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THE SEARCH FOR BEAUTY

BEAUTY is as much a necessity of our everyday life as bread. If our lives are to be more than mere existence, they demand something besides a weekly pay cheque, three meals a day and a roof over our heads. There must be food for the mind and the eye, the soul and the spirit.

The thought of beauty, its expression, and the love of it, have been present in the minds of men of every century. Writers and artists have spent their lives capturing and immortalizing the beautiful in words and in paint; the men of the Middle Ages made lasting monuments to beauty and the glory of God in the building of great cathedrals; ordinary people have been inspired and uplifted by beauty in their physical and spiritual lives.

As far back as 25,000 years ago, in the early stone age, paintings on the walls of caves in France and Spain show the desire of men to create, and to rise beyond the limitations of the daily struggle to keep alive. We today are also struggling in an anxious world — and if ever any people needed some power outside themselves to give relief from worry and alarms, we do. We are more fortunate than our forefathers, for we have the accumulated culture and wisdom of the ages to draw upon.

What is Beauty?

We use the word "beautiful" dozens of times a day, to describe anything from a new fashion to a sunset, but what actually is beauty?

Great thinkers have defined it in many ways, some of which we might quote. One of the best known, one that has had far-reaching influence, is the teaching of Plato: Beauty is the splendour of truth. The influence of this can be seen in the lines written by Keats, in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Molière, in one of his sparkling comedies, went so far as to recommend beauty as a civilizing force. The music master in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* asks: is it not true that war proceeds from want of concord

among men? He suggests that if all men learned music, it might be a means of keeping them in tune, and of bringing universal peace to the world.

Ruskin, in *The True and the Beautiful*, had this to say: "Any material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities, without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful." But perhaps the simplest definition of all is that given by St. Thomas Aquinas: "That which when seen pleases."

These descriptions can include everything in life, from a bride to an advertisement, from a bird-song at dawn to a radio broadcast, from a heather-covered mountain to a department store window.

We live in a world that abounds in beauty, but sometimes we are too absorbed in ourselves, our pursuits and our problems, to see the beauties. We scarcely notice the small unselfishness or the single flower; it is the grand gesture or the big bouquet that ordinarily calls forth our admiration.

But there is beauty all around us, in poetry and in paintings, in our vast forests and in our own back-gardens, in city streets and business offices and in factories, and in the lives of saints and ordinary men. To feel this beauty makes the imagination richer, and the world more interesting.

A recent editorial in a Montreal newspaper called attention to three kinds of beauty.

First there is beauty of the senses, the joy that comes from loveliness of colour, line, form and tone. A second aspect of beauty exists in the understanding of the origin and being of Nature (including human beings). This constitutes science. The third form of beauty lies in seeking the meaning of beautiful things we see, and the purpose they express. The deeper and farther we go in the search for beauty, the higher we rise beyond the physical and sensuous to the spiritual sphere.

We were all born with an eye for beauty, but when we were children we were perhaps more closely akin to the homespun beauties of the world. The softness of a kitten's fur, the brightness of an autumn leaf, the first fresh snowfall, these were all sources of wonderment and pleasure. As time went by, and sophistication set in, we lost this first fine appreciation of beauty, our eyes were not so open to the simple things which once gave us pleasure, and our outlook became not so alert and eager. We lost some of our natural eye for beauty, and with it we have lost some of our happiness too.

Beauty and Happiness

Beauty contains the seeds of happiness—that dearest wish of every human being. Happiness and beauty are closely intertwined. In our social life we try to make our surroundings, manner and conversation pleasing. We do not wish to expose the duller portions of our lives to the public eye. In the books we read, in the plays and the films we see, we all desire the happy ending, and we are slightly disappointed and “let down” if things do not “end well.” In enjoying the beautiful, we increase our own happiness.

This cultivation of love of the beautiful is not a special privilege, the preserve of the few or the possession of a caste. Beauty is ours to enjoy without money and without price—a rewarding joy within the reach of all. It has nothing to do with technical ability or wealth or high education.

