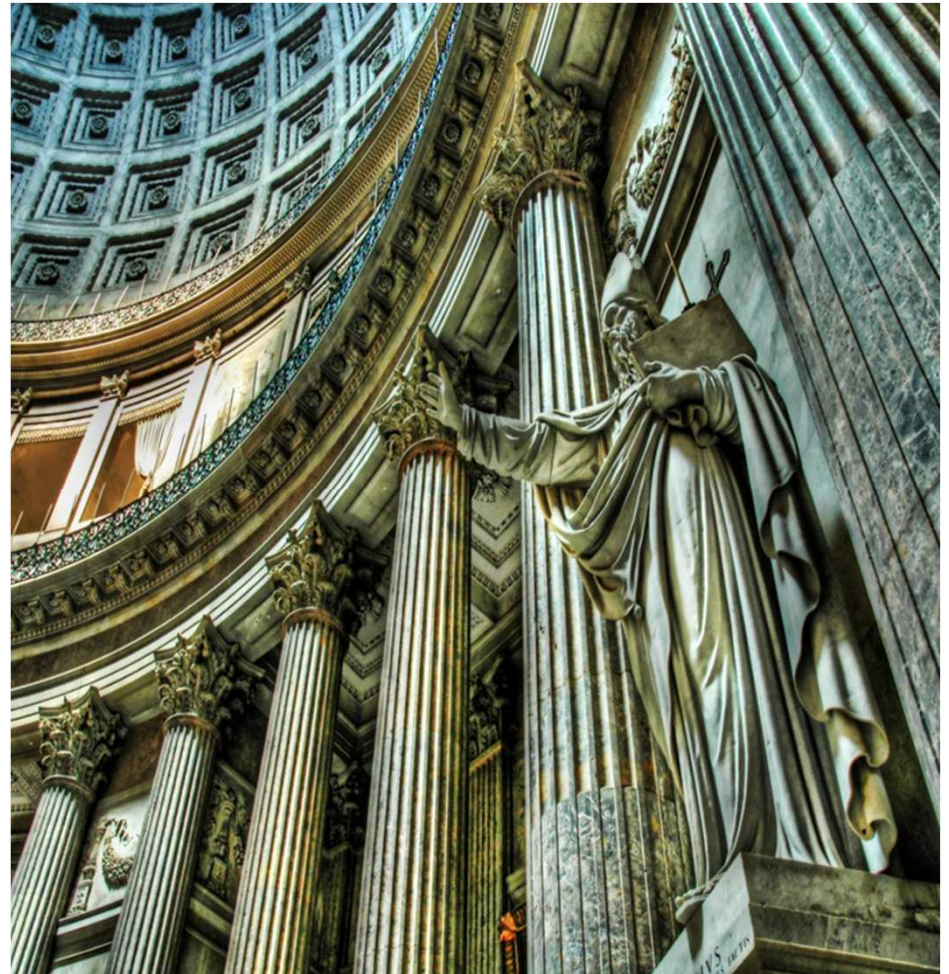
The beautiful is the object of contemplation, and not of desire. But what about desiring the good? Aquinas says the beautiful is a form which we contemplate while the good is an end to which we aspire. In order to satisfy our desire for the good, we must possess good itself. All that is needed to satisfy the desire for beauty is to possess the image of the beautiful. At the same time this does not mean that good things are not beautiful or that beautiful things are good.

Aquinas' Theory of Art:

- Did not restrict himself to thinking of fine arts but every form of production.
- The word "art" (*ars*) denotes the ability to make something.
- Actual activity of making is termed "*factio*."
- Aquinas defined art as the "right rule of reason" which enables the goal to be attained by a certain fixed means. In sum, "*recta ratio factibilium*" (the right reason of things to be made).

The Right Reason for Things to be Made:

- An art product finds its source in the mind of the maker. The idea precedes actual construction.
- In order to realize this idea, the maker must possess general knowledge.
- Since the maker must apply his knowledge to different tasks, he need an understanding of concrete reality.
- The end of the art product lies in the product while the artistic activity is in the maker.



