

# Beauty & Aesthetics

---

“Aesthetics”, or the study of beauty (including art, music, architecture, etc) was of ongoing concern and great interest in the Middle Ages. This interest is evidenced by the great works of art and architecture which the medieval period has contributed to civilization.

The word, “aesthetic” comes from a Greek word meaning to “perceive” or, in other words, the way something is presented to us. When we look at something, we are either repelled by it, attracted to it, or indifferent to it.

Aesthetics deals with the attraction that reality holds for us: a beautiful person, a beautiful sunset, a beautiful piece of music, and so on.

But what constitutes this beauty? What makes something beautiful?

For the medieval thinker, “beauty” is simply another way of considering what is “good.” And that which is good, has the fullness of “Being”. Being, goodness and beauty were considered “transcendentals” -- that is, present in everything, but also transcending everything we can point to. But they are not three separate things, but simply three ways of thinking about the same thing.

The medieval writer Boethius has given us one of the clearest and most succinct descriptions of the relationship between goodness and beauty. In a nutshell, that which has the fullness of being is good; and that which has the fullness of goodness is beautiful.

By way of example, consider a perfectly formed apple, shiny and succulent to look at. When an apple has the fullness of being (in other words, when it is everything an apple should be), it is appealing to the eye: desirable, because it appears “good”. A good apple is a whole apple; a whole apple is desirable.

As the apple loses its lustre, and begins to decay, it is -- at that stage -- losing its being. As it loses its being, it loses its goodness; as it loses its goodness, it loses its beauty.

Hence, beauty to the medieval mind was that which had the fullness of goodness through a fullness of being, whether physical or abstract, like justice.

**Reading:**

Read chapters [XI and XIII in the Consolation of Philosophy](#) and discuss the attitude towards beauty and life in these passages.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. Given the medieval understanding of beauty outlined here, what was the purpose of medieval art and architecture?
2. Why were the people of the Middle Ages willing to spend an entire life-time working on the building of a Cathedral, knowing that they may never see it completed?