We cannot all create beauty or be artists in the grand manner. Not many of us will write a great novel, paint a masterpiece or perform on the concert platform. But every one of us is capable of creating beauty in one form or another, and of appreciating it even more widely. The woman taking a well-baked loaf out of the oven, the man gathering vegetables from the garden he has carefully tended, the mother telling a story to her children, and the employer who makes a congenial working atmosphere for his employees—all of these are creating something that is beautiful. Beauty can be small, but it can never be insignificant if it adds to the enrichment and dignity of human life.

Russell Lynes, in the Centennial issue of *Harper's Magazine*, points out that before the American and French revolutions taste had been the prerogative of the few families of wealth and position. Then, as a result of the political revolutions and the Industrial Revolution, a new middle class was created, eager to enjoy the arts of leisure and the exercise of taste.

It has been truly said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Incidentally, it is comforting to know that, by some divine astigmatism, each one of us is supremely beautiful in the eyes of another! But perhaps in no other sphere is there such latitude of choice or expression of individuality as in the love of beauty. What seems beautiful to one person does not appear so to another—and here you have the yardstick of taste.

The Test of Beauty

In all the arts there has always been a controversy of opinion concerning what is beautiful. In commenting

on Turner's painting, *The Slave Ship*, Ruskin wrote that it was “perfect and immortal.” The painter Inness declared: “It's claptrap.” Thackeray was puzzled and neutral: “I don't know whether it's sublime or ridiculous.”

Eric Newton, the British critic, whose book *The Meaning of Beauty* has just been published, said some years ago that there is no real test of beauty, because beauty is the expression of the artist's aesthetic excitement. If one person shares that excitement and another does not, then the former thinks the work beautiful, and the latter thinks it ugly. When we say that there is beauty in a picture what we really mean is that that particular arrangement of colours and forms causes a state of mind *in us* which is good.

An object cannot be beautiful if it can give pleasure to nobody. A beauty to which all men are forever indifferent is a contradiction in terms. And to be beautiful, an object must communicate some idea. It must mean something to someone other than the person who created it. Not until the second quarter of the twentieth century was the essential communicability of art ever denied, says Francis H. Taylor, Director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. “Communication has been common to all the great racial traditions . . . The one and only quality denied to a work of art throughout the ages is privacy. Unless participation is allowed the spectator, it becomes a hopeless riddle and ceases to be any work of art at all.”

In our choice of the beautiful, familiarity plays a big part. We all cherish scenes and memories which “flash upon that inward eye” to strengthen and uplift us, and on these our future choices of the beautiful are based. These things of beauty, like a great affection, a clear thought, or a profound faith, are eternal possessions.

We cannot, of course, retain everything in our own personal storehouse of beauty. Something that we find shining with beauty at one time we may find later has lost interest for us; this holds true for people and paintings, books and memories. There is an interesting variation of this. As time passes, and we undergo wider and more varied experiences, we can and do return to people and to art and discover new beauties and new values which we did not see in earlier years.

An example of this is to be seen in the work of the Canadian artists who are known as the Group of Seven. When their work first appeared, about thirty years ago, it was adversely criticized in some quarters. Today the work of these artists, which includes such great names as Tom Thomson, Lawren Harris and Dr. Arthur Lismer, is considered by the majority of our people as being typically Canadian. It has captured the character and flavour of our country.

Where to Find Beauty

Where can we look for beauty? Where can we search and be sure of our reward?

Art may sometimes disappoint and confuse us, but Nature never. The effect of natural beauty is to elevate

us to a higher level. We cannot look upon a great natural scene, a serpentine river, a snow-capped mountain, or a green and gentle meadow, without feeling remote from our personal pettinesses. We cannot, in these days, and all of us would not, even if we could, follow Thoreau in choosing a hermit's life by a Walden pond, but natural beauty can play a vital part in raising our lives from the humdrum to the enjoyable.

