

## Taking care of beauty

### *La cura della bellezza*

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The Corsia Sistina, built by Pope Sixtus IV, is an extraordinary example of a hospital where the beauty of the works of art is part of the care for body and spirit as well. This can still be a model nowadays.

The article develops the philosophical foundation of this assumption, showing how the knowledge of beauty, in its natural objectivity, involves the whole human being, becoming the intrinsic purpose for Man himself. The current cultural and existential crisis has made it difficult to understand beauty objectively and to define an art capable of representing it realistically. Therefore, it is even more crucial to get back to art, which, with its beauty, can heal Man. It is therefore necessary to fill hospital wards once more with works of art that, through beauty, contribute to the wellbeing of the person as a whole.

**Key words:** Art, beauty, health

*La Corsia Sistina, realizzata da Papa Sisto IV, costituisce uno straordinario esempio di ospedale in cui la bellezza delle opere d'arte fa parte della cura del corpo e dell'anima. Questo può costituire ancora oggi un modello.*

*L'articolo sviluppa la fondazione filosofica di questo assunto, mostrando come la conoscenza della bellezza nella sua oggettività naturale coinvolga tutto l'essere umano, costituendo una intrinseca finalità per l'uomo stesso. L'attuale crisi culturale ed esistenziale ha reso difficile la conoscenza oggettiva della bellezza e la definizione di un'arte capace di rappresentarla realisticamente. Per questo risulta ancora più urgente recuperare l'arte che con la bellezza curi l'uomo nella sua interezza. Occorre dunque riempire nuovamente le corsie degli ospedali di opere d'arte che attraverso la bellezza e contribuiscano alla salute integrale della persona.*

**Parole chiave:** Arte, bellezza, salute

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The Sistine Chapel and the Corsia Sistina in Rome, both take their name from the same Pope of the XV century, Sixtus IV. The Sistine Chapel, known to all in the world, is the magnificent chapel established by Sixtus IV, which takes its name from him, known especially because of its decoration for which he called upon the greatest artists of that time, as his successors also did, among whom Julius II who gave Michelangelo this assignment.

The Corsia Sistina, less known, is on the other hand, a magnificent construction which takes its name from the same Pope, and is also frescoed by great artists, but which is a hospital ward constructed in the ancient “Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Saxia”, reconstructed by Sixtus IV after a fire had destroyed it.

Therefore, the same beauty was commissioned for the Chapel of the Pope and for the ward of a hospital.

This is worthy of reflection. The great humanistic Renaissance culture perceived that beauty is an indispensable element for the life of the spirit and the body. In the Christian perspective, the sick person is a figure of the same Jesus Christ, and as to Him, the sick person is owed honour and decoration. However, beyond this perspective, there is also the anthropological awareness that sickness heals better and earlier in a context of beauty. Beauty forms part of the perfection of human maturation.

Contemporary hospitals are extremely efficient and clean, but often precisely for this reason they are unadorned, they do not provide the person who is suffering with beautiful images.

Beginning precisely from this observation, I would like to offer some points of reflection on beauty and on art, as integral elements of human fullness.

### A view on beauty

An authentic view on beauty should originate from the evidence of beauty itself. A simple view is therefore required, which does not cease to observe and to admire, but which, on the contrary, assumes wonder in a classical way, as the starting point and the motor for all thorough examination.

A global view is also necessary: the competence with regard to specific knowledge should not mean renouncing the composition of the totality. We need a view which never loses the vision of the entire mosaic, focusing only upon a single piece of it, as Saint Augustine writes suggestively, in *De Ordine*: “Let us suppose that a certain person has such a limited vision, that while looking upon a mosaic on a pavement, his view can only perceive the dimensions of one piece at a time. He would reproach the artist for incompetence in the work of organization and composition, in the conviction that the little stones were badly placed. However, it is *he himself*, who cannot grasp and portray to himself in an overall vision, the pieces which are harmonized in a reproduction of uniform

beauty. The same condition can be seen in uncultured persons. Incapable of understanding and reflecting upon the universal and harmonic organization of things, if one aspect alone, (which for their imagination is too big) strikes them, they think that a great irrationality exists in the universe” (St. Augustine, *De ordine*, I, 1.2).