Does Art differ from Science?

- Yes, because its aim is to produce something of value (useful, pleasant, or beautiful), while science is not a productive but a cognitive activity.



What was his scope of the arts?

- Very wide: It included crafts and diverse arts such as cooking, finance, horsemanship, and even war.
- Aquinas combined the literary, the pictorial, and sculptural into a single concept known as figurative arts.

Art Imitates Nature:

- Emphasized not only representational art, but also of art in general.
 - Imitation and appearance of nature and the imitation of nature's modes of acting.
 - Why? Nature is purposeful (telos). Nature is striving toward definite goals.

Aquinas Division of Pleasurable Arts vs. Useful Arts.

Painting, for example would be a useful art because it was used to instruct those who were illiterate. In contrast, instrumental music and poetry would be pleasurable arts.

Many of the arts we consider to be fine arts today would be considered useful arts to Aquinas.



Does Art differ from Morality?

- Yes, because morality belongs to the realm of action toward a common goal to all life whereas art aims at some specific goal.

How Should Art be Evaluated?

Like everything else we do, Aquinas believed that the arts should be evaluated from a moral and religious point of view.

But he did not believe that people should disregard the arts as something not worthy to pursue. In fact, he did not condemn pleasurable arts like music. They were permissible as long as they provided the artist and listener with entertainment.

The arts can be used to educate people and glorify God.

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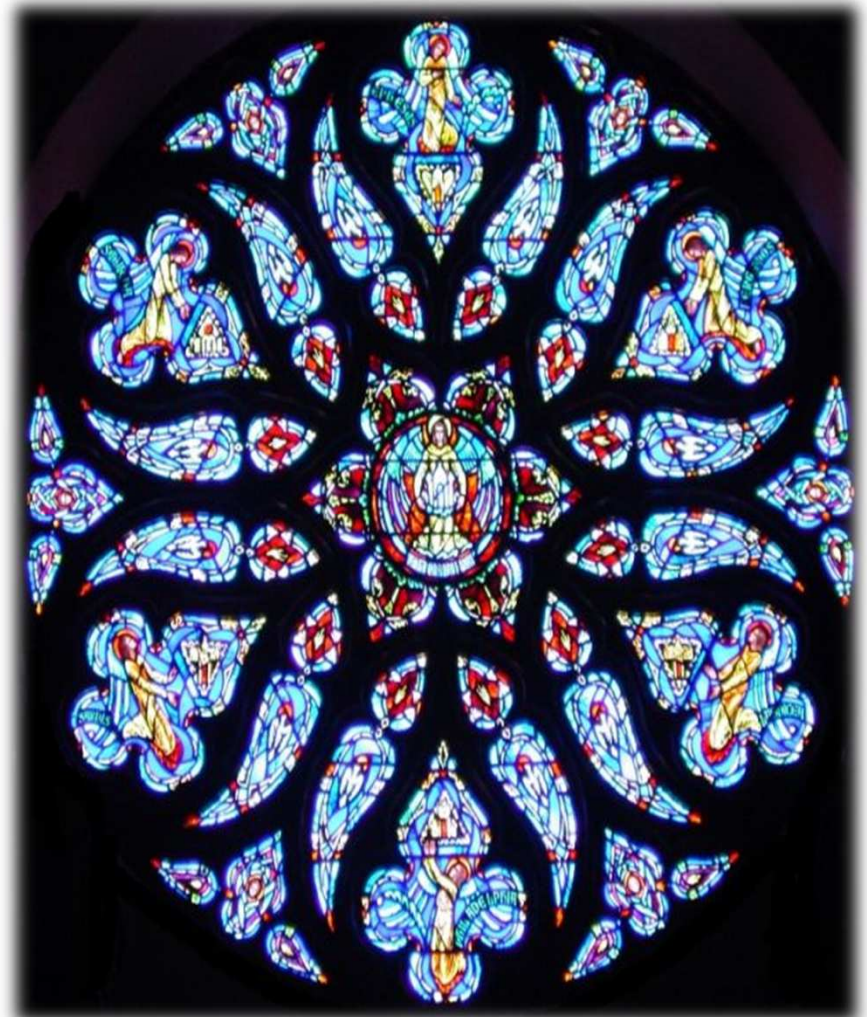
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How Should Art be Evaluated?

