

# How Should Christians Approach Beauty?

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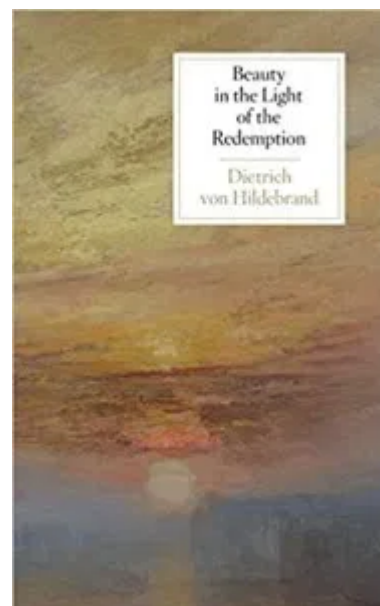


## THE IMAGINATIVE CONSERVATIVE

Although the beauty of visible and audible things presupposes the use of the senses, beauty's essence is not sensual but spiritual. It does not distract us from God; on the contrary, it elevates our minds to God.

*Beauty in the Light of the Redemption*, by Dietrich von Hildebrand (92 pages, Hildebrand Project, 2019)

The great Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977) has a fine advocate in the Hildebrand Project, which is issuing newly translated editions of his works. Hildebrand dedicated himself to applying classical philosophical insights to the problems of modernity (he was a fierce intellectual foe of Nazism and Communism), and although he tackled subjects like ethics and the philosophy of religion, he was also deeply involved in defending the value of beauty in an age when it was being gradually steamrolled out of life. *Beauty in the Light of the Redemption*, the most recent title from the Hildebrand Press, collects three of Hildebrand's extended essays on beauty and art and how they relate to the Christian life.



The first thing you notice and delight in is the lucidity of Hildebrand's style. His writing is aimed at the common man, not academics, and the slim volume is a perfect dollop of philosophy for the layman. In both style and substance, Hildebrand belongs in the company of such 20th-century thinkers as Josef Pieper, Hans von Balthasar, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and the late Roger Scruton. The philosopher's organization of his material reflects a neo-Thomist spirit, with objections laid out and answered by a resounding *Respondeo*.

Although Hildebrand does not actually define beauty in these pages, it's helpful to recall Aquinas' statement that beauty is part and parcel of the good. As he said, "The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only"; specifically, "Beauty adds to goodness a relation to the knowing power, so that good means that which pleases absolutely... while the

beautiful is something pleasant to apprehend.”[\*] This link between beauty and goodness is crucial to Hildebrand’s argument about the necessity of beauty to our lives, and its status as something far more than sense pleasure.

There are two main points about aesthetics discussed in Hildebrand’s essays. The first has to do with the status beauty has in the life of a Christian. Hildebrand admits the existence of a metaphysical or spiritual beauty—defined as an aura, a refulgence or radiance of the inner quality of virtue. But when we talk of beauty, we usually mean beauty of form, that which belongs to visible and audible things. This beauty exists preeminently in nature, but man-made works of art participate in it by imitation. The puritanical mindset holds that beautiful art and music are a distraction from following Christ, and they argue on the grounds that these examples of formal beauty are tied to the senses, therefore inferior to spiritual things. Thus, it would appear that beauty belongs to the class of dispensable things and is even an obstacle to union with Christ.

Hildebrand will have none of this. Although the beauty of visible and audible things presupposes the use of the senses, its essence is not sensual but spiritual. The objection is due to a lack of appreciation for the nature of formal beauty. Truly complex beauty, such as we grasp in the structure of the natural world or in a complex artistic work, engages the mind and discloses a world of order far above the senses. This sort of beauty does not distract us from God; on the contrary, it elevates our minds to God. It acts as a bridge from the sensual to the divine.

Some are led astray by the fact that the beauty of the human body can give rise to lust, or that beautiful sights or sounds can act as distractions. But these are incidental and do not belong to the essence of the beauty itself; they are a result of our reception of such beauty in our fallen state. The “noble, profound” world of beauty is not something superficial and cosmetic but the reflection of a higher world. Thus, St. Paul’s admonition to “seek what is above” is perfectly compatible with the search and appreciation for the beautiful in life, whether in nature or in art. Since the redemption ennobles all things in Creation, and all of human action, it follows that anything beautiful is made more profound and greater by it.

Some might argue that the value of beauty as such is nowhere proclaimed in the Gospel, and that social and moral good must be the Christian’s sole concern; such an argument shows a sore lack of imagination and insight. There are details in Jesus’ parables (the lilies of the field, the outward disposition of the person who fasts) that affirm the value of beauty; and Hildebrand sees the story of Mary of Bethany and the costly ointment as emblematic of the importance of beauty in the life of man and as a pleasing offering to God.

