

Spring 2021

## How Fashion Teaches Philosophy about Beauty?

Yuxuan Zhang  
Bard College, yz6552@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2021](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2021)

 Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Zhang, Yuxuan, "How Fashion Teaches Philosophy about Beauty?" (2021). *Senior Projects Spring 2021*. 232.

[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2021/232](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2021/232)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2021 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

# How Fashion Teaches Philosophy about Beauty?

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Yuxuan Zhang

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021



## **Dedication**

This paper is dedicated to my life at Bard College. Without coming to Bard to study, I would never develop so many questions and thoughts on the idea of beauty. Beauty would be an eternal standard and restriction for me if I did not study philosophy at Bard. Philosophy gives me a chance to rethink my beliefs and thoughts, and Bard gives me a perfect environment to investigate my philosophical thoughts.



## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor Garry Hagberg. Although we could not meet face to face for my whole senior academic year, he helped me make it through with our online meetings. The time difference between Beijing and New York was really an obstacle for both of us to find an appropriate time to meet weekly, but he generously used the time beyond normal office hours to make the meetings happen. His guidance enabled me to link what I have learned and to find more thoughts from the old knowledge. His patience and encouragement reduced my stress and anxiety for writing this project. Thank you so much.

I would also like to thank my friends Beibei, Wandi, Lixuan, and Shuang, for being so supportive and insightful, helping me gain so many interesting thoughts and understanding me intellectually and spiritually.

Also Joyce, Jiaying, Sabrina, and Pendle for providing aesthetic inspiration.

And to David Sytkowski, my advisor in music. His guidance, patience, and passion for music helped me perceive the beauty of music to a further extent. This profound influence would stay with me forever.

And Susan Blake, my first advisor in philosophy at Bard. Without her encouragement and academic guidance, I would not step in the realm of philosophy with passion and curiosity.

I feel very lucky to have had you as my teachers and friends.



## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	<b>1</b>
Section 1. Plato's Essentialistic View	<b>4</b>
Section 2. Aristotle on beauty and its relationship with the particulars	<b>10</b>
Section 3. Hutcheson on the Internal Senses	<b>17</b>
Section 4. Late Twentieth Century Fashion Designs	<b>26</b>
Section 5. Wittgenstein Against Essentialism	<b>38</b>
Section 6. Kawakubo challenging the conventional idea of beauty	<b>58</b>
Section 7. Wittgenstein's Thread & Fibre Analogy	<b>69</b>
Conclusion	<b>77</b>
Bibliography	<b>86</b>



## Introduction

In 1981, a Japanese designer gave her debut of the first collections in Paris. That was the first time that an “eastern” fashion designer brought her aesthetic into the fashion world that was dominated by the “western”. Although the designer does not think that her work speaks for eastern Asia aesthetics, the entry of her design into the western dominated empire revolutionized people’s conception of fashion and beauty. The clothing she created looked bizarre to most people at that time: monochrome dark garments, oversized silhouettes that do not conform to the curves of the human body, asymmetrical shapes, and broken pieces as if ripped or burnt. It went totally in the opposite direction of the contemporary fashion trend: exquisite sewing, harmonious colors, and perfect cuts that subtly show the curve of the human body, etc. The majority of the fashion world rejected her. However, forty years later, we can see that her ideas of clothing have slipped into various fashion designs and the dairy wardrobes of many people. We see more and more people start to wear clothing with deliberately made holes, raw edges, and exaggeratingly oversized cuts. This designer is Rei Kawakubo, and her most influential brand is *Comme des Garçons*. Today she has established a distinctive label of fashion with many faithful adherents, and his aesthetics has been embraced by many new generations.

Kawakubo’s designs made people question the concept of beauty and its relationship to the human body. Does beauty, as it manifests itself in the form of clothing, must appear as exquisite embroideries, fine cuts, harmonious color, and luxury materials? While the majority of people recognize the beauty of the Eurocentric bourgeois dressing styles, it seems that the very anti-bourgeois styles are also becoming more and more prevailing. Hence, what features of the beautiful things make people feel their beauty? Is there a common feature between these designs

even though they appear to be so different? How these features “enhance” the beauty of the people who wear these dresses? What is the relation between these specific features and the concept of beauty? Moreover, if certain garments are not appealing to people’s eyes, does this mean that they are ugly? Since we have seen the prevailing styles of dressing have been changing a lot as time changes, does this mean that the standard of beauty is “cultivable”? In this way, does the definition of beauty change correspondingly to the change of the standard of beauty?

As the author of *Fashion: A Philosophy*, Lars Svendsen, says, “Clothes rewrite the body, give it a different shape and a different expression.” We see how clothing gives us a different perception of the beauty of people in the above example. Kawakubo’s radically different designs made us reconsider the features and possibilities of beauty. Since her works of design that were regarded to be ugly when first shown become a very influential brand now, it seems that ugly could transform into beauty through a certain way. However, not all ugly could evolve into beauty, it seems there are some rules that decide whether something could be beautiful. Nevertheless, in reality, it is extremely difficult to find out the explicit rules or definition of beauty. While an aesthetic judgment is made as if there are some rules restricting, beauty could manifest itself in so many different forms with different features. The beautiful things really look and sound different if we compare one with another closely.

In this article, we will discuss the possible definitions of beauty, the reason why beauty is so difficult to define, and the issues of the very act of defining beauty. In this way, we can come to a clearer view of the relationship between the idea of beauty, beautiful things, features of beauty, and the occasion of beauty. We will look at Plato’s thoughts on absolute beauty in the

*Republic* first, seeing how absolute beauty is distinguished from tangible beautiful things. Then we will take a close look at Aristotle's view on the beauty of poetic works and the process of gaining knowledge. We will see how Aristotle brings the absolute idea closer to the experience of a certain person and how his theories on beauty of poetry works could be identified in other manifestations of beauty. Later we will shift the attention to the inner aspect of beauty, reading Francis Hutcheson's passage on the Internal Sense and the feature of objects that give rise to the impression of beauty. Through some pictures of fashion design works, we will see how Hutcheson's formula of beauty could be applied to these beautiful objects and how these objects show the limitations of this formula. The last philosopher of this essay will be Wittgenstein. We will see his views on the problems existing in the action of defining words, the limitations of language, as well as the primary function of the term beauty. Rei Kawakubo's design works will be used close to the end of this paper to exemplify and extend Wittgenstein's theories.

## Section 1. Plato's Essentialistic View

In the *Republic*, Plato differentiates “many beautiful” from “the absolute beauty”. He says,

“The lovers of sounds and sights, I replied, are, as I conceive, fond of fine tones and colors and forms and all the artificial products that are made out of them, but their mind is incapable of seeing or loving absolute beauty.”<sup>1</sup>

That is, people who love beautiful things are actually fond of the manifestations of beauty, e.g. things that please the eyes and the ears. They do not necessarily know the concept of absolute beauty since what they love is merely a pleasing sense. The absolute beauty, as he explains, is the eternal and divine Form of beauty that is not accessible to the senses but the intelligence. While the many beautiful things are beautiful within a certain context, absolute beauty remains unchanging as it is about knowledge rather than an opinion. Those who could recognize the existence of absolute beauty could distinguish the difference between the idea and the object (i.e. the beautiful things) that participate in the idea. In contrast, the sensible beautiful things, as he describes, would become ugly if the given environment becomes different. For example, a pair of beautiful adult shoes would look good when worn by an adult and matched with certain garments, but it would become disproportionate if worn by a child. A chord would sound great within a certain phrase, but it would lose its magic if put in another piece of music. Hence, for Plato, the sensible beautiful is relative and temporal. It remains as an opinion and could not enter the realm of philosophy since it is not about truth and knowledge. The nonphilosophers who are

---

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 476

lovers of beautiful things are incapable of knowing absolute beauty because while beautiful things are about senses, absolute beauty is about intelligence. Just as those who see many just but do not know absolute justice, the people that love fair colors and sweet sounds do not have the true knowledge about absolute beauty. What they have toward the object that they love is merely an opinion, and an opinion, in his view, is an intermediate between knowledge and ignorance.

Therefore, absolute beauty (i.e. the notion of beauty itself) is the object that philosophers want to explore as it is more divine and eternal than the sensible beautiful things from a philosophic point of view. Although absolute beauty could manifest itself through the beautiful things which can be sensed by the organs, absolute beauty by itself could only be contemplated through the intellectual mind. As Plato says, “The many, as we say, are seen but not known, and the ideas are known but not seen.”<sup>2</sup> We see that, for Plato, just as to know what redness is, one should look at the color itself instead of a red pen or a red table, to know what beauty is one must look for absolute beauty itself. However, the idea of beauty is unlike the color red-- although redness manifests itself in a red pen, both the color red and the red pen are visible to the eyes; in comparison, the notion of absolute beauty could only be perceived and inspected by the mind.

On the other hand, how could we know anything about beauty if we do not use our senses? It seems that absolute beauty, although existing independently from the organic senses, must derive from the sensory experience of the tangible things. To see a beautiful painting we use our eyes, to hear a beautiful piece of music we use our ears, and it is through these beautiful pieces and paintings that touch us and shed our tears, we come to understand what an object that could arouse a sense of beauty inside us is like. A vague feeling of the notion of beauty is

---

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 507

formed, but on the other hand, it is difficult to say what exactly the notion by itself is if discussing without the sensory experience.

It seems that Plato has a mixed feeling of the role of sense in the formation of the concept of beauty. On the one hand, he negates the possibility of accessing absolute beauty through various senses since the tangible beautiful things are relative and changing. Remaining in the realm of sensory experience would never render the ideal about the form of beauty. On the other hand, he sees that the concept of beauty does not come out of nowhere; between the absolute idea and the sensory experience of beautiful things, there seems to be something that connects them.

Plato admits the role of senses in the process of knowing the idea of beauty, and he explains this connection by an essentialistic view. He says,

“...there is an absolute beauty and an absolute good, and of other things to which the term ‘many’ is applied there is an absolute; for they may be brought under a single idea, which is called the essence of each.”<sup>3</sup>

He uses the sun as a metaphor for the absolute form. The sun is not sight, but the author of sight that is recognized by sight. The eye could see things because the sun shed light on them. The soul is like the eye, it could “see” the truth when the truth is illuminated by the idea of the absolute form. In this way, just as the sun is the author of sight who is recognized by sight, the absolute form is the author of the many and is recognized by the many. We can see things in nature not only because we have sight but also because the sun sheds light on objects. Hence, the sun is not sight but begets sight. Similarly, truth is only known when it is illuminated by the idea

---

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 507

of good, and one must perceive it through intelligence, i.e. the eye of the contrast. If we only see the appearance of objects through our physical eyes, we do not access the truth. Furthermore, Plato adds that, just as the sun is not only the author of visibility in all visible things but also gives generation, nourishment, and growth to objects, good is not only the author of knowledge to all things known but of their being and essence. He emphasizes that the sun by itself is not generation but gives rise to generation, and similarly, the good is not essence but far exceeds the latter in dignity and power.

Notice that for Plato, both good and beauty are the absolute forms of “the sensible many”. Hence, just as good gives essence to all good things, beauty gives rise to the essence and beings of the many beautiful. The tangible beautiful things are reminders of absolute beauty: by seeing and hearing them, we are reminded of the existence of their absolute form, which by itself cannot be sensed by any means. In other words, absolute beauty is like a mathematical fact: purely abstract and one can never access it through senses.

Now we have the ideal absolute beauty and the sensible beautiful things; the former is known but not seen, and the latter is seen but not known. In this way, it seems that Plato would agree that everything beautiful shares a single essence that is the cause of them being beautiful. Without that essence, the beautiful thing would lose its beauty. Hence, it seems that the concept of beauty could be detached from its sensible manifestations since it by itself gives the beautiful things the essence. If a gorgeous dress looks beautiful, Plato would say that it is because the dress possesses the essence of beauty, and this essence is exactly the same thing as that that makes a piece of Schubert’s serenade beautiful. The same essence could be applied to natural splendor, an impressionism painting, a short poem, a young girl..... In this way, the platonic

concept of beauty provides a model in which the abstract notion of beauty is separated from beautiful things. The absolute beauty could be detached from the things on which it manifests itself, and the philosophic question that he makes about beauty would be “what is absolute beauty” or “what is it that makes every beautiful thing beautiful”, instead of “what are the things that are beautiful”.

On the other hand, if we recall our experience of knowing the idea of beauty and being drawn to beauty naturally, it seems that the former comes later than the latter. In other words, the cognition of the absolute form does not come before the experience of seeing and hearing the tangible beautiful things. That is, one is not born with the comprehension of this notion and finds beautiful things by identifying the essence of beauty in them. A three-year-old child might be drawn by the beauty of a rainbow or a flower, but it is not that she finds that they bear the essence of beauty and then becomes drawn by these objects. The child might not even know what the concept of beauty is, but she is drawn by the flower’s beauty in a similar way just as those who are conscious of the platonic conception of beauty. In this way, it seems that the platonic essentialistic view of beauty does not fill in the gap between the form of beauty and its sensible manifestations. Our experience seems to indicate that the conception of beauty rises after having seen and heard beautiful things, and the process of the cognition of the concept of beauty seems to be gradual rather than immediate. If true beauty, as Plato argues, is a superior absolute form that exists as an idea, then it seems that such an idea is not “implanted” in everyone’s mind at first hand. While a scholar could explain the beauty of a Greek tragedy by analyzing the overall structure, the plot, and the scale of the drama, a three-year-old child who is drawn by the beautiful flowers would not be able to “see” such beauty in the tragedy; neither



could she identify the common properties of beauty in tragedy according to her experience of seeing beautiful flowers. Hence, the process of gaining experience of seeing and studying various beautiful things seems to be necessary for the comprehension of beauty as a general abstract idea. Without paying attention to particular cases such as a beautiful rainbow, a beautiful song, a beautiful work of art, etc., it is almost impossible to form a platonic concept of beauty.