Beauty always implies a reference to totality, because things are beautiful by participation in the very beauty of God.

Every authentic “phenomenological” investigation – as we can find in philosophical tradition –, links beauty to an experience of the senses which goes beyond the senses themselves. In Platonic speculation, beauty is outlined as an *ideal but visible* reality (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250 D-E).

Scholastic tradition also sees beauty as a pleasure that basically originates from sensory knowledge : “*Pulchrum autem respicit vim cognoscitivam, pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent*” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5 a. 4 ad 1).

The word “aesthetic” – that since the XVIII century defines the philosophical study of beauty and art –, has its origin precisely in reference to sensation, *aisthesis* (even if the development of the discipline appears thereafter very complex and even controversial).

Sensory apprehension is only one aspect of beauty; with-in and together with the sensory aspect, one perceives, understands and enjoys an additional meaning by reason. Beauty is a manifestation of something which goes beyond sensation itself: if a certain reality is beautiful, it is not *only* sensation.

From the time of Greek reflection, the theme of beauty, examined radically in its ontological significance, is defined in its relationship to the good, in terms of order, harmony and perfection. Aristotle, for example, defines beauty precisely by confronting it with the good Aristotle (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XIII, 3, 1078 a32- b4).

The pleasure, that one enjoys in the knowledge of beauty, is rooted in the fact that beautiful things are also true and good. In fact, it is common experience that the originals are appreciated more than the imitations, and good things more than bad things.

Also etymology links beauty to the good; in Greek, as Bodei reminds us “even if *kalos*, according to Plato, is derived from *kalein*, ‘to call, to attract to oneself’ (*Cratylus*, 416 b), it is also regularly associated with the good (*agathos*)” (Bodei, 1995, p. 13). In Italian, and in the languages derived from Latin, “beauty” refers to a “small good”, as Mazzotta underlines: “It is the translation for the latin *bellus* which is an abbreviation of *benulus*, which is, in its turn, a diminutive of *bonus* in affective and friendly language, and has the meaning of ‘pretty’ which one discovers in many poems of Catullus and in at least one epigram of Martial. Another, more suggestive theory involves the medieval Latin term *bonicellum*, ‘small good’ or ‘abbreviated good’” (Mazzotta, 2008, pp. 73-74).

The terms *bonito*, *beau* and *bello* are related to this etymology of beauty.

Also in very far away languages and signs, beauty and goodness refer to each other: “In the Japanese *yoshi*, for example, the link with the notion of goodness is just as direct as in the latin *bellus*. [...] Other terms linked to the idea of goodness are [...] the Chinese ideogram *mei* (which originally represents beauty as a large ring), which has a very close relationship with ‘the good’ (*shan*)” (Bodei 1995, p. 13).

In an analogous way, aesthetic decor (*decorum*) and moral decor (*decentia*) are linked; moreover “in late antiquity the concept of *decor* is alternated with that of *decus*, the first in relation to the beauty of the body, the second in relation to the spiritual one” (Castelli, 2005, p. 48).

Lobato underlines that there exists a hierarchy in the order of beauty: “Beauty abides more in the spirits and less in the bodies and belongs more to the natural order than to the artificial one. At the level of being, there is no ugliness; in being there is no ugliness. Ugliness cannot be found in anything except in the *ens* (that which has being), which is, necessarily, beautiful” (Lobato, 2005, p. 162).

Along the same lines, ugliness can be perceived not as something that is, but as a limit, as the absence of completeness: “Ugliness and badness cannot consume the heart of being. Their bite reaches only the exterior surroundings and is always a proof which attests the union between beauty and being: the finite being is subject to many deprivations. Man himself ‘in many ways can be sick or ugly, even if this does not occur except in a healthy and beautiful being’ (*In IV Sent.*, d. 44, 3, 1, sol.1). Therefore, ugliness does not exist except in that which is beautiful, which is being itself” (Lobato 2005, pp. 162-163).

Ugliness is therefore the limit and the imperfection of contingent and finite beings.

### Natural inclination to beauty

Man has a natural inclination towards beauty, and not towards ugliness: beauty is the natural goal of nature and of the human being in particular.

