

Conversation on Beauty

by [Richard Kuslan](#) (September 2018)



Venere e Amore, Hendrik van den Broeck, 16th century

Shortly after the publication of the poem, [The Birth of Venus](#), a friend messaged me. My friend and I have known each other for most of our lives. We attended the same high school and later attended different colleges focusing on different academic disciplines. Our tastes differ though we consider each other as siblings. My friend's talents favored the sciences; mine, the arts. Our professional tracks followed our interests. I am happy to present to you the transcript of a recent conversation about beauty with my friend. I do this with permission from my unnamed (but real) friend and hope that readers of *New English Review* will consider it of value.

Author's Friend (AF): Just read Birth of Venus, Not sure I

fully understand it—need Mrs. [*name of high school English instructor*] to help with analysis. What inspired you?

Author (A): The story of the birth of Venus. Classical Greek myth, subject of much Renaissance art. Stressing the worth of Beauty in our modern age where ugliness is the preferred expression, in music, art, theater, etc. That's why I wrote it in a classical-like style, to show it can still be done. If you read the myth itself, you'll see the poem tracks the events of it rather closely.

AF: Hmm. Is ugliness the preferred expression?

A: Oh gosh, yes. Walk through the Yale art museum. First walk through the Renaissance wing, then walk through the modern art section. The former works concern themselves with numinous notions of beauty and divinity. The latter preoccupied with distortions of the human form, even its defilement. Music very similar. From musical ideas that once concerned harmonious dignity and ideals, but in our age, loud and angry noise, generally speaking. Of course, there are exceptions. These ideas have occupied my mind for decades, but only now do I have the opportunity and capacity to express them succinctly and well.

AF: I don't completely disagree. But, of course, "ugliness" is subjective. The Stones and the Beatles were once called loud and angry noise.

A: The Stones certainly loved baseness. I thought them very

crude and they were. That was their appeal, to the lowest they could go and still sell. But, I mean, the trend over the last century has been towards defilement of Beauty. And what I see happening now in the West is a trend away from destructive, post-modernist emptiness to a desire for something richer, deeper, more life affirming and beautiful. I'm going to be a part of that trend. Young people, especially, there is a segment in the South (not in the Northeast or in California) turning away from the generation of 1968 and their crudeness. They're looking for something nourishing and finding real value in what came before. I'm very very hopeful.

AF: Aha. Make America Great Again?

A: That may be a political aspect to this larger cultural flip-flop. But, it is much bigger than that.

The reason is that the art, music, literature, theater, etc. produced under the post-modernist ascendancy is of very poor quality and generally unsatisfying. Like potato chips. Once in a while, yes. But you can't make a diet off of that and still be healthy.

AF: I suppose the challenge then would be to find "classical beauty," and richer, deeper, and more life affirming subjects in today's world, something perhaps more relevant than the Renaissance topic of the birth of Venus, something that speaks to the modern viewer.

A: Yes and no. The modern reader is generally a lazy reader because he's read only conversational English. So one must push a bit, making the reader do a bit of work.

On the other hand, a more “accessible” form—more result grasped with little effort—can also be valuable. I’ve written a few of those as well which are soon to be published.

And when the person of today sees the grandeur of Michelangelo, for example, up close and in person, it’s hard to go back to Jackson Pollock.

AF: Well that’s very subjective of course. Art has to evolve. Great art can not only be from the 1500s.

And with Pollack and the abstract expressionists and the Impressionists, often the medium itself was the message. There was no grand story telling—purposely.

Today, there may not be much audience for, or even appreciation of, The Birth of Venus.

A: That is the post-modernist theory. The so-called progressive ideology. Actually, in the arts, it has been entirely regressive. Rather than the traditional discovery of Truth and Beauty, which has been the sacred role of the artist for a millennium, now instead, the hack who hasn’t any special insight just regurgitates the ugliness of the world. It’s a spiral going nowhere (but down).