## Section 2. Aristotle on beauty and its relationship with the particulars

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that the general idea of something comes from particular experiences. In the accumulation of the particular cases, the general concept of a certain thing is gradually formed. Moreover, he also acknowledges the role of sensations in the cognition of beauty. Unlike Plato that despises particular cases and various sensations that link beautiful objects and people, Aristotle gives credit to sensations and argues about their importance in the perception of beauty. He says,

“Any beautiful object, whether a living organism or any other entity composed of parts, must not only possess those parts in proper order, but its magnitude also should not be arbitrary; beauty consists in magnitude as well as order.”<sup>4</sup>

Magnitude, as Aristotle explains, is a certain scale that can be readily taken in at one view. If the magnitude of a certain object is too large, the observer could not grasp the object at one time, and therefore the sense of unity and wholeness of the object would be lost. In other words, the observer would not be able to comprehend the object in one time if the object is beyond the perception limit. For example, if a piece of music is so long that it would take one month to listen to all of it, the listener would lose the general idea of the piece. They might forget what the melody, in the beginning, sounds like when they get to half of the piece, and hence the rest of the piece might lose the connection with the first half in the minds of the listeners. That is, the whole piece would take too much effort to be apprehended as a complete and unified object, and therefore people would not find it beautiful as an entity. Beethoven’s Symphony No.9 is much longer than the symphonies before his time, but it is of a *certain* scale that the audience would be

---

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 51a

able to grasp and regard it as an entity rather than scattered music phrases and motives. Although the time duration of this symphony is relatively longer, the audience still could perceive it as a unified object and see the inner relationship between the beginning, development, and ending. Thus, it could be perceived as beautiful only if it fits the perception limit. On the other hand, according to Aristotle, if the object is too small, the duration of perceiving time would be too short, and the observers would become confused because they could not even see what the object is like before it finishes presenting itself. Examples could be drawn from objects that are just too small or short that people could not even see or hear. Because such objects could not even justly present themselves to people, there is no way for them to be regarded as beautiful objects. Thus, if something is beautiful, it should possess an appropriate scale that fits the limit of perception of the observers so that it is a complete object in the mind of the audience; people could then analyze and study it according to what they have seen and heard.

Furthermore, as Aristotle writes, he argues that the plots of a tragedy must be arranged in a certain rational order so that they are *unified*. The components of a work of art with smaller inner parts must not be scattered and random; they should be structured organically so that one is connected to the other and the sum of them is a unified object. Unlike philosophy, in Aristotle's view, poetry does not speak out the universal truths directly; it deals with particular individuals and particular matters. In this way, the relationship between each particular becomes very important; the sum of them has to render a sense of unity and completion so that each particular is meaningful and holds a necessary place in the whole story. Hence, a good tragedy consists of particular events with an arranged order, and this order connects the particular sequence of events with a necessary or probable relation. The particular events follow one another in a logical

and possible way. In this way, there is a universality behind the integration of the particulars. As he says,

“It is also clear from what has been said that the function of the poet is not to say what has happened, but to say the kind of thing that would happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity.”<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between the components must be probable or necessary so that one follows another in a way that could be understood; no plot of a tragedy stands out in the sequence of plots due to its absurdity or unconformity. Only with such a connection between the components, the whole object could be regarded as an entity. For example, if we have two plots: “I eat a hamburger” and “I draw a portrait of my friend”. Both plots have “I” as the protagonist, but they are not connected logically. The second does not necessarily follow the first, and the audience does not know how they are related. There are hundreds of ways to link them together, but they by themselves do not form a unified story. We need more plots in between to explain why these two are connected so that the story can be grasped as a whole. Hence, the story might go like this: I’m an art student in college; my good friend’s birthday is coming soon, but I don’t know yet what I should give him as his birthday gift. Today as I ate a hamburger in a cafeteria, I saw a cartoon figure on the wrapping paper of the hamburger. That figure immediately reminded me of that friend, so I wanted to draw a portrait of my friend in a similar outfit to the figure as his birthday gift. In this way, because of the logic that runs through the sequence of events, each plot is linked to the other. The audience could see why and how one plot follows another, and the

---

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 51a

entire story is therefore the integration of all the smaller plots. If any plot is left out, the story would become incomplete and illogical.

Therefore, although poetry does not speak out the universal truth in the way that philosophy does, it could still attain knowledge and reveal truths by showing the necessary and probable relationships between particular events. In other words, it indirectly “speaks out” the universal truth. Because of this, Aristotle thinks that poetry also has a philosophical aspect, and in this way he regards it to be superior to history. He says that poetry is different from history in that it says what would happen instead of what has happened. Because history says everything that has happened before without considering whether one event necessarily relates to the other, all of the events cannot form a *unity* as they might be fluky and disordered. In comparison, the particular events in poetry are ordered by a certain logic. This logic makes it possible for the audience to see the universal truth behind the sequence of particular events. Although a single event does not stand for the universal truth, the arrangement of the events that make each event’s position necessary, and this necessity is what is in accordance with philosophy. For example, the reason that the beginning plots are put at the beginning of the story is not random, it is because it gives context for the following plots to emerge, and there are no necessary plots prior to it that the audience must know--it by itself is sufficient to be a starting point. As we see more and more plots and the relation between these plots, we gradually comprehend the drama as a unity. Each plot makes a clear effect on the whole, and the whole is an organic entity that is made up of a lot of integral parts. By grasping the necessary relationship between each particular event, we see how things would evolve according to the necessity, and therefore attain the knowledge of the universal truth. In terms of comprehending the concept of beauty, particular cases become

important in Aristotle's view. We approach absolute beauty as we see and hear more and more beautiful flowers, sculptures, paintings, music, natural landscapes, etc. In this way, instead of holding a despised attitude to the things that can be directly sensed through our organs, Aristotle points out these tangible objects' indispensable role in the cognition of the concept of beauty.

Therefore, Aristotle responds to Plato's essentialism in two ways. The first is that Aristotle regards sensation as a necessary factor in the process of acquiring knowledge. As he points out, beauty consists of magnitude as well as order. One must utilize various senses to perceive the object in order to judge the scale and the inner order of the object. If the scale of the object is beyond the perception limit, there is no way for the observer to decide if the object is beautiful at all. The second is that Aristotle thinks that the way people acquire knowledge of beauty is by knowing the particular beautiful things first: through the accumulated experience of knowing the particulars, absolute beauty is gradually comprehended by people thereby.

Aristotle's model of acquiring knowledge is, then, a reversal of the platonic essentialism. As Plato argues that the absolute form begets the many, Aristotle points out that we must start from the particulars to attain the universal truth. Beauty, in Plato's view, is an abstract idea that stays aloof from sensible many beautiful things. The absolute form of beauty begets the essence of beauty, and the object is regarded to be beautiful with this essence. The absolute form of beauty could only be "perceived" by the mind with no aid of the organs of senses. In this way, Aristotle bridges the gap between the superior absolute form of beauty and the tangible beautiful things. He points out the necessary role of sense in the process of generating the absolute and abstract idea of beauty: seeing and hearing many objects is an indispensable process of acquiring the more general idea of beauty. The absolute form of beauty does not establish itself without the

previous experience of seeing and hearing beautiful things. It is through these sensory experiences that people come to grasp the notion of beauty.

On the other hand, despite that Aristotle argues against Plato's mode of acquiring knowledge and points out the importance of sensation in the cognition of beauty, it seems that he would agree with Plato that beauty is a kind of property that exists within all beautiful things, and that absolute beauty (or the concept of beauty, in Aristotle's words) is superior to its tangible manifestations. For both Plato and Aristotle, if a dress appears to be beautiful, it is because this dress has the property of beauty within it, and this property is the exact same thing as what makes a piece of nocturne beautiful. Because Aristotle is in agreement with Plato that there is an ultimate idea of a certain thing, i.e. knowing the truth of something, he would agree with Plato that the truth of beauty is absolute beauty that gives essence to its tangible manifestations.

However, the term "essence of beauty" seems to give us no information about the object of judgment. Recalling our experience of seeing the magnificent sunset, watching a touching tragedy, listening to a sad song, and reading a lovely poem: all of these objects arouse the idea of beauty in our minds, yet it seems that none is similar to the other. If absolute beauty endows the essence to each beautiful thing, then there must be something in common to all the beautiful things. Nevertheless, our experience seems to show that beautiful things of various kinds demonstrate different "properties" as we gain very different visual and acoustic experiences from them. As we cry for the characters in a tragedy, we are emphatic about their encounters. As we listen to a quiet serenade, something complex stirs our minds. As we see snow mountains shine under the orange light of the morning sun, a sense of sublimity and reverence is aroused..... Of course one could say "All of them are beautiful objects to me", but what does the word

“beautiful” really mean here? Although it seems that we could see the binary system of the absolute idea of beauty and its manifestations (i.e. tangible beautiful things), it turns out to be extremely difficult to define and understand what absolute beauty is without the context of beautiful objects presenting. If the word beautiful is used without the context of the object presented, the interlocutor might get confused. For example, if someone says to his friend “I see a very beautiful thing today!” The friend might ask “What is it?” If the person insists on saying “A beautiful thing—you know what a beautiful thing is”, his friend might just get confused and mad for there are so many beautiful things out there one might encounter. In this way, it seems that the word “beautiful” is a very general description, and for different objects, it implies different feelings and aesthetic experiences. The contents of various beautiful objects could be totally different yet they could all be described as “beautiful”. In other words, what Plato and Aristotle regard to be the highest and ultimate form of beauty—absolute beauty—seems merely like a name of an abstract idea that could not be articulated: you know its existence but you could hardly know what exactly it is. This inarticulability makes people question if such a common property really exists within all beautiful things since there does not seem to be any property that is shared by all the beautiful things.



### Section 3. Hutcheson on the Internal Senses

In *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, Francis Hutcheson explains the relation between the power of the mind that perceives the impression of beauty and the property in objects that gives rise to such an impression. Hutcheson first explains that all the experiences that men receive from external objects are *necessary*. He writes,

“Those Ideas which are rais’d in the Mind upon the presence of external Objects, and their acting upon our Bodys, are call’d Sensations. We find that the Mind in such Cases is passive, and has not Power directly to prevent the Perception or Idea, or to vary it at its Reception, as long as we continue our Bodys in a state fit to be acted upon by the external Object.”<sup>6</sup>

No matter how much the will wants to alter the experience according to the preferential or logical decision, the sensory experience remains the same. The experience is eventually passive and immediate regardless of willpower and logic. Whatever pain or pleasure is occasioned by the object, the mind could only passively *receive* such information. Hutcheson writes that such a phenomenon is “natural” because things naturally please or displease people no matter how we want them to be. A harmonious chord simply pleases our ears more than a dissonant chord (and this is also why we call them harmonious or dissonant); our eyes find more comfort in soft and relatively low saturated colors instead of colors of strong contrast and saturation. Even if someone might want to push themselves to not dislike a kind of stinky herb for the sake of taking herbal medicine, the scent still causes discomfort when first smelled. Thus, the sensory

---

<sup>6</sup> Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas Of Beauty and Virtue*, p.2

experience and the corresponding like/dislike are inevitable and immediate, it does not change according to volition.

In this way, Hutcheson brings in the analogy of aesthetic experience and sensory experience. He contends that both the experience of organs and the experience of beauty are necessary and immediate. Just as the tangible objects affect our organs of sense and give various sensory experiences, the less tangible objects could also “manipulate” our less-known sense--what he calls the *Internal Sense*. He says,

“It is plain from Experience, that many Men have in the common meaning, the Sense of Seeing and Hearing perfect enough; they perceive all the simple Ideas separately.....they distinguish them from each other, such as one Colour from another, either quite different, or the stronger or fainter of the same Colour.....they can tell in separate Notes, the higher, lower, sharper or flatter, when separately sounded; in Figures they discern the Length, Breadth, Wideness of each Line, Surface, Angle; and may be as capable of hearing and seeing at great distances as any men whatsoever: And yet perhaps they shall find no Pleasure in Musical Compositions, in Painting, Architecture, natural Landskip; or but a very weak one in comparison of what others enjoy from the same Objects.”<sup>7</sup>

If beauty is *perceived* by people, there must be some power of perception that receives the idea of beauty in objects. The receiver of beauty must also have some special capacity in order to perceive beauty. One immediately receives aesthetic comfort or discomfort within a certain object, and this experience could not be changed by one’s knowledge or willpower. If we

---

<sup>7</sup> Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, p.23

recall our experience of “making” a judgment of beauty, it indeed seems that our volition does not intervene in the judgment. A beautiful flower and a colored cloud naturally please us, a house with rectangular windows naturally satisfies us more compared to one with trapezoid windows, and a peaceful and glittering lake also brings more comfort than a roaring sea beneath the storm..... We could suspect such an aesthetic response and question its causation, but merely trying to alter such a response is ineffective to what we perceive from these objects. Hence, Hutcheson argues, the aesthetic experience is similar to the sensory experience in that it is necessary and immediate: it does not change according to the will of people.