The ultimate question for Aquinas when it came to evaluating the arts, esp. in relation to the community is that the arts should take their place in an ordered, rational, and harmonious life.

“Let us beware of disrupting the harmony of the soul.”

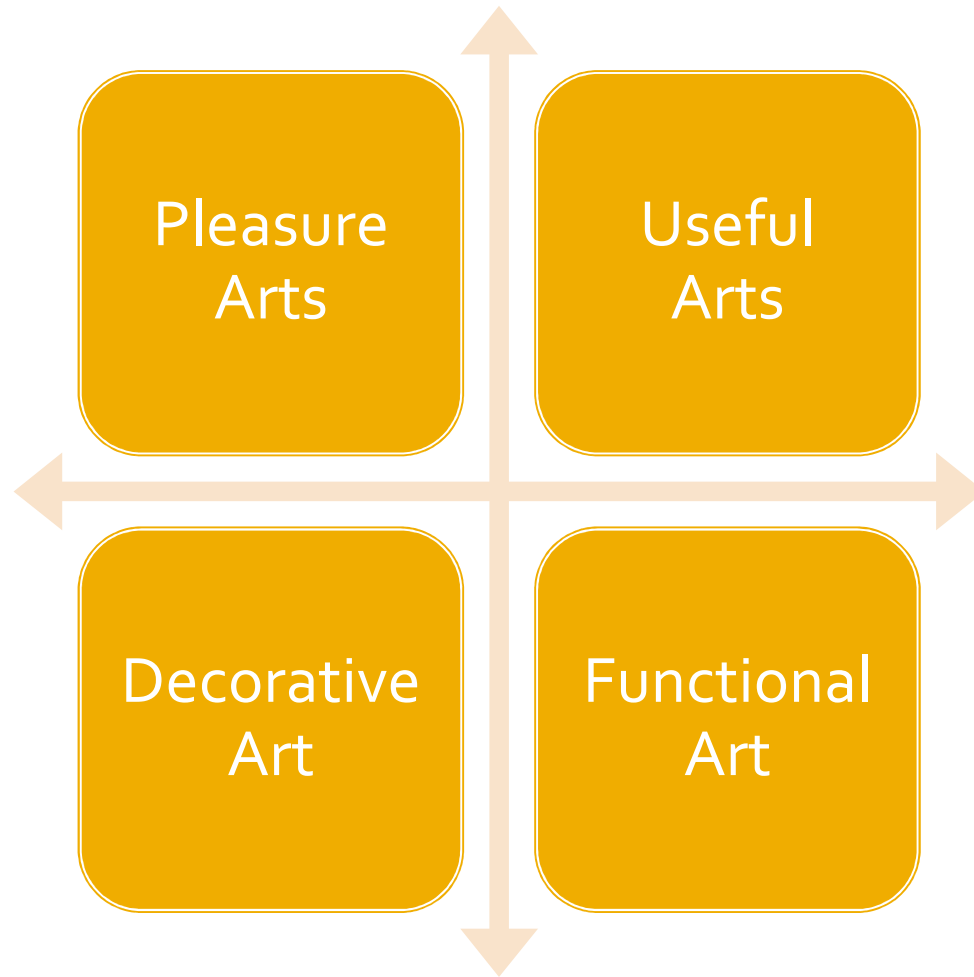


Representation & Transformation:



Aquinas argues that art cannot create new forms. In art, there is really no creation or formation, but only representation and transformation.

Categories of the Art (s):



Two Kinds of Beauty in Art Products:



Harmony of
Form

Satisfactory
Portrayal of a
Subject.

As a result:



Some pictures can be called beautiful if they portray a thing perfectly, even though the thing depicted may be ugly.