Sometimes we are almost barbarous in our disregard of nature's beauty. The man who takes a motor trip with the sole idea of covering so many miles a day, and arrives at his destination with mingled memories of the country he has sped through, is not only ignoring a source of physical relaxation but he is rejecting balm for his eye and his spirit. To catch a record-breaking number of trout in a day is not as soul-satisfying as to enjoy the mental peace and physical joy of a clear stream and the cloistered calm of tall trees.

Even a city dweller walking quickly along a crowded street can catch some moment of natural beauty. Often a shaft of sunlight striking a church spire, a strange and interesting formation of clouds, or the delicate outline of an ancient weathered tree, can pierce our busy day with a little stab of pure delight.

One of the grandest photographs we have ever seen was of an electric-wire pole against a cloudy sky; it was entitled: "The Power and the Glory."

Art, Beauty and Life

The nearer one is to nature the more instinctive art becomes. It has been said that art is the one thing we all want, the expression of man's joy in his work. Line, form, colour and sound all play a part in widening our mental and spiritual horizons, stimulating our senses and our imagination. Art is the work of the whole spirit of man . . . it is not something extraneous to life, but the way by which vital needs are perfectly satisfied.

Before the industrial era, there was greater opportunity for creative expression within the limitations of a man's working day. The craftsman, making things painstakingly by hand, had a particular pride in his whole artistic achievement. Today, with the fragmentation of production, there is not this satisfying sense of creation.

Since many of us do not derive this full artistic satisfaction from our daily work, we must find the answer elsewhere — in the broadening of our culture in our leisure time.

An indication that this is becoming more and more usual is shown in the mounting interest and participation in adult education. Men and women of all ages gather in groups all over the country to listen to fine music, to study the great books, to learn new skills in handicraft — to learn anything, in fact, to which their tastes incline.

It is interesting to hear from McGill University that 25 per cent of the extension courses given there are cultural. Doubtless a similar proportion would be found elsewhere. This is a symbol of our desire, in this age, for what are so inadequately referred to as "the higher things in life."

It is quite true that we cannot all become outstanding in the arts. But a man is not an artist only because of what he writes or makes, but because of what he feels. To have imagination and taste, and to love the best, is an accomplishment in itself.

To live in these days is a strenuous experience, demanding more than ever before of vigour, thought and spirit. When, then, we learn to enjoy beauty as we seek it and find it, we are indulging (as it were by proxy) an instinct which in other times and other circumstances would find expression in the doing of beautiful things.

Beauty in Business

From beauty in art to beauty in business may seem a sudden transition, but beauty plays a very important part in the world of commerce. In practically all goods produced for sale there must be an appeal to the eye or ear. Advertisements, displays, shop windows and billboards, as well as the actual products themselves, concentrate on this, and so create a desire to possess the goods. Everything from automobiles to book-jackets and bacon wrappers is designed to appeal to the consumer's aesthetic sense in addition to more practical considerations.

One of the first things to attract the would-be purchaser is the packaging of an article. This was thought to be so important a part of selling goods that a survey of packaging in Canada was carried out recently by representatives of the British Board of Trade and the British Export Trade Research Organization. The main purpose of this survey was to help British manufacturers design the packaging of their products to conform to the tastes of Canadian consumers.

The survey showed that British designs were often considered old-fashioned and without eye-appeal — chiefly because of lack of colour. Canadian taste was found to prefer simplicity in design, with abstract patterns generally preferred to pictures, and full, bright colours, with blue, red and green as the most popular.

Colour in our Lives

Colour has always played a principal part in our selection of the attractive. A recent issue of *C.I.L. Oval*, entitled *World of Colour*, tells in small space the potentialities and influence of colour. In the world of nature and of science, in our homes and in our factories, in art and in the expression of emotion in literature, as pointed out by Hugh MacLennan, colour has a predominant meaning in our lives. We can use it in modern merchandising and to make our living more graceful and attractive.

We know that there are certain effects of colour that give us pleasure, and others that jar, almost like a musical discord. The development of this sensibility, and the increased availability of colour materials, has created a new art, which deals with colours as music does with sound.