Unlike Plato and Aristotle that focus on the objective aspect of beauty, concerning the essence and the abstract idea of beauty, Hutcheson shifts the attention to the internal side. He argues that the perception of beauty is a two-way process: it requires not only the objects possessing certain properties that could occasion ideas of beauty in the mind of the beholders but also a power of perception for the perceiver so that the idea of beauty could be aroused by certain properties. In other words, the mind must be able to *perceive* beauty to detect beauty within the beautiful objects. Even though some people can have great sight and hearing, this does not necessarily mean that they can “see” and “hear” as much beauty within a painting and a piece of classical music as a real art lover. Hence, Hutcheson contends that the Internal Sense is distinct from the senses of organs (i.e.. sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste) that we are familiar with. It relies on the capacity of the mind and would “resonate” with the beautiful objects so that the mind beholder would sense the beauty of the objects. He adds,

“Had we no such Sense of Beauty and Harmony; Houses, Gardens, Dress, Equipage, might have been recommended to us as convenient, fruitful, warm, easy; but never as

beautiful: And in Faces I see nothing which could please us, but Liveliness of Colour, and Smoothness of Surface...”<sup>8</sup>

In this way, Hutcheson points out the vital aspect of beauty: it not only depends on the features and appearance of objectivity, but it also relies on the capacity of the mind that receives the impressions of beauty. Without such a Sense that allows people to be moved by certain properties of beautiful objects, men would not even be able to have the idea of beauty and sense it within objects. Although the perception of beauty starts from seeing or hearing tangible objects, this does not mean that the perceptual capacity of beauty could be reduced to bodily sensations: good senses of organs would not directly lead to good senses of beauty. The power of receiving the impressions of beauty and harmony thus is a prerequisite for the mind to “see” and “hear” beauty in the external objects. Therefore, Hutcheson brings the understanding of beauty a big step closer to the mind based on Aristotle’s view. While Aristotle argues that the very idea of beauty is grasped gradually from particular beautiful things, Hutcheson asserts that the mind must possess a special sense so that beauty could be taken in by the beholder. If beautiful things, as Plato argues, is beautiful because they share the essence of beauty that is endowed by absolute beauty--the abstract and ultimate form of beauty, then Hutcheson argues back reasonably that the mind must also be able to respond to such essence to have beauty be comprehended by the beholder. In other words, Hutcheson seems to say that even though the idea of absolute beauty could be something abstract and exclusive to intelligence, what really touches people and stirs the mind is actually the tangible objects themselves. Instead of responding to the abstract idea of absolute beauty when making an aesthetic judgment, the reaction to beautiful things is actually

---

<sup>8</sup> Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, p.26

the response of the Internal Sense that is aroused by the impressions of beauty and harmony. Hutcheson seems to alert people that we must also pay attention to the perceptual aspect of beauty if we want to understand beauty: there is not only the “presenting” side but also the “receiving” side. Just as Auguste Rodin’s famous saying goes: “Beauty is everywhere. It is not that she is lacking to our eyes, but our eyes which fail to perceive her.” The mind must possess a certain perceptual power in order to detect beauty within objects, otherwise, people would remain indifferent to beautiful and ugly things despite the sensory experience they provide.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that, while Plato contends that absolute beauty is exclusive to intelligence, negating the possibility of accessing absolute beauty through various senses, Hutcheson argues that the increase of knowledge would by no means lead to the perception of the beauty of a certain object; one can know and study the properties of an object, but this knowledge does not increase the perception of the beauty of the object. As he says,

“This superior power of perception is justly called a Sense, because of its Affinity to the other Senses in this, that the Pleasure does not arise from any Knowledge of Principles, Proportions, Causes, or of the Usefulness of the Object; but strikes us at first with the Idea of Beauty: nor does the most accurate Knowledge increase this Pleasure of Beauty, however it may super-add a distinct rational Pleasure from prospects of Advantage, or from the Increase of Knowledge.”<sup>9</sup>

No matter how the Internal Sense is different from the senses of organs, it is still a *sense* and remains ineffective to the intelligence and knowledge. This explains why a poet, who does not have as much knowledge of a tree and a flower as a scientist, could “see” so much beauty within

---

<sup>9</sup> Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, p.25

the natural object and compose a poem for it. Just as knowledge would not add up to the senses of organs, e.g. knowing what the peacock's feather looks like in detail would not help one see a peacock in distance better, the Internal Sense, like sight, would not be affected by knowledge of objects either.

In this way, Hutcheson fills the gap between intelligence and sensations as well as their corresponding concepts--absolute beauty and tangible beautiful things. While agreeing with Plato that beauty is not accessible to mere senses of organs, Hutcheson points out that it is not accessible to intelligence either. By contemplating upon a certain object or studying more about it would not help one perceive its beauty better.

Hutcheson thus reasonably proceeds to his discussion on the occasion of ideas of beauty and harmony, that is, what quality in the objects gives rise to such ideas. He directly proclaims that the idea of beauty in the object is raised by *a compound ratio of Uniformity amidst Variety*. He says, "...what we call Beautiful in Objects, to speak in the Mathematical Style, seems to be in a compound Ratio of Uniformity and Variety: so that where the Uniformity of Bodies is equal, the Beauty is as the Variety; and where the Variety is equal, the Beauty is as the Uniformity."<sup>10</sup> He then explains this "formula" in two ways. First, the Variety increases the Beauty in equal Uniformity. For example, in the universe, the uniformity is the immense dark empty space; the beauty of the universe increases as stars and galaxies of different colors scattered around the empty space. Second, Hutcheson adds, the greater Uniformity increases the Beauty amidst equal Variety. The movement of tides is a good instance here. We see waves of different shapes, speeds, sizes on the ocean; none is the same as the other, yet they all move toward the same

---

<sup>10</sup> Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, p.29

direction and there is a general sense of uniform rhythm amidst these different movements. So, despite that we can never see waves moving in the same size and shape, we see their beauty through the more general uniform rhythm behind such a variety. If we recall our experience of seeing the movement of streams, wind (as it manifests itself on trees), bonfire, clouds, blooming flowers, etc., it seems that these natural objects that give an impression of beauty and harmony all display a kind of Uniformity amidst Variety in their appearances and movements. On the one hand, if all flowers and trees look the same, and if all the stars in the universe line up neatly, nature would be too boring and lifeless. On the other hand, imagining seeing a field of flowers with too many colors and are of bizarrely different sizes and shapes, harmony and beauty would not be sensed. In this way, the formula of beauty that Hutcheson brings in seems to be quite compelling: too much uniform is dull and lifeless, and yet too much variety would disturb our eyes. Hence, the formula Uniformity amidst Variety is what incites the Internal Sense and occasions the idea of beauty and harmony. While the external senses perceive the physical properties of objects (e.g. coldness, softness, smell, etc.), the Internal sense perceives a more complex relationship between these properties and reveals their order and arrangement to the mind. This sense allows people to find harmony and beauty from the complex and variegated sensory experience.

Therefore, as Hutcheson writes in the previous passage,

“The only Pleasure of Sense, which our Philosophers seem to consider, is that which accompanys the simple Ideas of Sensation: But there are vastly greater Pleasures in those complex Ideas of Objects, which obtain the Names of Beautiful, Regular, Harmonious. Thus every one acknowledges he is more delighted with a fine Face, a

just Picture, than with the View of any one Colour, were it as strong and lively as possible”<sup>11</sup>

The Internal Sense holds two features according to him. First, what incites the idea of beauty is a rather complex and abstract inner relation between the properties of a certain object; as the mind extract the complex inner relations into a more ordered overall perception--Uniformity amidst Variety, the Internal Sense is incited, and it links people and the objects together through the idea of beauty and harmony thereafter. Second, the idea of beauty and harmony is immediate and necessary, it strikes the mind directly without the beholder’s intelligent intervene. Whatever volition or decision could not impact the aesthetic experience one receives. Therefore, we come to see that the Internal Sense is both internal and “sensory”. It is different from the external senses in a way that it perceives a higher relation between the properties of external objects, yet it is also a sense that preferential and logical decision remains ineffective to it.

Regarding the inner relation between the properties of the object, it might be reminiscent of Aristotle’s writing on magnitude and order. Like Hutcheson, Aristotle also points out that there must be some common features of all beautiful things, and such features are about the inner relation of the components of the object. If the object is an organic entity that is made up of many integral parts that are arranged by a necessary logical sequence, the object is a beautiful one. However, Hutcheson extends this view to a more abstract and comprehensive level. On the one hand, he proceeds Aristotle’s discussion on the external side, suggesting that the external objects must possess certain qualities so that they can arouse the aesthetic response within people. On the other hand, Hutcheson brings forward that beauty is not knowledge that could be

---

<sup>11</sup> Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, p.22



learnt through accumulative experience. It resides in the connection between the external objects and the Internal Sense. According to him, the aesthetic experience is eventually a response of the Internal Sense to the objects that are capable of inciting the Internal Sense.

If we take a look at fashion, a media of beautiful garments where the concept of beauty manifests itself in dramatically different ways, we might be able to understand Hutcheson's formula Uniformity amidst Variety better. Although clothing is essentially a practical thing that was invented for the sake of keeping the body warm, protecting the body from rough surfaces and insect bites, etc., it inevitably evolves into a media of showing people's cultural background, identity, social roles, and aesthetic tastes. It seems that if people did not have the Internal Sense of beauty, clothing would not evolve into so many forms and styles since very basic wraps of the body or simple suits could satisfy the essential and practical needs of human beings. As there are so many different styles and patterns of garments across ages and cultures, what was accepted to be beautiful and charming appears to be radically different. Not to mention the difference between the medieval Catholic clothing and the traditional clothing of Japanese women, if we only look at the late twentieth century's fashion designs in France, we could find that the idea of beauty could appear to be so different on various garments. It seems that these different manifestations of beauty on clothing demonstrate Uniformity amidst Variety in a subtle way.

#### Section 4. Late Twentieth Century Fashion Designs



This is a photo from Christian Dior 1998 Spring Couture Collection by John Galliano. The model's slightly tanned skin and the monochrome ivory of the dress contrasts with each other, displaying a visual harmony as both of them display a warm tone. The skirt naturally drapes at one side, creating a beautiful shape. This soft texture contrasts with the vest's more firm material, which enables it to remain in a relatively straighter cut, portraying the shape of the model's upper body. The combination of the upper body's slim cut and the lower body's draped silhouette makes the whole look not too bulky or too slender. The silver heels are also very subtle. It is beautiful by itself, but it does not grab too much attention so that it forms a

harmonious relationship with the other components of the whole look. One could imagine that if the model wears a pair of bright yellow or purple heels (which could be beautiful by themselves too), the sense of harmony would not manifest itself on this look. Moreover, the proportion between the hat and the waist displays a geometric beauty; without the large flat hat, the beauty of the waist might not appear to be this obvious.



Here is another Galliano's work for Dior in 1998. In the left photo, the first impression is the bigger upper body and the slenderer lower body with a leg half exposed from the split dress. Unlike the above one, this one has more colors and is decorated with a more complex pattern. The color of red and blue are supposed to present a big contrast to the visual experience, but Galliano lowers their saturation and adds a cold and white tone to both of them, making them rosé and silver-blue. In this way, the two colors show a sense of harmony, reducing the visual

impact of the scattered flowers. In addition, the silhouette of the robe and wide sleeves are reminiscent of the Chinese garment in the early twentieth century. In contrast, the split dress is a purely western European style. However, the two garments do not render any visual dissonance or absurdity. They seem to add radiance to each other.

The same can be said to the right photo. There are more than five colors on the garment that the model wears, but it does not create a sense of chaos or randomness--each color seems to match the other appropriately. While the robe has an apparent oriental vibe, reminiscent of Japanese kimono, the dress inside is pretty “western” regarding its color and low neckline design. Once again, this combination of eastern and western creates a new visual experience and satisfies our aesthetic eyes. The mix of colors, materials, and styles do not show a contradiction or dissonance; on the other hand, they are such a beautiful combination that one would be equally charming without the other.



Similar to Dior in Galliano's time, Elie Saab is also a fan of maximalism. This exquisite white dress comes from Elie Saab Haute Couture 2017. The main color of the dress is also white, but this one presents a totally different visual experience compared to the first ivory Dior suit. The embellishment is so finely detailed that the cloth by itself is a beautiful piece of work. The upper part of the dress is almost transparent and it seems like the embroidery is a part of the model's body. However, a white belt is placed on the waist as if it is telling people that the model is actually wearing something, balancing the beautiful illusion and reality. The ornament is not all over the dress but stays around the waistline and the sleeve, bringing people's eyes to the center of the body so that the dress does not seem to be too heavy. Below the embroidery are layered diaphanous veils, under which we can see the model's legs subtly. Moreover, the pair of

long earrings make a clever balance: it illuminates the upper body so that it does not look too blank compared to the fine embellishments in the waist area.