If beauty is the object of a natural desire, then it falls into the context of ethical considerations. Human beings are naturally inclined to some goals that reveal what is good for themselves. The classic text to refer to about natural inclinations of human beings, is the second article of question 94 in I-II part of the *Summa Theologiae* by Thomas Aquinas. Man, in as much as he is a substance, tends to conserve his own being, and in as much as he is an animal, tends to reproduction: man shares both inclinations with other substances and other animals, but he realizes them in a peculiarly human way. The knowledge of God and life in society are the ends of specifically and exclusively human inclinations. A complete and complex anthropology, as well as an authen-

tically human and adequate ethic, emerges from the development of these concepts. These goals, which animate man, indicate to man himself that goods ought to be sought, and how to obtain them.

This text of Thomas Aquinas is explicitly taken up again by John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor*, where we can find an explicit reference to beauty among the precepts of the natural law: “In order to perfect himself in his specific order, the person must do good and avoid evil, be concerned for the transmission and preservation of life, refine and develop the riches of the material world, cultivate social life, seek truth, practise good and contemplate beauty” (n. 51).

The contemplation of beauty, therefore, is presented as a precept of the natural moral law.

The knowledge of beauty, even if it is intrinsically linked to the senses, is a specifically human phenomenon, in as much as it requires a rational creature, capable of reflecting and of understanding the order of things. The knowledge of beauty is, in fact, the knowledge of a rule, a measure, and a harmonious agreement between the parts.

The enjoyment of natural and artistic beauty is characterized by a “pleasure” that involves the whole person: emotions and passions; reason and intellect. It is a pleasure that is not “useful” but rather a disinterested pleasure, a pleasure of pleasure: that is the feeling of pleasure in the presence of something which one knows by seeing it – or hearing it – without wanting to buy it, possess it, modify it or sign it.

The cultivation of beauty is then an authentic cultural activity, in as much as it cultivates the whole person, it is *paideia* (Jaeger, 1986; Barzaghi, 1996). Beauty, together with art, carries out an important role in civilizing (Miccoli, 1995, p. 6).

Beauty can and must be cultivated, in its dimension of natural beauty and in its dimension of artistic beauty. Artistic beauty can help in unveiling and underlining natural beauty.

### What is art

It is well known that the latin term *ars*, *-tis*, corresponds to the Greek term *téchne*, which indicates the dimension of an operative, creative, productive, poietic know-how, aimed in a transitive way towards the production of something which is external with respect to the subject. The *artes* then evolved in the late ancient and medieval culture, and they were divided into mechanical and liberal arts. During the Renaissance, some of the mechanical arts were elevated to the status of “beautiful arts”: picture, sculpture, architecture. They passed from the rank of mechanical to that of liberal (music, because of its close relationship to mathematics, was already recognized as superior: it made up part of the “trivium”). The arts, defined in this way, evolved and diversified, grew and changed, maintaining however their specificity. Then, in

a quick and often confused way, in the context of a general crisis of culture and of human beings, they lost their identity, to the point of boasting of not having one, so that all is art that is art is nothing.

However, in the midst of historical changes, art maintains its identity and can still have a great human value today, as long as it is formulated correctly.

In order to define it better, let us begin with its end. What is the purpose of art, why does art exist?

Art has an eminently “cultural” function, its role is the *cultivatio animi*. The word “culture” comes from the Latin word *colo* which means to cultivate (the same root *κολ* from the Greek *βουκολέω*: to graze). Cultivation is an activity which helps to grow, according to the rules of the individual subject; each type of cultivation proceeds in this way.

St. Thomas made a distinction between two types of cultivation, according to the subject who is cultivated:

“We can cultivate something in two ways: either to make what is cultivated better, as we cultivate a field or something of that sort, or to make ourselves better by the cultivating, and in this way we cultivate wisdom. God cultivates us to make us better by his work, [...] But we cultivate God, not by ploughing but by adoring, in order that we may be made better by him” (Thomas Aquinas, *Super evangelium S. Joannis lectura*, 15, l. 1)

Culture is therefore *paideia* in the classical sense of the term: the cultivation of a young person so that he blossoms and matures into a man. (Jaeger, 1986). Culture has an intrinsically pedagogical aspect, which is particularly exalted in art. Art is needed in order to grow, in order to make more fruitful what is already in the soul. This is true not only from a classical perspective, but it is true even now.