In other words, Marcel DuChamp’s urinal and Piss Christ aren’t Art. Rather, they are expressions against Art.

AF: Perhaps. But in no way would I compare Pollack or the abstract expressionists to Piss Christ.

So, where do you find truth and beauty in today’s world, without regurgitating 500 year old themes? That’s the

challenge.

A: Oh, it's everywhere. Oh my gosh. The human form itself.

AF: Then I look forward to reading about it in your next endeavor.

A: But one has to know, has to have discovered wherein truth and beauty consist. The post-modernist asserts that there is no truth—it's all relative. And Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, rather than an Ideal that overarches the mundane. Since they predicate all their works on this premise, they can never glimpse it, so they can never express it.

Even if that expression of it is only but a glimpse.

I loved discussing this with you. Finally, someone other than my brother (and one editor) intelligent and willing to think about it. I've been so starved for intelligent intellectual conversation these many years.

AF: Well glad I could be of assistance. I enjoy it as well—keeps the neurons lubricated.

I do believe that at least to some extent beauty is in the eye of the beholder. There can be no one simple definition of beauty.

A: I don't mean by beauty what we consider good looking. Rather, that there exists an Ideal, which is beauty, much as there is an ideal of what is a chair. One can imagine the idea of chair without the actual expression of chair in its physical form. The ideal of beauty is "seen" or understood to

be, the qualities of which are glimpsed, as it were, with aesthetic insight, and then in turn expressed in whatever form and content that takes.

AF: Like the Impressionists, the Abstract Expressionists, Rothko, Picasso, the Minimalists, many others, and even Pollack tried to do—to get at the essence of the thing, the chair, the nude descending the staircase, rather than the thing itself.

A: That is true but I don't mean it in that way. Beauty, not being a *thing*, but an ideal—in the sense of seeing the essence and communicating through the physical means what is ethereal and can't be sufficiently defined in concrete terms by the human faculties.

It's like trying to picture gravity.

It is there. We know it. We sense it everyday but we can't see it.

Mathematicians with insight discovered it and use it to great effect in our lives.

AF: But we can't really see it—observation alters the reality. Schrödinger's cat. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Perhaps that is why some have submitted a plain white canvas and called it art.

A: Yes, we can't see it but we can *know* it. And when it is encountered, *wow*. Even more often encountered than fraud in financial advisors, than it is in art. De Kooning whose

paintings go for millions, total fraud. Incompetent, couldn't paint, not even that he lacked mastery, he lacked everything and, with the help of a famous so-called critic who bought his paintings cheap and then wrote up his paintings as great art, made many millions when he sold the collection.

Last month or so I saw a canvas in the Houston Museum of Fine Arts that was so fine and so moving, so extraordinarily beautiful, divine, I wondered how the artist, who lived when life was full of death and pain with few comforts, could see it. And express it.

Let me see if I can find the photo (*see above photo*).

Idealized feminine beauty, maternal, child-like love (Cupid). I thought, who the hell needs Rothko's manic depression in all its bleakness when you can have this?

AF: I don't necessarily see idealized feminine beauty in that painting. You see bleakness and depression in Rothko? I do not. Have you been to the Rothko Chapel in Houston?

A: Yes, I've been. Deathly silent. It is a representation of his internal negation of life. They try to pass it off as a place of meditation, but there is no life in it.

It is an anti-chapel. Another example of the fraud perpetrated on art.

AF: Hmm. Your opinion of course. Wow. What a skeptic.

A: I'm sure you've not heard many people speak about things in this way, but there are actually many of us. Really!

The academics are all progressives when it comes to culture. They are a bloc.

No, not a skeptic.

I've just seen through them. I understand what motivates them.

But those who think as I do are truly legion. You just don't hear from them unless you go looking.

And once you do, *holy mackerel*, there are many.

They all loved Madoff until he was found out. And no one but no one would listen to Harry Markopolos.

AF: An Underground of sorts?

I'm just saying that beauty can exist after 1500. Not all modern art is fraud because you don't happen to like it. Money motivated Michelangelo, too.