This is Ines de la Fressange in Chanel's runway by Karl Lagerfeld. The black coat slightly extends her shoulder, and the oversized pants makes people unable to see the shape of her legs, both adding a spice of masculinity to the whole look. However, the layered long pearl necklace and the adorned belt contrast with these muscular elements and add a sense of femininity to the look, balancing the sense of masculinity out. In addition, the bagged pants, the

slim waistline, as well as the extended shoulder line make the whole body an x-shaped look, so even though this is not a completely feminine outfit, we could still see a beautiful shape of the body. It is interesting to see that the lower edge of the coat is right near the waistline; in this way, the shape of the waistline becomes partly hidden and partly visible as the model walks. This is like telling the audience “I have a slim waist but I don’t really want to show it to you”. We could imagine that if the coat becomes longer the visual experience would be quite different. This is where the garment is functioning as a language.

Moreover, Fressange’s temperament also adds beauty to the whole look. It seems she and the clothing is a unity: the garment increases her beauty and shows her special humor while the beauty of the clothing is also presented through her. If we see the suit hung in a closet, we might not be able to grasp its beauty as much as it is on Fressange, and Fressange would not show equal charm if she just wears a t-shirt and a pair of jeans. It seems that the relationship between them is almost a necessary one. Although she can change whatever clothes she would love to wear, the photo shows a kind of inseparable relation between them to those who do not know her. We come to know her and her charm through the suit that she wears, and we also know what type of people is suitable for this garment by looking at this photo.



Last by not least, Maggie Cheung walked for Hermès by Martin Margiela in 1999. Compared to the previous garments, this one is very minimalist. The cut is by no means to emphasize the curve of the body, and there is no contrast between the silhouette of the sweater and the pants: both are quite loose. The color is simply black, although there are different levels of darkness. However, the reduction of ornamentation does not lead to a reduction in overall beauty. Although the sweater and pants might look ordinary, they seem to possess a special beauty when Cheung wears them. In other words, the combination of Cheung and the garment



seems to be a representation of leisureliness and comfort, which by themselves are the manifestation of beauty and elegance.

Looking at these examples, it seems that there is not an obvious and explicit feature that runs through all of them. Despite that each look draws our eyes by their beauty, the silhouettes, color matching, style, ornaments, and texture are just very different. It seems that there is not a set formula for a beautiful garment, e.g. a dress does not need to be voluminous, colorful, or exquisitely embellished to be beautiful, it could be *anything* according to the designer's thoughts and senses. In this way, it seems that the beauty of a dress does not lie in a single feature or a set of features, instead, it is more about the overall relation of each feature and how one contrasts or corresponds with the other. In fact, through these examples, we may find that mere words such as contrast, correspond, match, balance, etc. are too explicit and limited. They tell *something* about the garments but could not replace the visual experience of seeing the garments. Without seeing these pictures, we might not be able to seize the idea of how a kimono-like flowery robe could match a golden slip dress, and how a monochrome black sweater and black pants could be combined in a way that displays a sense of elegance and nonchalance.

On the other hand, even though one cannot extract the common features of all these beautiful garments, it appears that they please our sense of beauty *in a certain way*. The contrasts of the silhouette, the matching of colors, and the usage of embellishments and decorations are not random and capricious. We could see that if the colors are too many, if the silhouette is too voluminous or slim, or if the texture is rough and stiff, the dresses would not display equal beauty as the pictures above. That is, any little change could alter our overall perception of the beauty of these looks; each garment's color, material, embellishment, and silhouette play an

important role in the overall beauty of the piece. In this way, it seems that the design of clothing is in accordance with Aristotle's criteria of beauty: *magnitude* and *order*. The garment has to be of a certain size that suits our perception limit, and the details of the dress must obey an order so that each component is an integral part of the organic whole (i.e. the overall beauty of the dress). However, while Aristotle could explicitly point out that the order of poetry works resides in the logic and necessity of each event, it is more difficult to say what the order of a visual work is since there is not an obvious "logic" between each visual element of a dress. In other words, while we could sense "an aesthetic order" when we see a beautiful dress, it is not quite easy to specify what exactly the order is because the visual elements could not display a logical relationship with each other as the events in a tragedy do. The logic behind a sequence of events is easier to be "translated" into language whereas the "order" of various visual elements does not.

Apparently, Hutcheson has seen this limit of Aristotle's view on beauty, and the theory of Internal Sense comes in right in the place to explain what the order of the visual components of a beautiful object is. Just as he says, "...there are vastly greater Pleasures in those complex Ideas of Objects, which obtain the Names of Beautiful, Regular, Harmonious."<sup>12</sup> The pleasure of beauty comes from a higher and more complex relation between the basic features of objects, and such a relation is usually difficult to be articulated by plain words because it is more about the *sense* rather than logic and intelligence. The ivory Dior suit in the first photo is beautiful because its tone, material, and shape display a harmonious relationship with each other, and the same could be said to all the other pieces in the pictures above. What attracts us is not a simple color or a special cut of the dress but an overall arrangement of them. Each garment is beautiful not only

---

<sup>12</sup> Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, p.22

because of these simple visual elements but also because of that special relationship between these elements. While Galliano's oriental robes are quite charming, they do not go well with any other dresses in the pictures above despite that other dresses are equivalently beautiful. We could imagine that it is worn with the Chanel jacket and pants, it would look very bizarre. In other words, the pieces that are beautiful by themselves might not go well with each other if the *relationship* between them does not correspond with our Internal Sense. They must be in a special relationship so that they could occasion the idea of beauty.

Furthermore, to understand Hutcheson's argument to a further extent, it also seems that Hutcheson's compelling formula Uniformity amidst Variety could be applied to each of these designs. The most obvious examples would be Elie Saab's translucent dress and the Hermès black suits. For the Saab dress, it seems that the shape of the embroidery is quite random; it is like the shape of the vines of a certain plant: while one could find various shapes of the vines, it seems that they distribute themselves according to a certain rule that they do not look madly scattered. We could also say that while the color and material of the dress remain uniform, the embroidery, as well as the swaying skirt, renders a sense of ruleless and randomness. In this way, the dress overall conforms to Uniformity amidst Variety. Similarly, for the black Hermès suit, the overall uniformity is the color and oversized silhouette. However, the contrast between the tone of black and grey, the inverted triangular neckline of the sweater, as well as the formless empty space between the model's body and the garment contribute to the "variety" aspect of the outfit. As long as the look consists of both uniformity and variety, it could be very attractive to our eyes.

In this way, it seems that it is very difficult to explain rules of sense by language. Even if there are some terms and theories that are quite close such modes could only cast a certain light on our understanding of beauty. It is neither necessary nor sufficient condition for objects to be beautiful. In this way, one could not help but ask if there is really an explicit answer to the question “what makes things beautiful” because we have seen that to have the idea of beauty not only the external objects should possess certain qualities but also the perceiving mind should be able to detect a higher relation between these qualities of the objects. On the one hand, the higher relation seems to be so free and lawless if we recall the picture of beautiful fashion garments. It almost seems that the designers could just assemble variegated colors, forms, patterns, and cuts together and create a fashion piece. On the other hand, we clearly see that while the components of a whole look match each other so well, they could not give rise to the idea of beauty if one piece in a picture is matched with another piece in another picture. Of course one could argue that it is possible for the ivory vest in the first Dior look or the black jacket in the fifth Chanel look to match with other clothing and create different beautiful looks, but these other looks would render a totally different aesthetic experience even if the same item appeared on all of them. That is, one could take a component and utilize it to create other beautiful entities, but these other beautiful entities, despite their beauty might be equally compelling, the aesthetic experience of seeing entity A would be very different from seeing entity B. Hence, a beautiful entity is beautiful and *special* due to the relationship between its components. Like Aristotle says, each component must be an integral part of the whole, taking out any component would decrease the overall beauty of the organic whole. Therefore, it seems there are some inexplicit rules that direct our perception of beauty. Such rules are like the logic behind a sequence of

necessary events in Greek tragedy that links all events together. The logic of fashion links the silhouette, color, material, cut, etc. in a similar way, and each piece of beautiful clothing is like a complete poetry work that consists of many small integral events.

## Section 5. Wittgenstein Against Essentialism

While Aristotle and Hutcheson provide a more global view to our understanding of beauty, it seems that each particular beautiful object contains a different relationship between its components. In other words, even if we admit that it is the higher and more complex relation of the components of a certain object that gives rise to the impression of beauty, we still could not ignore each object's particularity, i.e. the *unique* relation that makes us feel something is beautiful. When a piece of music strikes us, we are impressed by the piece itself, its melodies, harmonies, rhythms, lyrics (if any), etc. The relationship between these elements is a special one, and this specialty makes this piece a unique piece. If another piece contains a totally same relationship between these elements, we might say that that piece is plagiarizing for it copies what makes this piece beautiful to that piece. Similarly, when commenting on a fashion design work, despite that the first impression of a certain piece might be "this is a beautiful dress" when explaining this first impression, we still need to bring more attention to the special features of this dress, e.g. its texture, silhouette, color matching, etc. Going back to the fashion design examples above, it seems that we must describe the details of the dress in order to give a fuller embodiment to our impression of its beauty. We say "the asymmetric drape of the skirt contrasts with the clingy vest" and "the oversized black coat and pants add a spice of masculinity that balances out the sense of femininity that comes from the layered pearl necklace and the adorned belt", to let others know what exactly makes us feel this certain dress is beautiful. Each sentence shows several features of the dress, and words such as "contrast" and "balance" tell the relationship between these features of the dress. From such words of description, one comes to know what a certain garment looks like and what makes it beautiful. However, while the

previous philosophers tend to extract a higher relationship between these features to “elaborate” the formula of beauty, it seems that no dress displays a completely same relationship with another. That is, even though Hutcheson shows the compelling formula *Uniformity amidst Variety* to explain the occasion of beauty, we still could not see how each dress manifests this rule along with their various features, neither do we know how this rule operates upon these features of the garments when looking at those photos of fashion designs. Indeed, through the Internal Sense, we could perceive a more complex pleasure within objects under the name of harmony and beauty, but the occasion of the impression seems to be very abstract and formless. Saying that this relation is the occasion of the idea of beauty gives not much information about the beautiful object.

In other words, when we comment on a certain work of fashion, we are really focusing on the individual pieces and their details. We do not think about *Uniformity amidst Variety* first and then identify features of the dress that are in accordance with this formula to make an aesthetic judgment. Indeed, if we look at *many* fashion design pieces at one time and compare their different designs, they may show a kind of uniformity amidst variety. As the colors, shapes, cuts of each garment are so different from one another, we might see a subtle uniformity amidst such various designs, and this aesthetic experience might render an impression of beauty. Nevertheless, such an impression is very insignificant compared to that when we look at the individual pieces. Hence, the comprehensive formula seems very powerless in the context of fashion designs because people really care about are the particular dresses and particular jackets. Moreover, even though we could say “There is a special relationship between the componential features of each beautiful dress, and it is this relationship that coordinates with the Internal Sense

and occasions the idea of beauty”, it seems that such a relationship is too abstract to grasp. Recalling the brief analysis of each beautiful fashion design works above, it seems that there are so many variants or derivatives of such a relationship that we almost feel guilty by calling it *a* relationship. While some features of beauty may overlap in these photos, like many outfits demonstrate a contrast between the silhouette and overall harmony of colors, there is always something new about beauty in a new photo. Although both the Chanel suit and the Hermès outfit use a lot of blacks to portray a kind of elegant and unisex style, Chanel uses many jewelry and accessories while Hermès uses just a simple black string. While the first four photos show gorgeous femininity, the last two display a more unisex or boy-like style. We could also find both maximalism and minimalism in those photos, and both are compellingly beautiful even though the features that make them beautiful are totally different. While a dress can be simple and elegant with the cut and volume displaying different characters, it can also be quite complex and colorful with visual elements from different cultures and styles. Moreover, the garment can even be beautiful in a way that it and its wearer show a unique relation as one becomes more beautiful with the accompaniment of the other..... If we look at more pictures of this kind, we may find more features of beauty in fashion designs. In one word, we can never exhaust the further explanations of the beauty of various garments. Each piece consists of different elements, and each is composed of a different arrangement of elements. Therefore, it seems that the occasion of beauty is neither a single property nor a concrete special arrangement of the components of the beautiful objects. Different beautiful things possess different features and arrangements of features for them to be beautiful. While some beautiful things have similar features that make them beautiful in common, some may not.



In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein brings a new way to think about definitions of words when he talks about the plurality of language. If we apply this mode of thinking to the definition of beauty, we might have a different view on the concept of beauty. Wittgenstein argues that, instead of having one essential common feature that works for all things under the same name, many things are “defined” by a series of overlapping similarities, where no single feature or a set of features is common to all. He says,

“Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all— but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all "language".<sup>13</sup>

He uses the word “game” as an example. He argues that it is impossible to form a clear-cut definition for game because when we use this word in different contexts it has very different meanings. We can find some common features of its meanings in card games, sports games, board games, and children’s games, but it seems that there is not a single feature that is common to them all. Although some of them share a common feature, this feature disappears when the word is used in other contexts. For example, for both card games and sports games, there is a competitive aspect involved; whereas in other contexts such as children’s games or makeup games, the meaning for competition disappears. Similarly, for children’s games and card games, there is a sense of entertainment involved, suggesting that the game players use the game as a way of entertaining themselves, and such games are meant to bring fun to people. However, in sports games, the significance of this entertaining aspect lowers much more for the athletes are

---

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, p.33

not meant to entertain themselves when they spend much energy and time to prepare for the Olympic “Games”. In this way, the definition of game is basically “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing”<sup>14</sup>. One could not find an absolute definition for it regarding how its meaning changes in these different situations. In addition, if we think about the verb of games, i.e. to play, it seems that this word also consists of various meanings with one overlap another. It could mean to participate, to perform, to compete, to have fun, etc., depending on the context. There does not seem to be any sentence or a set of features that could summarize the usages of the word.

