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ARCHITECTURE AND THE BEHOLDER'S EYE

B.R. TILGHMAN

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Like so many shibboleths so easily lisped, no one seems to have a very clear idea just what it means or what its espousal commits us to. There are at least two ways this slogan can be understood. It may be no more than a reminder that in discussions of artistic and aesthetic matters that we must expect a good deal of disagreement and that such disagreements can't be settled by anything like a scientific test. But this is something that we all know and is not really very interesting. There is, however, another way to understand the expression that is important and should be talked about.

The strongest claim that can be gotten out of our platitude is that every aesthetic and artistic description and judgment of value is arbitrary and that anyone can say anything he pleases about a work of art without every having to justify what he says or fear that he may be mistaken. This view of our relation to art has certain attractions. It offers a convenient reason for dismissing the critics in the local paper with whom I disagree and for objecting to the latest proposal of the City Commission for civic improvement. It appeals to the eternal democrat in me by giving theoretical support to my desire to be in matters aesthetic as good a man as my betters. The view, however, is false and, in addition to being false, it is pernicious. It is pernicious because it destroys the possibility of any kind of rational discussion of a very important aspect of our lives and our cultural traditions. It is pernicious because it destroys the point of art training and art education: the student can be as good as his master without the arduousness of the life drawing class. I shall suggest why it is false.

Perhaps the clearest expression of the "eye of the beholder" thesis was presented by that *enfant terrible* of eighteenth century British philosophy, David Hume. In an essay entitled "Of the Standard of Taste" Hume sketched a theory, "a species of philosophy, which cuts off all hopes of success" in the attempt to establish a standard of artistic evaluation. According to this theory "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty." Hume explained all this by drawing a distinction, in his eighteenth century terminology, between *judgment* and *sentiment*. A judgment is a statement that describes things in the world and their characteristics. Judgments are either true or false. A sentiment is merely a feeling that arises in a person as a reaction to things in the world. Sentiments are neither true nor false. To say that "beauty is no quality in things themselves" is simply to say that our artistic descriptions and evaluations are not "judgments," that is, are not statements about things whose truth or falsity can be determined. Such utterances are, instead, the expression of "sentiments," that is, expressions of our

feelings, our likes and dislikes. Thus to say that a building is beautiful is not to make a statement about the building whose truth can be tested, but is more like shouting "Hurrah!" in the presence of the building. (Hume thought he could incorporate this "species of philosophy" into a theory that would establish an objective basis for aesthetic evaluation, but all that and why he failed is another story.)

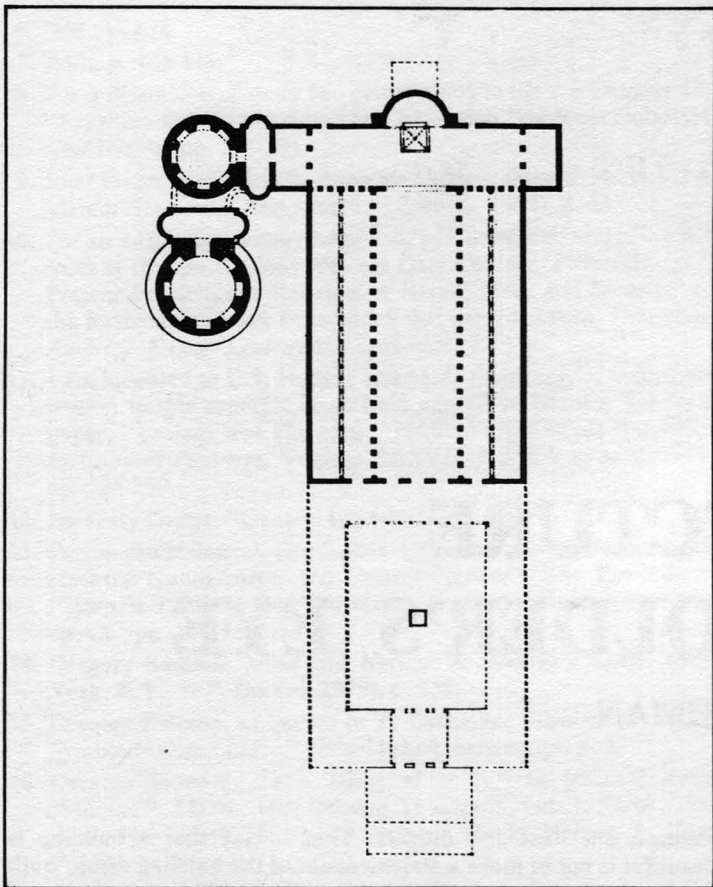
Hume's account misleadingly suggests that the word "beauty" is just about the only word that plays a role in aesthetic discussion. In fact, there is scarcely a word in our language that can't at sometime or another be pressed into doing aesthetic service. To suppose that every such word is an expression of a feeling is already to put a strain on the theory. It doesn't take into account the many different kinds of things we say.