A: Of course beauty is present even now. All over. But the general trend of popular culture is ugliness, defilement. That is what they even teach in the schools.

AF: Of course, still your opinion.

A: There really is a right way to look at things.

AF: Ugliness is as subjective as beauty I suppose.

A: This is what the progressives teach. Because for them it all comes down to one assumption—

There is no truth.

From this, they claim there is no meaning. And if there is no meaning, there is no purpose. And we are just an assemblage of atoms, if we even exist, because they won't even assume that.

What I have found is, that to discover truth, one must posit that it exists. Like the theoretical point and line in geometry.

With the right assumption, wow, what we can discover. It's true for the arts just as in the sciences.

AF: "A right way to look at things?" Now hold on there, Orwell.

"All animals are equal but some are more equal than others."? Some equal, some elite, perhaps the State knows what is beauty and what is ugly? So you know better?

A: I love Orwell. I've read literally every word that he is known to have written.

Yes, I know better. The state knows nothing.

You, for example, are an expert in the medical field, a specialist due to training, experience, intellect, intuition, you've got it all.

AF: So you are a Fascist? Because you know better than anyone else? Your opinion is the correct opinion?

A: What the progressive mind wants us to accept is that no one knows better. Except them, of course.

A fascist is one who compels others by force to submit to the power of state control. I don't have any prisons in my house. At least, not that I know of . . .

My take on this is a total contradiction to the current, century old trend.

Many have come to the same conclusion.

AF: Agree about the Libs. But you said there is a "right way" to look at things and that "you know better." That is a fascist philosophy, I believe.

Should a government adopt that philosophy, there would inevitably be prisons for improper thought.

A: Roger Scruton, an absolutely brilliant Englishman, philosopher speaks on this topic of beauty eloquently, explains it much better than I can.

Yes. There is a right way. Or at least a better way.

We could drive on square tires. But a wheel is far better. And we see what is right by virtue of what is produced by it. Like for example, the quality of pork. Feed the animal junk and abuse it and the meat tastes bad. Feed it the best quality acorns and wash the animal, etc, let it roam, and it tastes fantastic and with better texture.

The discernment, our discernment, that is what shows us what is better.

That is an aesthetic judgment.

-the conversation ends here-

One may tend to think that aesthetic ideals and ideas have been relegated to discussion among academicians when actually much of the worthwhile conversation is going on elsewhere. (Neither my friend nor I are or ever have been academics.) But, in the academy, as far as I can tell from the pronouncements of professional intellectuals, there seems to be little substantive discussion of the Ideal. Rather, it would appear that the post-modernists engage only themselves in an intermural jousting with jargonized rhetoric in a battle they believe they've already won. I think they have lost. The evidence is, to me, plainly evident.

It must be because this vast cultural transition is at an incipient moment when examples of its blossoming are still few. But everywhere people are witness to this transition. We (myself and people like me) see everywhere bankruptcy manifest in each and every one of their creations. The products of their -ism, emanating from their One Great Principle—that there is no Truth—are routinely crude, crass, false, fraudulent, profane, unsatisfying: poison.

While the academics apparently seem to thrive in their self-referential bubble, many of us on the outside of the proverbial ivory tower have seen through them.

We are poised on the crest of a new aesthetic. Perhaps

a better analogy is that seedlings of great promise have popped up under the detritus.

This is why Beauty—which human beings are naturally attracted to from the earliest age—is so important. The ideal of Beauty grounds the artist, the writer, the performer, the poet, the playwright, the sculptor in a nourishing soil without which none of us can sink roots. This is what we must restore for our own sake, and for the children.

Richard Kuslan is an admirer of Donne, Sheridan, Byron, LeFanu, Trollope, Orwell, Sacheverell Sitwell, Christopher Logue and Jean Sprackland, among (many) others in the English language. He marvels at meaning's fecundity when language is constrained by form and delights in the melodies that take to the air when the beautiful is read aloud.

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