Wittgenstein uses “family resemblances” as an analogy to the relationship between these similarities: just as members of a family that have various features that overlap and criss-cross each other, the meaning of games in different contexts also form a family. In a family, the father and the eldest son may share the features a,b, and c, the eldest son and his sister share features b,c, and d, his sister and her cousin share c, d, and e, and the cousin and her brother may share e, f, and g..... Eventually, the father and the cousin’s brother have nothing alike as the common features keep dropping out, but because of the relationship between these members of the family, people could identify them according to their features and tell that they belong to this certain family. For the word game, there is not a feature that is common to all kinds of games. On the other hand, we know what we are talking about when we use the word “game” because each usage of the word in different contexts retains certain similarities with some of the others.

Reviewing our examples of the beautiful garments above, it seems that beauty, just like games, does not have a feature that is common to its all manifestations. While some beautiful

---

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, p.32

dresses are monochrome, other ones have various colors. As embellishment and accessories are the most important factors that make one dress beautiful, many other dresses do not need any accessories or embellishment to show their glamor. Some designers use clothing to emphasize the shape of the human body, whereas some purposely avoid showing the linear aspect of the body and reveal a kind of subtle beauty within the empty space between the body and the garment, etc. In this way, the most embellished dress may have nothing in common with the most minimalism sweater, but they could appear equally beautiful to the audience. We see that these features of beauty, as well as the arrangement of features, overlap and criss-cross each other, but we cannot identify one single feature or a set of essential features that are possessed by all beautiful dresses. That is to say, in the realm of fashion designs, the aesthetic judgment is usually made based on the *particular* features or arrangement of features of the garment. Without seeing the particular piece of design, there is no way for one to know how it gives rise to the impression of beauty. Even though these beautiful dresses could be viewed as in accordance with Aristotle's criteria of beauty (i.e. magnitude and order) and Hutcheson's formula of beauty (i.e. Uniformity amidst Variety), it seems that identifying them with these theories are not the essential process in our understanding of their beauty: we do not know how these theories work on the pieces until we actually see these pieces. That is, the theories of beauty do not come into life without the context of usage. Only after seeing their colors, cuts, textures, and silhouettes could we perceive a higher relationship between these features, and then could we decide whether they conform to the philosophers' theories of beauty. We learn what the theories mean from each particular case because the particulars are where the general abstract ideas show their meanings.

Moreover, as it has been argued above, there is not one dress that displays a completely same relationship of its features with another, meaning that the so-called higher relationship never manifests itself in the same way. This makes us question if there is really an abstract and more complex relationship between the basic features of the clothing that could occasion the idea of beauty because we could never know what it means until we see the tangible manifestations of it, and these theories work very differently on each particular garment. Hence, it seems that saying “there is such a relationship within this dress” is no different from saying that “this is a beautiful dress” because both sentences convey a meaning that the dress gives rise to an impression of beauty; it is just that they express in a different way. Hence, why do we not just directly say the latter? Instead of extracting an abstract formula that seems to work on every beautiful object while not being able to see how the formula works on each individual before seeing the individual pieces, focusing on the specificity of each individual seems to be a more explicit and direct way of “explaining” its beauty because these theories work very differently in each particular cases. Only knowing that a certain dress conforms to the theories does not give much information about this certain dress. To comprehend it we still need to give a full-blooded consideration of the particular objects.

In this way, it seems even if it is possible to give a very comprehensive theory of beauty and identify its manifestations on tangible beautiful things, the theory is just too abstract and general. While each particular beautiful thing could be very different and special, an abstract formula of beauty turns out to be quite inadequate for the more concrete beauty seems to reside in the particular features and the special arrangement of features of a certain beautiful thing. Therefore, the conception of beauty might just be a large family with members of various

features overlapping and criss-crossing each other. While some members share certain features, some of the features may drop out in the similarity between other members. The beautiful fashion designs above are very specific examples that show how the features of beauty may overlap and drop out, and it seems that the same is true to beauty in other realms. If we think about music, painting, sculpture, movie, and natural landscape, it seems that we could find examples of so many different kinds within each realm. In music, we have medieval church music, Baroque's decorative pieces, lyrical songs in the Romantic period, blues, tango, and contemporary popular music, for example. Regarding the difference in harmony, rhythm, chord progression, the atmosphere between each genre, it is almost impossible to form an all-inclusive and concrete formula to define beautiful music.

Hence, Wittgenstein offers a significantly different perspective to the concept of beauty, one that is radically against the platonic essentialism. While Plato prompts people to look for the essence of beauty, contending that absolute beauty is much superior to the tangible beautiful things and endows essence to the latter, Wittgenstein negates such a hierarchical relationship and points out the perplexity of the concept of beauty, suggesting that there is just not such an *essential* quality that is shared by all beautiful things. The occasion of the idea of beauty and harmony might not be a single property or a set of properties that are shared by all beautiful things; instead, it could be a family of various features that might or might not appear on each beautiful thing.

In the *Blue and Brown Books*, Wittgenstein criticizes this kind of essentialistic mode to a further extent. He contends that our craving for generality deeply roots in our way of thinking and prevents us from proceeding into further philosophical discussions. He says,

“The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation; for it has not only led to no result, but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him to understand the usage of the general term.”<sup>15</sup>

Such a craving makes people hold a contemptuous attitude toward particular cases. People tend to think that the particulars are incomplete, insignificant, and unrepresentative because a philosophical argument is usually about the general truth, and such a truth should be applicable to all particular cases of its kind. If a case could not reveal the most comprehensive and compelling aspect of a certain truth, then it fails to lead to a certain superlative and unitary statement and should not be given much attention because it does not contribute to a philosophical conclusion. Besides, people’s preoccupation with the scientific method also leads to this craving for generality. Because science could explain a lot of phenomena by certain formulas or a series of arithmetic operation, people become fond of this reductional method of explanation, i.e. “reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws”<sup>16</sup> for it seems that viewing these phenomena through the smallest possible natural laws help people see the “essence” of the phenomena. Hence, readers of philosophy and some philosophers think that a) everything could be explained in such a reductional way, and b) philosophy should explain things in such a reductional way. If a “why” could not be answered with a “cause” by a scientific method, then it would create discomfort to those that ask the question.

---

<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p.19

<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p.18

Nevertheless, as Wittgenstein suggests, this tendency is the real origin of metaphysics and leads philosophers into abysmal darkness. A lot of questions are raised only because people can add a “why” to an ordinary statement. It is a strange thing that while we do not learn and use languages according to strict rules, we want very specific and exclusive rules of language in the discussion of philosophy—we want an exact definition of a certain word although we do not use it definitively. That is to say, we use many words casually in our daily lives because a simple word could hold many different meanings in different contexts, but as soon as the context becomes a philosophical discussion, we require the meaning of these words to be absolute and restrictive. Wittgenstein warns us that a word has the meaning that is given by people. People first invent a word to describe a certain thing and then confuse themselves and ask what the meaning of the word is. In this way, we mystify the word by ourselves (e.g. what is absolute beauty?) and raise a question that could never be answered with satisfaction. There are some words with clearly defined meanings, as he writes, but there are also many words without. Because of the craving for generality and the psychology forged by the reductional method in scientific practice, we tend to think that the words without definitive meanings are defective. However, such a feature is not a defect; we feel discomfort about their undefinable meanings only because they do not satisfy our mentality and ways of thinking. Therefore, we keep looking for an ultimate answer to such metaphysical questions. Wittgenstein gives an analogy to such words without defined meanings. He says, “To think it is would be like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no sharp boundary.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, a meaning

---

<sup>17</sup> Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p.27

without a restrictive boundary is still a meaning; it is just that such a meaning does not satisfy our craving.

Here one might ask reasonably: “But it seems that the response to beautiful things is still a *special* one. Although the word beauty may not have an absolute meaning, it does not directly imply that our response to beautiful things is also boundless and non-restrictive. Hence it seems that we could investigate the *response* of beauty to understand the concept better.” That is, while the external aspect of beauty could not be described in a definitive way (a conventional and satisfying way), it still seems possible that the receiving aspect could be explained in such a way. Even though beautiful things are numerous, our responses to them appear to be very similar and unitary: whenever we see something beautiful, we might be touched, we shed tears for it, and we want to extol the object if it resonates with us strongly. Despite that there are countless things that could give rise to the impression of beauty, the response to them turns to be rather unitary and simple. Thus, instead of focusing on the objectivity of beauty, it seems that viewing the concept of beauty from the receiving side could also give us some information. Hence, maybe we could ask “What aesthetic judgments mean to people?” or “What an aesthetic judgment consists of?” to view the concept of beauty from a different perspective.

In *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Wittgenstein directly talks about the usage of the term beauty in language and how it helps us see the meaning of the term. He points out that saying something is beautiful is no different from giving a facial expression or a gesture of approval. Regarding how children learn the words “good” “fine” “great”, etc., exaggerated bodily expressions are used to help them understand that the objects that arouse these bodily reactions are of the kind that deserves their approval-- of the “good” kind. As the children get more and more familiar



with the objects as well as the words that give approval to them, they would substitute their facial expressions and gestures for words such as good and fine. In other words, it is not that the children are taught the notion of beauty first and then learn to identify things with the property of beauty. The cognition of the notion actually comes from various occasions and activities; only after having these experiences could one use descriptive language. In a similar way, the word beautiful is learned from various occasions. We start from seeing the objects that deserve our approval; we hear the word beautiful whenever these objects present. Then we gradually learn that we could use this word in substitution of certain expressions and gestures whenever we make a judgment of certain things.

It therefore seems that, unlike Plato who immediately negates the importance of tangible beautiful things and the contact with them through various sensations, Wittgenstein anchors his discussion right in the objects of beauty (i.e. what Plato calls *the many beautiful things*) and our linguistic relation with them, suggesting that the real important thing in a judgment of beauty is the particular tangible objects themselves. He says,

“Language is a characteristic part of a large group of activities—talking, writing, travelling on a bus, meeting a man, etc. We are concentrating, not on the words 'good' or 'beautiful', which are entirely uncharacteristic, generally just subject and predicate ('This is beautiful'), but on the occasions on which they are said—on the enormously complicated situation in which the aesthetic expression has a place, in which the expression itself has almost a negligible place.”<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious*, p.2

Since words of approval function as a substitution for gestures of approval, they could also be replaced by the latter. In this way, when someone says “this is beautiful”, what matters in the sentence is not the meaning of the term “beautiful”; instead, the sentence mostly concerns a judgment of approval, and the word “beautiful” hardly plays any role at all in an aesthetic judgment. If we want to know more about the beautiful object we need to ask the person what it is about the object that gives him an impression of beauty. If we recall our experience of reading a music criticism, for example, it seems that the aesthetic adjectives hardly manifest themselves in such passages. Compared with saying that “This chord sounds so beautiful”, a real music lover might say “The transition from the half-diminished seventh chord to the tonic is very smooth and satisfying.” If one only says that the chord is beautiful, others would hardly be able to know how the chord functions and sounds like in the music passage. To know why something could generate a pleasing experience one should consult the particular features of the thing instead of focusing on the term “beautiful”. Moreover, if the satisfying tonic chord is put in a totally different phrase, it could sound dramatically different and might even cause some discomfort to the ears. That is, the beauty of this chord relies on the context and its relation to the context. Hence, when saying that “This is a beautiful chord”, one is giving approval to the chord as it is played within a specific context. Merely looking for any kind of property within the simple chord could never explain the music and its listening experience.

Therefore, Wittgenstein stresses again that the idea of beauty could not be detached from the particular beautiful objects, contending that beauty could only be cognized with the aesthetic object presenting. More importantly, unlike Plato and many other previous philosophers that focus on the concept of beauty itself, Wittgenstein suggests that the word “beautiful” has almost

no place in an aesthetic judgment. Since the judgment does not come from the identification of the determinant essence (i.e. beauty) of the object, the word beautiful functions only like a predicate or an interjection of approval. Such an adjective tells something about the object, but the “something” is very limited. If a person replaces such adjectives with interjections or exaggerated facial expressions, other people who see such a reaction could still understand the response that was made upon the object. Asking what the word beautiful means in an aesthetic judgment is like asking what it means by “good” in the sentence “The coffee tastes good.” To describe why it is good, instead of focusing on the meaning of the word good, one should talk about the aroma and the acidity of the coffee, i.e. the more specific features of the particular object. The adjective here is really just an expression of approbation; what the *good* or *beautiful* consists of needs to be further explicated according to the particular features of the object.

Moreover, Wittgenstein goes on in the lecture and points out the secondary role of descriptive language in aesthetic judgments and the primary role of sense. He adds that, just as music appreciators are drilled by harmony and a generally steady rhythm, in fashion, tailors also make their judgments upon the feeling of “correctness”. They know what a good suit would look like on each person, so when someone tries on the suit in front of them, they could easily judge if the sleeve or the shoulder line is too long or too short, too large or too narrow. Compared to those who have no idea about what a good suit is supposed to look like, the tailors have a more refined judgment about suits. Their aesthetic judgment towards various suits is more refined than ordinary people. Such commanding of the rules, as Wittgenstein suggests, comes from the accumulative learning of various rules. As people gain more experience in a certain field in which aesthetic judgments are needed, they would gradually internalize the rules they have

learned and develop a “feeling of the rules”. This feeling directs their intuition and helps them make more refined judgments. The rules could be explicitly taught or not formulated at all, and the commander of the rules could recognize and flexibly utilize them (e.g. in music a suspension note should move down a degree to resolve the dissonance) or take actions that follow these rules in an implicit way (e.g. an interior designer knows better in how to place the furniture in a beautiful way). In other words, some rules in the aesthetic judgment could be articulated by language and some could not. Those rules that could not be explicated by language remain a mere feeling of correctness, but its inarticulability does not affect how it directs composers and tailors to create beautiful pieces.