A work of architecture, like any work of art, can have an aesthetic character and this character can differ radically from one building to another. Consider, for example, the spatial character of the Roman basilica, an architectural form used in early Christian churches, several of which still survive. A basilica consists of a long rectangular nave flanked by narrow side aisles often separated from the nave by an arcade of columns. The aisles were usually dark, drawing their light from the clerestory of the nave, and consequently did not compete for attention with the space of the nave. The arcade of columns served as a decorative addition to the nave and the rhythm of their spacing helped to emphasize the horizontal movement of the main space.

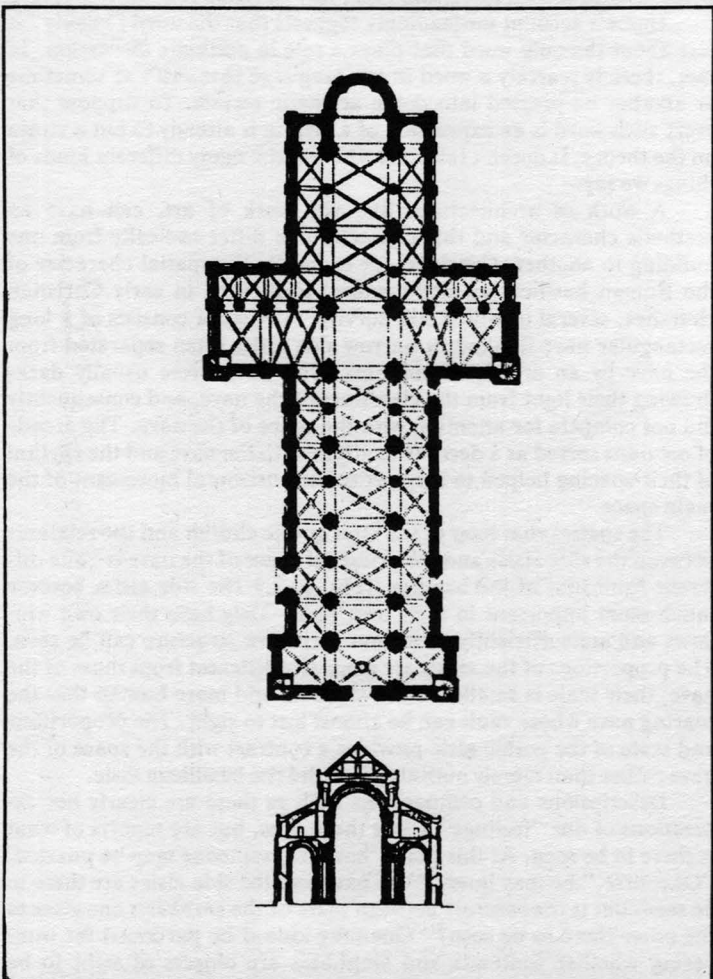
The spatial character of the later gothic church and the relations between the side aisles and the principal space of the nave is quite different from that of the basilica. (Fig. 1, 2.) The side aisles become much more important in their own right. They have their own windows and are sufficiently lit so that their own structure can be seen. The proportions of the aisles are generally different from those of the nave; their scale is smaller, more intimate and more human than the soaring nave whose vault can be almost lost to sight. The proportions and scale of the gothic aisle provides a contrast with the space of the nave rather than merely outlining it as did the basilican aisle.

Descriptions and comparisons such as these are clearly not expressions of our "feelings" about the spaces, but are reports of what is there to be seen. At this point, however, someone may be puzzled. "Of course," he may query, "the nave and the side aisles are there to be seen, but is the *contrast* between them or the *emphasis* one gives to the other there to be seen?" One may indeed be pardoned for wondering whether contrasts and emphases are objects of sight to be placed alongside columns, vaultings, and windows.