\* \* \*

Hildebrand's second goal is to define a correct and balanced appreciation of beauty, arguing against distorted views that have arisen in the modern world. These opposing false views can be categorized as philistinism and aestheticism. Both dance around the periphery of art, never going deeply into its essence. Of the two, aestheticism is perhaps more dangerous because it comes from within the art world itself. The aesthete is a kind of epicurean, focusing exclusively on pleasure and enjoyment. Instead of seeking transcendence, surrendering to and being lifted up by the artwork, he absorbs it as he would eat an exquisite meal. The art lover turns away from meaning and value, from the spiritual essence of the work, and clings to external and subsidiary parts of it.

One type of aestheticism is the exclusive focus on the artistic language itself. Form trumps content; the technical means used to create the work are all that count, and whether it fulfills these requirements or not determines whether it is good or not. Technique is king, as in the most abstruse serialist music, and any concern for content is viewed as emotionalism with which the serious artist need not concern himself.

Another type of aestheticism looks at art merely as an expression of the personality of the artist, or of his period of history. The Romantic cult of originality has accustomed us to think that the most important factor in art is that it conveys a vivid sense of the artist's personality, regardless of its character or content. All that matters is that the artist has "expressed himself." This again negates any possibility of transcendence; the artist remains closed in on himself. A good example of this is art commentaries that seem to assume the purpose of a painting is to tell us about the economics of colonial America or gender roles in 16th-century Spain. Such a view fails to see the timelessness of great art, its transcendent nature, and instead ties it down to the ephemeral and sociological.

Similar to this, some aesthetes overemphasize the radical separateness of art from other aspects of life. Art becomes divorced from morality and ultimately from reality—a free-floating agent unmoored from any value apart from the arbitrary will of the artist. This type of aesthete, says Hildebrand, has a fundamentally unserious attitude toward life and values. This indifference to values results in art that glorifies ugliness and depravity and becomes a blight on the civilization.

Hildebrand argues that aestheticism actually makes beauty *less* than it really is, compromises its true dignity and stature.

The proper view honors the autonomy of art yet recognizes its integration into a higher truth. In Hildebrand's account, every work of art embodies a "world of values," in which its true substance consists. The values may be aesthetic, like the harmonious proportions of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, or moral, like the sense of divine justice that pervades Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. This world of values is communicated in a distinctly artistic way; the artwork is

not merely a source of “information” or a didactic tool. Entering into the work of art, we encounter a distinctive world of beauty. The artist’s task is to open a window onto universal beauty in this particularly ordered way, using means that are exclusive to art.

Philistinism is a blindness to this uniquely aesthetic dimension of art. The failure to recognize that a work of art is a unique world unto itself leads to the expectation that art should only copy the banal reality around us. A crude, debased naturalism (such as we see in modern novels or movies) is one result of this attitude. By contrast, the true artistic disposition recognizes that art is not “reality” but a heightened form of expression, embodying distinctive values that the artist consciously chooses.

Hildebrand describes this world of values in luminescent terms such as “hovering gracefulness,” “golden, luminous beauty,” and “transfigured light.” The title of Hildebrand’s book refers to the redemption, and his references to “transfigured” or “redeemed” beauty suggest the transformations that the artist works upon the material in his piece—for example, thematic development in a symphony or character development in a story—as well as the transformative action of grace on human nature. By being infused with a higher reality of spiritual truth, ordinary artistic materials (harmonies in music, metaphors in literature, colors in painting, for example) become something more than themselves.

Thus, while having integrity and autonomy within itself, the artwork must point to something beyond itself. The beauty of man-made things is an imitation or participation in the beauty of Creation, which reflects the divine beauty. It is necessary to keep this perspective in mind, lest one deify the artwork or the artistic process, the fundamental error of aestheticism. It is not the case that art is a god, but rather that it points to God.

What is true of artworks is true of beauty itself, the essence in which every artwork participates. As Hildebrand puts it, beauty is “incorporated organically into the overall realm of values.” Like goodness, beauty is necessary for the human soul, as Aquinas recognized. Beauty is not a decoration, like icing on a cake. It is not merely a useful instrument—an allurements to make good things more attractive—but, rather, exists in its own right as a quality of inner radiance inhering in things, what Aquinas called *claritas*. This is true whether we speak of the metaphysical beauty of a virtuous soul or the beauty of the myriad sensible forms that surround us—both the original beauty of God’s creation and the participated beauty of human art.

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**Note:**

[\*] *Summa theologiae*, Part I of Second Part, Q. 27, Art. 1

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