Art is authentically *cultivatio animi*, cultivation of the soul. With the term “soul” we refer to what metaphysics has researched and defined in a long tradition, and which today would be called the most intrinsic, the principle, what we are and can be in our most intimate selves, what is expressed in all that we do in as much as we are human persons, that element which is not material but which keeps our body together in its vitality and in its multiple and specific activities.

The characteristic feature of art, as a “cultural” activity, may be found in beauty. The beauty of art must be defined in reference to the beauty of reality, so that it does not lose itself in being self-referential and in ambiguous no sense.

Art is essentially communication between the artist and the beneficiary of the art, it is the transferal of a message of beauty, dialogue with someone. Art needs someone who desires it, and someone who enjoys it.

The beneficiary is someone who *knows* how to rejoice in art. Art cannot be consumed like “stuff” or like a show. It implies the ability to recognize and to know it, and this ability evolves thanks to act of enjoying it. One learns how to delight in art, and therefore the education of taste, the ability to see and the ability to know, are all required.

The classic distinction between *uti* and *frui* may be used to differentiate between a type of enjoyment that leaves no traces and which destroys precisely because it had ambitious desires to possess what cannot be possessed, and a type of enjoyment which, on the other hand, builds up the person who enjoys, because he desires nothing other than the joy of the beauty itself. Art does not have users, but it does have beneficiaries (that is, those who enjoy it). He who delights in the beauty of art becomes transformed and bettered by it.

## The crisis of art

Gradually, a process took place in which, firstly, beauty became the exclusive property of art, with the consequent negation of natural beauty; then it became manipulated by artistic theories as if each individual could invent it according to his own pleasure; finally, the point was reached when contradictory affirmations were made, such as “the beauty of ugliness”, to the point of an inconsistent relativism in which each person affirms something as beautiful, according to what they *want* to affirm as beautiful (Papa, 2006).

Von Balthasar was a good prophet, in the very famous passage in the *Introduction to Glory*, when he clearly denounced how the lessening of beauty means the loss of the strength of the true and the good: “In a world without beauty – even if people cannot dispense with the word and constantly have it on the tip of their tongues in order to abuse it – in a world which is perhaps not wholly without beauty, but which can no longer see it or reckon with it: in such a world the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. [...] In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency” (von Balthasar, 1982, p. 19).

The crisis of beauty tragically means the crisis of art and it is linked to a broader cultural and existential crisis. Joseph Ratzinger highlighted the dimension of a real crisis for humanity: “Today we are experiencing not just a crisis of sacred art, but a crisis of art in general of unprecedented proportions. The crisis of art for its part is a symptom of the crisis of man’s very existence. The immense growth in man’s mastery of the material world has left him blind to the questions of life’s meaning that transcend the material world. We might almost call it a blindness of the spirit” (Ratzinger, 2000, p. 130).

The “downfall” of art has taken place at the very moment that the edifice of knowledge, that was built around art, has had its cornerstone removed (that is, beauty itself) and, with this crime brought to its conclusion, the edifice has folded back upon itself and has collapsed into a thousand pieces. Many architectural parts and pieces have been continually taken from these ruins, but it has been impossible to reconstruct a new building from them, without putting back into

place the most important element, the only one capable of keeping everything together: the cornerstone, that is, beauty.

The loss of “beauty” has dismantled the entire building of which art is the expressive apex.

However, it is a process which in reality has already reached its end, but continues to reproduce itself like an echo, above all in its worst manifestations. In fact, upon examination of multiple and different realities – among which we could point out numerous Academies of Art particularly in America, but in other places too which are committed to the teaching of figurative art, beginning from the Italian Renaissance tradition; the existence of museums of figurative art such as the MEAM of Barcelona; the general preference of the contemporary public for artists such as Caravaggio... – there emerges the necessity of a return to artistic beauty that finds in natural beauty its own style, and which takes upon itself an ethical role within the aesthetic debate.

The classical definition of beauty, moreover, is supported today by various psychological and anthropological studies which confirm that there is a general tendency to recognize as beautiful and pleasing what is harmonious and proportionate.

For this reason, art can be valued in its dimension of medicine for human beings, because the typical delight that is produced by the vision of beautiful things helps the entire human person in his psychophysical dimension, and therefore produces well-being.

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