The puzzlement felt here is to be relieved by a philosophical in-



(Fig. 1) Plan of Old St. Peter's, Rome. Begun c. 333 A.D.



(Fig. 2) Durham Cathedral. Plan and Transverse Section. 1093-1130

investigation into the very idea of seeing. Seeing turns out to be a much more complex notion that we tend to think. The complexity of the notion was first pointed out by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his book, *Philosophical Investigations*, first published in 1953. Wittgenstein introduces us to some of those complexities by means of the figure which can be seen either as a duck or as a rabbit. (Fig. 3.) By means of this example we are reminded that in addition to the experience of *seeing* an object, there is also the experience of *seeing it as* this or that. This latter kind of seeing is not arbitrary; we cannot see things in just any way we please. There is, of course, more than one way to see the figure, but there are limitations. It can't be seen as a kangaroo. This idea of *seeing-as*, I believe, is very important for aesthetics and our understanding of art.

Our description of the basilican aisle emphasizing the movement of the nave is based upon how we *see* the interior space rather than upon any *feelings* or sentiments we may have. This, I suggest, is an aesthetic instance of *seeing-as*; we see the aisle as emphasizing the horizontal character of the nave. If I am right about this, then one of the most important tasks of both architectural education and architectural criticism is to teach people what to look for in works of architecture and how to see what there is to be seen. Architectural beauties are not in the eye of the beholder, but are there for the beholder's eye to see.

I shall close by begging the reader's pardon for presenting an over-simplified—and very likely misleading—account of what is really a frighteningly tangled business. I have not, for example, said anything about why empirical psychology is not really relevant to the problems of aesthetics. The attempt to understand the nature of visual perception is one of the most difficult, and at the same time exciting, projects in contemporary philosophical aesthetics.

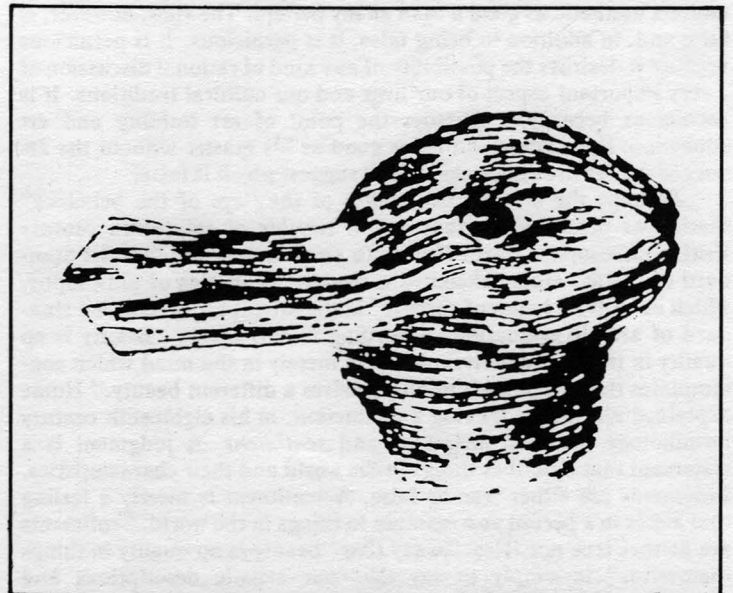
Suggested further reading;

Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, Methuen (1974).

_____, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, Princeton (1979).

B.R. Tilghman, *The Expression of Emotion in the Visual Arts*, Nijhoff (1970).

B.R. Tilghman was born in St. Louis, Missouri. He received his B.A. in 1950 and his M.A. in 1954 from Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri. In 1959 he received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Washington. Prof. Tilghman is head of the Philosophy Department in the College of Arts and Sciences, Kansas State University and has previously taught at: Reed College, Portland, Oregon, Western State College of Colorado, and at the University of Wyoming. Prof. Tilghman's interests are Wittgenstein and the philosophy of aesthetics. Currently he is teaching a Philosophy of Art class and after a year's leave of absence plans on offering a course entitled, *The Philosophy of Architecture*.



(Fig. 3) The Duck-Rabbit Illusion, depending on how one cares to interpret the figure.