It is also important to note that, unlike Plato, Aristotle, and Hutcheson that attribute beauty as a universally accepted thing to all human beings, Wittgenstein brings out the cultural aspect of aesthetic judgments. He contends that people of different time and culture play totally different aesthetics games, and therefore it would be impossible to treat the aesthetic judgments in different cultures with the same standard. As he says,

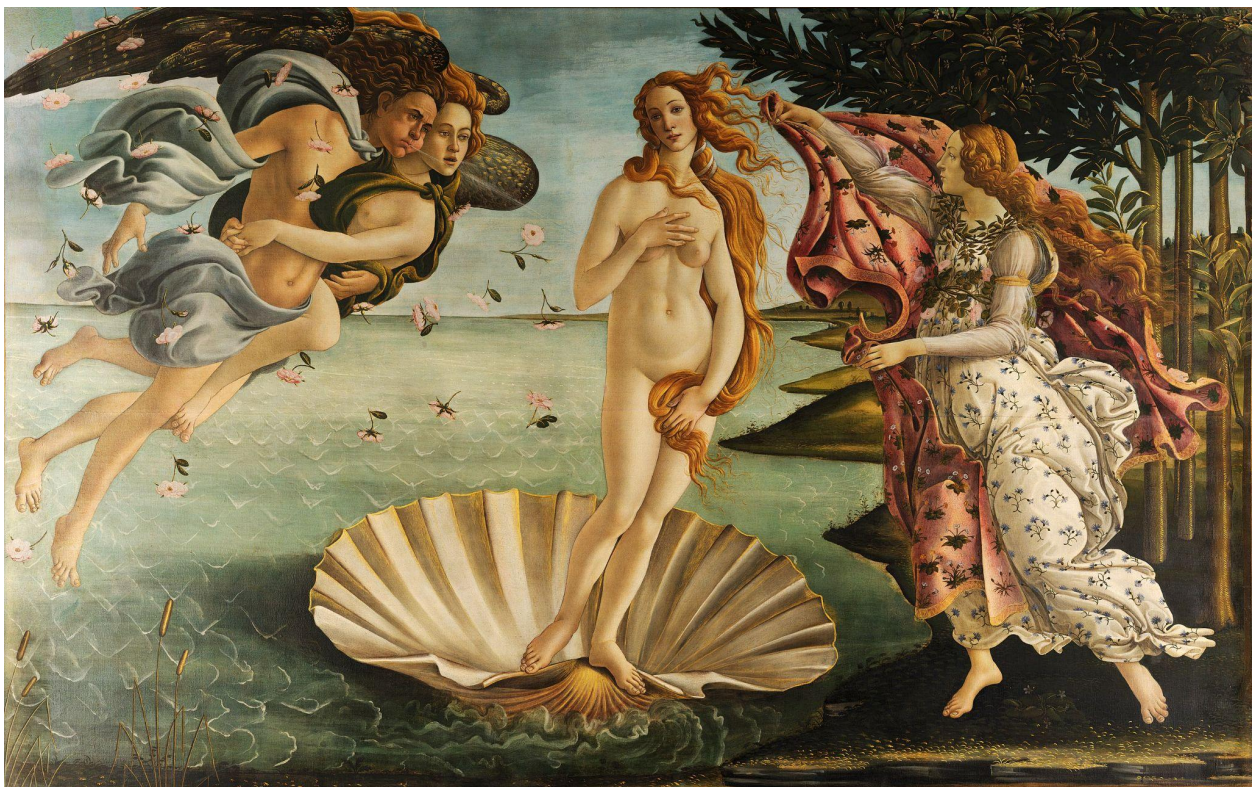
“The words we call expressions of aesthetic judgement play a very complicated role, but a very definite role, in what we call a culture of a period. To describe their use or to describe what you mean by a cultured taste, you have to describe a culture. What we now call a cultured taste perhaps didn't exist in the Middle Ages. An entirely different game is played in different ages. What belongs to a language game is a whole culture.”<sup>19</sup>

Because people in different cultures and periods of time have different rules of sense according to their living environments, experience, education, habits, etc., to describe a set of such rules in

---

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious*, p.8

full would require describing the whole culture of a certain period. In this way, it turns out to be an enormous job—one that is impossible to complete—to explicitly specify what the appreciation of certain objects consists of because we need to explain the whole climate of the culture and the time period where the appreciation lies in. Therefore, it seems that Wittgenstein negates the possibility of the existence of universally accepted beauty by saying that “the entire game is different”. For people in different cultures and eras, the rules of senses of beauty are various, and thus people in different cultures and eras would have different senses of “correctness” even regarding the same media on which beauty manifests itself. This explains why the renaissance paintings look so different from their contemporary Chinese paintings. Because the whole culture is different, the sense of correctness for beauty is quite different. We therefore see different visual expressions of beauty in ancient people’s minds.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, around the mid 1480s

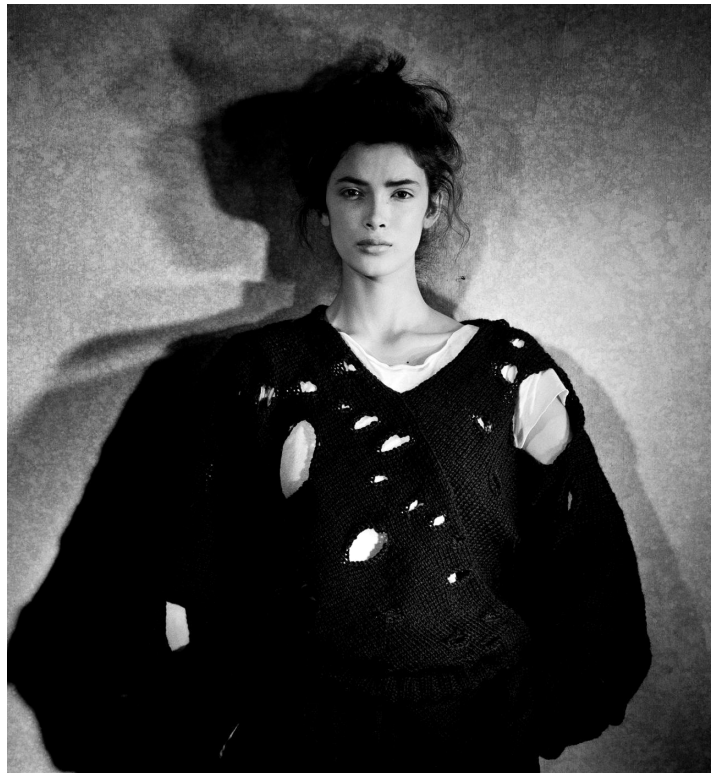


Shen Zhou, *Poetic Feeling of Fallen Flowers*, 1508

Although a lot of us can perceive the beauty of both of them today, it is unlikely that a man in the Renaissance age would give high praise to his contemporary Chinese painting. The usage of color, lightening contrast, and space, as well as the content of the paintings, mid-1480s are entirely different. A fifteenth-century Italian man might say that his contemporary Chinese paintings lack a sense of space and vigorousness because there are a lot of empty spaces in the painting; the contrast of light is also not enough, which makes the figures look very flat. Whereas the Chinese man might say that the European paintings are too colorful and realistic, which makes them unable to present a larger spirituality of the scene. Since little room for communication was given at that time, people were immersed in their own culture and aesthetic systems, and were thus unable to get into the language of beauty in other cultures.

However, looking at the history of art in a retrospective view, it seems that the rules of correctness do not remain unchanging within a certain culture. There were always some people that could “create” or “discover” new rules and finally incorporate them into the general rules of art. When some new rules were first created, they might not be accepted by the general audience, but good works of art would stay in time, expanding people’s understanding of the notion of beauty and modifying the rules of correctness. In this way, what was considered “ugly” at one time could become “beautiful”, and the family of beauty keeps expanding with certain features dropping out and certain features added in through time.

The pictures below are fashion styles of different times. Despite that both are regarded to be beautiful garments in their own aesthetic systems, they look dramatically different and one almost could not find any similarity between them. Such a difference suggests that the rules of



correctness for beauty could change significantly through time.

The first picture is the portrait of Marie Antoinette, the last queen of France. Although ordinary people at that time could not afford such luxurious garments, her taste of fashion represents an acme of the standard of beauty (as it manifests itself on the human body) at that time. Compared to the photo on the right, her dress and sleeves appear to be extremely voluminous, suggesting her power and wealth. Details are refined, and the materials demonstrate a sense of luxury and exquisiteness. The colors of the dress, blue of different degrees, gold, white, and silver (the accessories on the upper dress) are arranged in a proportion that seems very harmonious and comfortable. The waist is extremely narrow compared to the voluminous dress, depicting the beauty of the curve of her body (also a sign of the explicit rules of beauty at her time). The neckline is quite low, which was designed to show her pale beautiful shoulder and upper bosom. The hair accessories with feathers and jewelry obviously match the dress in color and style, with the beads twist around her finely curled hair and shine subtly. Besides, the size of her hair and the hair accessory makes her face look fairly small, creating a balance between the full skirt and making the whole look even more dainty.

The second picture is from Rei Kawakubo's fashion label *Comme des Garçons*. The whole sweater is black, with holes appearing in random places and exposing the white underwear and the arm. The neckline is almost crooked, making the whole garment asymmetric. In the eyes of Marie Antoinette and a lot of fashion critics in the 1980s, the clothing could not even be called a garment because it just looks like a rag, even the poorest people would try to stitch the holes on their clothing to make it look better. Moreover, the sweater is so loose and oversized that it shows nothing about the shape of the body. Although black and white do not look bad together,



an eighteenth-century dressmaker would say that the designer of this piece pays no attention to the “design” of colors because no color suggests a kind of lack and meager at that time. In addition, because of the exaggerating holes, it is difficult to tell what the sweater is made up of. It seems that Kawakubo deliberately wants to conceal the textile so one would not be able to judge whether or not it is made up of fine materials. This sweater might not seem to be in accordance with the idea of beauty that most people are used to, but its designer is regarded to be one of the most influential fashion designers throughout fashion history, and this ripped sweater is one of the most representative works of her. It was mockingly called the “post-atomic” look when first presented to the public in the 1980s, but the fact that today’s people do not see the holes on the sweater as signs of ugliness and a trend of fashion is a direct reflection of this designer’s impact on people’s sense of correctness. If we take a more detailed look at Kawakubo’s design and the thoughts behind it, we might be able to better understand Wittgenstein’s view on the usage of the term beauty and its relation with “a culture of a period”.

## Section 6. Kawakubo challenging the conventional idea of beauty

When talking about her own designs, Kawakubo says that she wants to remove the impact of all the previous standards of beauty. As she said, “I never intended to start a revolution. I only came to Paris with the intention of showing what I thought was strong and beautiful. It just so happened that my notion was different from everybody else’s.” Although her attempt was not to crush the existing notions of beauty, her designs truly revolutionized the contemporary thought about beauty and its relation to clothing. Regarding her contemporary fashion designers such as Thierry Mugler and Christian Lacroix (works of the design shown below), what Kawakubo “thought was strong and beautiful” draws the public’s attention to fashion in another direction.



Fall-Winter 1987 Haute Couture Christian Lacroix runway



Theirry Mulger in the 1980s

Different from her contemporary designers' works, Kawakubo's design seems to reveal beauty through radically different means. Although clothing is also the media to showcase her thoughts and understanding of beauty, she employs such a media idiosyncratically: by not using the elements that "represent" the contemporary notion of beauty, she forces the audience to reconsider the relationship between these elements and the possible manifestations of beauty. Fine materials, exquisite decorations, slim cut, luxuriant jewelry, etc., elements that remind people at Kawakubo's time of the notion of glamour, appealingness, and beauty, are all absent in her work. Instead, we see asymmetry, oversized, and monochrome garments that deliberately conceal the original shape of the body.

Kawakubo calls the ragged sweater (picture shown on page 58) the "lace sweater"; she thinks that the tears are not a sign of poverty or ugliness, but "openings that give the fabric

another dimension”, which might be considered as another form of lace. She thinks that the machine-made flawless and uniform garments are too boring: all are the same and not a certain piece is special, so she uses a lot of hand-woven pieces in her works, attempting to retain the uniqueness and seemingly imperfectness of each piece. Through the randomly placed holes on the sweater, she builds up an interplay of different textures and shadows with the woolen sweater, asking the audience to view these signs of “bad” and “ugly” in another way. Beauty is no longer identical to brilliant colors, curved shapes, and refined materials. People must reconsider what the roles of these elements are in their judgment of beauty and what beauty could possibly mean without these elements present. If rag, irregular shapes, and imperfection could be combined in a way that somehow renders a sense of beauty, then it seems that beauty is not restricted to an arrangement of certain visual elements. Hence, these imperfections no longer stand for poverty, insufficiency, or ugliness; such terms and their visual representations become detached from these negative connotations as they could also be arranged in a way that demonstrates a counterintuitive sense of beauty. In this way, what was regarded to be good and beautiful became mere *signs* of good and beautiful, what was bad and ugly became signs of bad and ugly. These signs are now detached from their connotations, and the terms “imperfect” “unfinished” “torn” “feminine” become neutral without any derogatory sense. In this way, Kawakubo transforms elements of anti-beauty into a new platform that discusses the possibility of beauty.