Colour can create psychological changes. Hospitals choose colours that help build an atmosphere of calm and relaxation; schools and factories use colours to stimulate activity and efficiency; and industrial safety can be aided by special painting of buildings and machinery.

Patrons of Art

We can see that business needs and profits by beauty, but in this century business is playing another part also . . . that of patron of the arts.

In earlier ages, the role of patron was assumed by men of culture, position and wealth. Then in the Middle Ages the Church largely superseded the private patron. It employed the finest talent in building cathedrals and monasteries, and fostered the arts of painters, sculptors, goldsmiths and silversmiths. It was only the Church's influence and position as art patron that enabled the European artist, and thus the thread of European culture, to survive.

Later, kings like Henry VIII and Charles I were patrons of such famous artists as Hans Holbein the Younger and Van Dyck. And by the eighteenth century it was an established tradition that great and noble families should contest with one another in their art collections and in their employment of artists.

The high peak of patronage was reached in the eighteenth century; the nineteenth saw its decline, and the twentieth, with high taxes and death duties, saw its almost complete disappearance.

And here, with happy results for both artist and patron, has entered industry. Imperial Chemical Industries in Great Britain is an example of an industrial sponsor of the arts, with its informative advertisements for which it commissioned well-known artists. A series called *Portraits of an Industry*, which pictured actual workers employed by the company, was so successful that, after being used for advertising purposes, it went on a two-year tour of municipal and other art galleries throughout England and Scotland. The Canadian Pulp and Paper Association, commissioning such artists as A. J. Casson, Thoreau MacDonald and A. Y. Jackson to interpret the operations of the industry, has contributed greatly to art in Canada.

Beauty in the Home

Business can use and cultivate beauty on a large scale, but each one of us can create an atmosphere of grace and charm in the smaller environment of his

own home. We have come a long way from the over-ornamental architecture, gloomy colours and heavy hangings of the Victorian era, and the modern trend is toward light, space and colour in our surroundings.

There is a growing appreciation of utility and grace in household goods. From this has come an emphasis on functional beauty as the basic requirement for good design in articles made for everyday use. Recently the industrial designer in Canada has been given professional recognition. The Association of Canadian Industrial Designers has been formed, and, in 1948, a National Industrial Design Committee. This is made up of manufacturers, retailers, research officials, educationalists and designers, all united by an enthusiasm to co-operate in ensuring that Canadian industry will be able to meet our mounting desires for more attractive goods, and to compete abroad with the best-designed products of other countries.

Thousands of labour-saving devices are now on the market. When first invented, many of these were of intricate mechanism, cumbersome to handle, and unattractive in appearance. The industrial designer has worked toward increasing their simplicity, their ease of operation, and their beauty. These principles apply to the design of anything, from a toaster to a tractor. As Donald W. Buchanan, Secretary of the National Industrial Design Committee, says, "Good design in manufactured articles means a combination of simplicity, fine proportions and functional utility."

The Power of Beauty

It is true that we can create an atmosphere of beauty and grace with the wealth of goods that modern ingenuity and manufacturing have developed and perfected, but the very first seeds of beauty lie within ourselves.

If we cultivate the many attributes of beauty in our relationships with our families and our associates, we can achieve a happiness and a spiritual content such as no possession of material goods can give us. The understanding ear, the appreciative eye, the open mind and the generous heart are not only blessings to us who possess them, but their benefits extend to all those whose lives touch ours, no matter how slightly. By beautifying our social and domestic existence, we can all be artists in life.

We can educate ourselves intellectually and spiritually to see the maximum of beauty . . . in the world of nature, of art and of human beings. By this aesthetic education we will achieve not only that general sense of steadfastness and resource which is perhaps the kernel of happiness, but a new joy and meaning in living.

It is a fundamental truth that nothing but the good enters into the beautiful. In this largest sense of the word, beauty — the yearning for it, the search for it, and the contemplation of it — has civilized mankind.