When asked about these counterintuitive elements in her designs, Kawakubo says that the concepts in traditional Japanese aesthetics such as *mu* (emptiness), *ma* (space), as well as *wabi-sabi* are very important ideas for her works. The notion of *mu* and *ma* keeps inspiring her

and drives her to create new things within the potential spaces between the traditionally fixed idea of all kinds of binary systems. In an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2017, Kawakubo's works were curated under the topic of "Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between". The exhibition investigates nine expressions of the designer's understanding of "in-betweenness" through her previous collections: Absence/Presence; Design/Not Design; Fashion/ Antifashion; Model/Multiple; High/Low; Then/Now; Self/ Other; Object/Subject; and Clothes/Not Clothes. For the designer, between each duality there is an empty space that allows her to dwell her thoughts in. She thinks that these dualities do not come from social or cultural impact, instead, she sees them as natural— ideas that are rooted naturally inside people's minds without the need to be taught. In this way, her works seek to expose the space of emptiness between these naturally formed dualities, exploring the possibilities of resolving or dissolving these binary systems and challenging the conventional understanding of the dichotomy.

Moreover, the lace sweater and other Kawakubo's designs also resonate with the concept of *wabi-sabi*. The term *wabi-sabi* suggests an acceptance of imperfectness, incompleteness, and naturalness, which by itself is quite opposed to 1980s prevailing aesthetics in the western fashion empire that is heavily influenced by the Renaissance's ideal beauty—symmetry, balance, and perfection. The elements such as "broken" pieces, frayed edges, asymmetry, irregularity, deformation, etc. that repeat on Kawakubo's designs indicate a sense of decay and damage, words that are usually related to negative judgments. However, for the designer, this kind of imperfection is the real perfection. As she said, "Too much importance has been placed on slick, polished images. I show clothes that aren't finished and expose their construction to indicate the

value of things that are primitive and imperfect.”<sup>20</sup> That is, imperfection reveals the real side of nature— nothing stays in long-last perfection. The cracked and faded objects present a certain kind of beauty that comes from the sign of time and a harmonious relationship with nature.



The above pictures show two of Kawakubo’s designs. The first one is made of an asymmetric loose top with tatters randomly stitching on it. The sleeves are of different sizes and widths, one covers a small part of the upper arm and another covers two-thirds of the arm. The hem is irregularly draped, reminding people of ancient Japanese farmer’s convenient and practical dressing. Because the wearers’ habits, body shapes, and working conditions are

---

<sup>20</sup> Bolton, *Art of the In-Between*, p.51

different, every garment is unique to its owner. As time goes by, the fabric is gradually imprinted with signs of age and usage, which also shows something about the owner, making the owner and the garment an organic ensemble. The skirt is made of several pieces of crumpled cloth of different shades of faded white. In the mid part, a triangle is “torn off”, and the legs of the wearer are exposed subtly as if the skirt has been worn for years. For Kawakubo, the ageness of these garments reveals the beauty of the patina of time as well as a harmony between nature and human beings. The “worn and torn” garments possess a kind of beauty that the gorgeous exquisite dresses do not have. Although they are new pieces when first created, they are made to look “old”; the intention is to present the beauty that derives from the oldness of the piece and a sign of nature. Moreover, the dress and the top create a balance when viewed together. One could imagine that the whole look would lose what Kawakubo aims to create if the skirt became too voluminous or too slim. Although the stripes and crumples look random and asymmetric, the entity presents a sense of nature and balance. As Kawakubo said, “I’m more comfortable with off-balance—the unbalanced and asymmetrical..... What I do is try to create a balance in the whole, because I’m aiming at presenting the total image, not a haphazard or random world.”<sup>21</sup>

In this way, Kawakubo brings in another perspective of beauty on garments: beauty that is not only exclusive to things that appeal to the eyes at the first hand, but a kind of more sophisticated and subtle beauty that only manifests itself through time and the garment’s special relationship with its owner. The signs of age show a harmonious relationship between human beings and their living environment, unveiling the humble position of humans and their reverence for nature.

---

<sup>21</sup> Bolton, *Art of the In-Between*, p.56

The second picture is from one of Kawakubo's most famous collections *Body Meets Dress—Dress Meets Body*. Kawakubo intends to blur the boundary between body and dress as well as subject and object through this collection. Down-padded garments of stretch nylon are used to create a swelling body, and “tumors” are added on random places on the body, making an illusion of dress becoming body and body becoming dress. The fusion of the two objects confuses the audience and challenges their conventional thoughts of clothing and its function. One cannot easily tell whether it is the body or the dress that swells—if not the body, why should the clothing add such humps to the body. This collection provocatively subverts the ideal beautiful body (slim waist, flat abdomen, etc.) as if saying “Hey, a beautiful body could also be humpy”.

Interestingly, however, grotesque as these designs are, they do not look extremely ugly at the first glance. Perhaps it is because of the dreamy lighting in the photograph or the contrast between the saturated red cloth and the dappled green background; the “humps and bumps” do not lead to immediate discomfort—the red deformed bodies are quite weird, but “ugly” would be too much to describe them. Kawakubo gives the “tumors” a different texture that usually appears on refined garments; this beautiful material is used in such a counterintuitive way that one cannot easily judge if this is beautiful or ugly. In other words, simply saying this design is beautiful or ugly would ignore the complexity and subtlety of it. This ambiguous feeling obscures the judgment of beauty, and it might make people ask, “What if there is a humpy kingdom where everyone looks like this?” “What would the ideal beauty be if none of them has seen a non-humpy body (what we call a normal body)?” An empty space between beautiful and ugly, subject and object is thus revealed to the audience, forcing people to reconsider the complexity



of the concept of beauty and ask them to shift their attention to the very object of judgment instead of the meaning of the idea of beauty itself.

Kawakubo has not given a clear answer of her version of beauty throughout the collections of *Commes des Garçons* because she thinks that the answer would always change and there are always more possibilities to explore. Each of *Commes des Garçons*' collections would explore a possible answer in a different way. Her motivation is to keep creating things that have never been seen before, prompting people to reflect on their own ideas. She would never be content with what she has created because beauty is never a fixed concept for her, so she wants to use her designs to explore the possibilities of such a concept, making clothing not only a media that carries the conventional idea of beauty but an entirely different platform that questions the possibility of beauty as well as the gap between the naturally formed dualities. She abandons the seemingly intrinsic qualities of clothing and the taken-for-granted elements of beauty, using her works as a candid communicative tool to put the Renaissance ideal beauty into question.

The above three examples have “explained” Kawakubo’s languages of clothing and beauty, if not too brief. Such languages make her label not only just *another* fashion brand but a vivid and strong aesthetic statement. To “express” this statement and have people understand her, she needs and must create a new language of fashion that adapts to her thoughts and reflections. As she said in an interview in 1998, “Deconstruction, reconstruction, etc. are words given by the media. What I try to do in my work is to dispense with preconceived ideas (about language or fashion, for example) and established techniques in order to create something new.”<sup>22</sup> Just as one

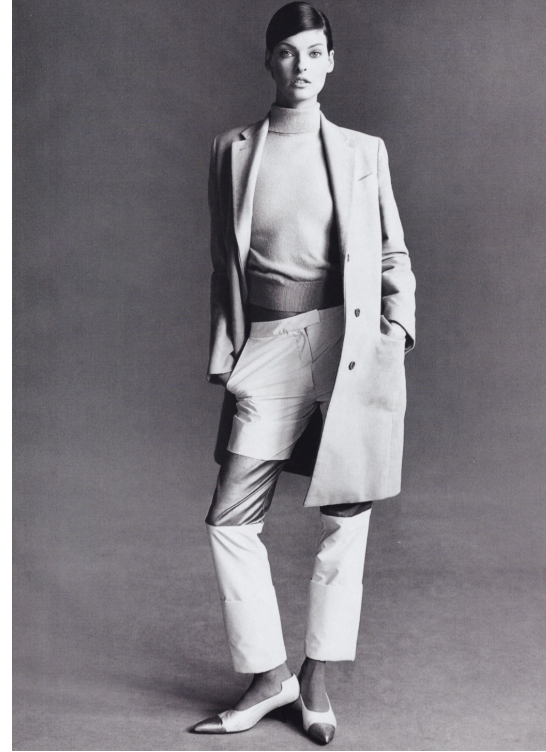
---

<sup>22</sup> Bolton, *Art of the In-Between*, p.32

may have a subtly strange feeling when first hearing a language of a completely different language family, the fashion designers and critics in the 1980s might also see Kawakubo's design as radically different and bizarre things when first seeing it. The west-dominated fashion empire before the 1980s has built in many preconceived ideas of beauty of body and dress within people's minds, although not purposely. Rei Kawakubo's entry (alongside Yohji Yamamoto, another very influential Japanese designer who came to Paris at the same time) to Paris fashion world questions and problematizes this taken-for-granted understanding of beauty. By not deliberately unfollowing the established aesthetic system of fashion and dispensing with preconceived ideas, Kawakubo creates a new language of beauty in fashion. This new language pulls out people from the language of beauty that they are used to and forces them to see how fixed and unconscious the ideas of beauty reside in their minds. In this way, people come to see the limit of the taken-for-granted language of beauty and start to realize that the appreciation of beauty is highly dependent on the culture of a period. When something that exists beyond such a culture suddenly enters this circumstance, the people that have never seen it would find it difficult to appreciate this new thing at first hand. However, unlike the Renaissance Italian man and the 1500s Chinese man that could not apprehend the beauty of the paintings in other cultures, Paris in the late twentieth century gave a room of communication and mutual learning to the fashion critics and the designer, making it possible for Kawakubo's designs to be understood to a further extent.

In this way, as more and more people learn and get used to this new language of fashion, they may understand Kawakubo's statement from a more profound and comprehensive perspective, that is, understand the designs "from within". Recall the analogy of beauty and

language, if we think of a Chinese student who has been learning English for years, the experience of hearing an English sentence must be different from hearing it when the language was first learned. Compared with translating English words by words into Chinese in terms of grammar and meaning, the long-term language learning enables the learner to understand the second language from a point that is closer to the native speaker's. The more the learner uses the second language, the more familiar she is with that language, and one day she might be able to perceive English totally from a native speaker's view because she has learned the explicit and implicit rules of this language through her years of experience of using English. In a similar way, as Kawakubo's designs are appreciated and discussed by more and more people, her language of fashion becomes increasingly prevailing and influential. Today, from avant-garde fashion designer labels such as *Maison Martin Margiela*, *Ann Demeulemeester*, and *Helmut Lang* (see their works of design on the following page) to university students' wardrobe, Rei Kawakubo's breaking aesthetics has been an inspiration to all of them. We see sweaters with holes, oversized jackets, and asymmetrical dresses appearing on people of different cultures and ages, signifying that the concept of beautiful clothing and beautiful bodies have changed since the last century. What people directly or indirectly learn from Kawakubo might not only be the symbols of her unconventional designs but also a non-definitive attitude to the concept of beauty because they have seen and learned different languages of beauty in fashion.



Upper photos (left to right): *Ann Demeulemeester 2021, Ann Demeulemeester 2017, Helmut Lang 1997*  
 Lower photos: *Maison Martin Margiela 2009, Maison Martin Margiela old collections, Margiela's iconic Tabi boots*

## Section 7. Wittgenstein's Thread & Fibre Analogy

Nevertheless, if the concept of beauty is a family with members of different features, does that mean all its manifestations could coexist and are equally acknowledged by all people? In other words, if we say the features of beauty are a, b, c, d, etc., are we indicating that these features have an equal impact on people? Would one who thinks a, b, and c are beautiful also agree that d, e, and f are equally beautiful? If we take cultural difference and historical evolution into account, it seems that people in different eras and cultures would take different things to be beautiful. Perhaps the Hermès sweater and pants on Maggie Cheung and the Chanel suit on Ines de la Fressange would be regarded weird and ugly for people in the time when Rococo was the dominating style. The embellished Dior ropes would probably seem bizarre and improper for the Chinese people in 800 A.D. even though it was intended to be an imitation of the “oriental” style. In this way, we see an inconsistency between the features in which beauty manifests itself and the subjects that decide whether something is beautiful or not. Because of geological and temporal differences, the features that are regarded to be beautiful may lose their charm in a different era and culture. We see that, unlike in a family that the members may have random features *at the same time*, the concept of beauty is made up of features that change evolutionally. The new style always emerges from the last prevailing style, and it is not difficult to find common features shared by these two styles.

The following illustrations (illustrations in the following pages) show the change of women's dress from 1908 to 1962. The image for each year does not speak for all trending styles at that year, but it could be regarded as a general representation of people's standard of beautiful dress of that year. We can see how the standard of beauty gradually evolves as time changes.

Every year some new elements appear and some are dropped, and one is not radically different from the others in the close years. Without seeing the years below and just by looking at the dressing styles, we can tell that the styles on each horizontal line are from the similar period. However, if a 50s dress is inserted into the 10s line, it will be quite obvious that it does not fit into the style of that time. The reason is simply that the 10s elements have been gradually dropped out during the four decades, and new styles and features of beauty have been added. Hence, the concept of beauty not only *changes* but also *evolves*. There is a close relationship between the “new standard of beauty” and the old. Each new element is like a new fiber that is added to the thread of the concept of beauty, and by looking at all the styles throughout time, we grasp the general idea of beauty. Compared with the family resemblance analogy in which the features of a family are more random (e.g. red hair, tall noses, and short jaws), the concept of beauty demonstrates a *progression* in which each feature is closely related to another. Therefore, it seems that the family resemblance theory may not be an accurate analogy of the concept of beauty due to the theory’s negligence on the progressive aspect of beauty.



1867 1868 1869 1870 1871 1872 1873 1874



1875 1876 1877 1878 1879 1880 1881 1882



1883 1884 1885 1886 1887 1888 1889 1890



1891 1892 1893 1894 1895 1896 1897 1898



1899 1900 1901 1902 1903 1904 1905 1906 1907







1939



1940



1941



1942



1943



1944



1945



1946



1947



1948



1949



1950



1951



1952



1953



1954



1955



1956



1957



1958



1959



1960



1961



1962



1963



1964



1965



1966



1967



1968



1969



1970

In *Philosophical Investigation*, Wittgenstein briefly mentions another analogy in the same chapter. He says,

“And we extend our concept ...as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.”<sup>23</sup>

That is, the overall concept is like a thread that is made of a lot of fibres; no single fibre runs through the whole thread, but as more fibres come in and previous fibers end, all the fibres constitute a thread. Wittgenstein himself does not make a clear distinction between the thread analogy and the family resemblance theory, but it seems that, when it comes to the concept of beauty, the thread analogy tells more about the term. That is, different from the concept of game, beauty is not made up of *random* features. While some types of games share the feature “entertaining”, some share the feature “competitive”, some share “involving bodily reaction”, etc., these features do not link to each other with a temporal relationship. Beauty, however, as it manifests itself in various styles of dresses, constitutes features that are tightly related to each other. As the illustration shows, from 1891 to 1898, for example, all women’s dresses have puff sleeves yet each year’s puff sleeve is different from other years’. In the line of 1922 to 1929, while the dresses show a gradual reduction in the length of the dress, they all demonstrate a straight cut and low-waist design..... In short, features that make up the concept of beauty in fashion not only overlap but also evolve.

We have to admit that the trending styles is not merely a product of the changing standard of beauty; it also reflects the change of society and ideology, (e.g. women’s bodies deserve more

---

<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, p.32

freedom). It is a misconception if we say that trending style is identical to the standard of beauty of that time. Although some styles of dressing may be described as outdated in certain contexts, it does not mean that this style is ugly. Women today do not dress in the way that the noble ladies dress in the eighteenth-century court, and this does not mean that they cannot see the beauty of the eighteenth-century dresses. However, it is not likely that a person in the eighteenth-century would find that Dior suit or the Chanel suit to be beautiful because his culture of the period has not evolved into the language of beauty that we use today. Many styles and materials of clothing do not come into being until the late twentieth century, and it thus makes sense that the people in the eighteenth century could not see the beauty of the late twentieth-century fashion. Hence, it seems that a good new design is an expansion of the people's understanding of the general concept of "beautiful dress". Although the ideological and utilitarian aspects of a fashion design make the work of design not an object of purely aesthetic judgment, good designers can construct a new style in which beauty manifests itself within the restraint of a certain social context. Just like Shakespeare's works that remain classical and win high praise throughout time, a good work of fashion design can also retain its beauty in the change of trends.

Today's fashion design is different from ever before in a way that designers enjoy an unprecedentedly high degree of freedom. As we can see in the illustrations, people had a very limited standard of beauty in women's dresses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. "Beauty", in terms of dress, was strictly limited to slim waists, exquisite tailoring, fine materials, harmonious colors, and delicate embellishments. The dressmakers had to make the garments according to the rigorous rules of their customers. In comparison, nowadays fashion designers are free to assemble all kinds of elements that appeal to them, and they can explore the notion of

beauty through various designs. Both the customers and designers are more open to novel ideas. Features that were popular in the 1920s could be combined with features of the 1990s, and they together can create a 2020s piece. In other words, the notion of beauty as it appears on clothing seems to be more descriptive rather than prescriptive in a nowadays social context. As people have more access to different styles, they learn to appreciate different types of beauty, and it seems that the notion of beauty gradually expands into a comprehensive term.

Nevertheless, because of this freedom, the tension between the pursuit of pure beauty and the need for novelty emerges. Although the designers have a larger room to create things that they regard to be beautiful, sometimes we see certain designs just do not work. Some designs would render a feeling of incorrectness. While people are more open to novelties, it almost feels like there is still an aesthetic rule laying inside everyone's mind to limit the receptivity of beauty; whatever goes beyond the receptivity appears subtly "wrong" to us. It seems that people just have an inner sense that decides what is beautiful and what is not. Hence, it appears that, despite the features of the objects that make them beautiful, the subjects that "take in" the beautiful features also play an important role. Without the subject that perceives the idea, the concept of beauty has no place to dwell in.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have examined many theories about beauty. It seems that each philosophical investigation of beauty casts a certain light on our understanding of fashion, and fashion also reciprocally shows some philosophical significance as we look into the details of the spectacular designs.

Going back to the very beginning of this paper where Plato asks what absolute beauty is, it seems that this question still holds an important place in our understanding of beauty. When we encounter so many different beautiful things, it is almost an intuitive action to reflect upon these beautiful things and ask what makes them capable of stirring our minds and impacting our emotions. While the beautiful things are so diverse, the experience of beauty is very different from any other things in nature. Compared to other experiences of living (e.g. eating, sleeping, walking, socializing), the experience of beauty is really different in that it influences us in the least utilitarian way, and yet we are still impressed by it and want to pursue more of it. Hence, the inclination to learn more about it and know its absolute form is almost inevitable. We want to know what it is about beauty that could affect us so powerfully even though the beautiful things themselves almost do not contribute anything to our condition of existence.

Plato regards absolute beauty to be the highest and ultimate form of beauty and contends that it gives essence to the tangible beautiful things. Such a conclusion is not ridiculous even after seeing Wittgenstein's radically different particularist view. Despite that Wittgenstein points out a vital point in our learning of beauty that we should not hold a contemptuous attitude towards particular cases, it still seems that we should not ignore the natural tendency of human beings to find an ultimate and superlative answer. Because people are capable of reasoning and

contemplating, they inevitably would *think* about the nature of a certain thing, especially when this certain thing is highly abstract and powerful. Just as children would ask “what is a dictionary” and “what is an airplane”, it is natural that people who are confused by the intricacy of beauty would ask “what is beauty”. They want to learn about beauty in the same way that they learn about a dictionary and an airplane. Therefore, Plato still holds an important position in the cognition of beauty. He reveals human being’s most intuitive reaction towards beauty. The platonic concept of absolute beauty is a manifestation of people’s ideal answer to the question “What is beauty”. People want to know the nature of beauty yet are incapable of finding the answer, so an ideal form—absolute beauty—provides a good way of thinking for this question. Although Plato does not explicitly explain what absolute beauty is, he establishes a mode that limits the possible answer to this question. This is like building a grand architecture without interior designs and furniture. People could see the shape of the architecture from outside, but the concrete answer to the question resides inside the architecture. Plato builds this architecture and leaves room for later philosophical discussions to fill in. What the interior of the architecture looks like depends on future philosophers’ thoughts and presumptions.

In this way, the distinction between absolute beauty and the tangible beautiful things that Plato draws is a direct reflection of a common way that people contemplate things. Even though absolute beauty is an idea that is too abstract and has almost no importance in aesthetic judgments, it still represents a very important mode of thinking. A dog that has tasted delicious food would simply want more delicious food, but it does not know that there might be the *most* delicious food and want to pursue it, neither would it ask itself what the feeling delicious means and what gives rise to the feeling of deliciousness to the tongue. However, with the mind that is

capable of both reasoning and perceiving the impression of beauty, human beings naturally would want to think about these questions of beauty and contemplate on the meanings of this term as we gain more experience of it. In other words, because non-intellectual beings are not capable of receiving the idea of beauty, perceiving beauty becomes an exclusive privilege to human beings. When we “feel” beauty, we want to use our intelligence to know its utmost manifestation and the occasion of it. Hence Plato is not wrong to draw the distinction between the tangible beautiful things and the abstract idea of beauty because by doing so he differentiates what is available to sensations and what is available to the intelligent mind. He sees this privilege of perceiving beauty for human beings and builds a necessary relationship between it and intelligence, and therefore he puts forward that absolute beauty could only be contemplated through intelligence and is not accessible to various sensations.

Proceeding from Plato, Aristotle brings forward a mode of cognition that gives a considerable place to sensations. Through the analysis of poetry works, Aristotle argues that to know the concept of something, one starts from knowing the basic and particular cases of this concept. It is not that we have the idea of absolute beauty in mind and then identify its essence in various things. Instead, only after gaining the experience of the particular things that contain the property of a certain concept could we gradually understand the more general concept. In this way, to know absolute beauty, one has to start from seeing and hearing many different beautiful things. As we accumulate the experience of the tangible beautiful things, the idea of beauty is gradually formed in our minds. In this way, the many beautiful things become an indispensable part of the cognition of the idea of beauty, and to access these beautiful things we must utilize our sensations. Hence, what Plato is trying to get rid of in the pursuit of absolute beauty (i.e.

sensations and particular cases) becomes the fundamental process of knowing absolute beauty. Moreover, this view of Aristotle manifests itself again in his writings on the critic of poetry works. He argues that beauty lies within the *magnitude* and *order* of the object. That is, a beautiful thing must fit people's scale of perception because an object that is too large or too small could not exist as a *unified* object within people's minds and thus could not be judged beautiful or not. The object also must be made up of integral components so that each part connects with the other necessarily; the components thus are organized together with a reason, and the sum of them could render a sense of completion. Hence, to satisfy the magnitude aspect of beauty we must use our sensations to judge, and to satisfy the order aspect we must use our logic. Both the body and the mind participate in the judgment of beauty.

However, despite that the mode of cognition of beauty that Aristotle brings forward is a reverse of Plato's, it seems that Aristotle would still be in agreement with Plato regarding the distinction between absolute beauty and many beautiful things. Although Aristotle argues that the former comes later than the latter, he still sees the former as a necessary idea that exists as an abstract and absolute form within people's minds. Such a binary view still leaves the question of "what is absolute beauty" unanswered. If we insist on this rigid dichotomy, it seems that we will need to eternally seek the answer, which could manifest itself in a way that satisfies us.

Both Plato and Aristotle seem to regard the capability of knowing beauty as a necessary result of human beings possessing intelligence for both of them argue the importance of logic and reasoning in the cognition of absolute beauty. However, such a connection might not be a casual but a coincidental one. It might just happen that human beings both possess the ability to reason and the ability to perceive beauty.



Hutcheson is quite right in pointing out that the power of receiving the impression of beauty is a very different kind. As he says in his work, if people do not have such a sense of beauty, they could never see the beauty of something even if they could have much knowledge of it. It is not difficult to imagine some aliens from other planets with very high intelligence but no power of perceiving beauty. They could be really good at learning and reasoning, but the lack of a sense of beauty would never allow them to sit down in a garden and enjoy the marvelous beauty of the flowers. While intelligence could increase knowledge through learning and thinking, it seems that it could not operate upon the perception of beauty. In this way, the Internal Sense (i.e. the power of receiving the impression of beauty) is a sense that it could not be changed by any preference or logical decision. While Plato stresses the necessary relation between reasoning and beauty, Hutcheson directly negates such a relation and brings forward a famous formula of beauty that links the sensible aspects of the beautiful things and the idea of beauty—Uniformity amidst Variety. He points out that beauty consists of a compound ratio of uniformity and variety, and the ability to identify such a ratio lies in the Internal Sense. This sense is not intelligent because logic could not intervene in the aesthetic experience; it is neither identical to the senses of organs because those senses could not directly give rise to an impression of beauty. Although Uniformity amidst Variety is a very abstract rule, it still appears to be true on many beautiful things if we recall our experience of seeing the beautiful things. Whenever we think of the dynamics of the ocean and the wind, the planetary movements, the design of clothing patterns, arrangements of gardens, architectures, etc., it seems that the beauty of these objects is indeed closely related to Uniformity amidst Variety. Too much variety would make the object difficult to understand because it remains a mishmash, whereas all uniformity

would be too boring and lifeless. We need a balance of these two to create beauty so that one could be discerned from another.

Such a compelling rule presents us with a very comprehensive view of beauty, making us reconsider the dynamics between order and disorder in nature. By putting forward this formula, Hutcheson deconstructs Plato's sacred palace where abstract beauty dwells. Instead of following Plato's thread of thought and trying to find the exact meaning of absolute beauty, Hutcheson directly focuses on the occasion of the impression of beauty and gives a very compelling answer. Such an answer brings a new insight into the understanding of beauty and shifts the attention towards the metaphysical answer to the exploration of the possibilities of the idea of beauty. As he writes, beauty lies in a higher and more complex relationship between the components of the object. Therefore, Uniformity amidst Variety is an open-ended formula that could be used in various ways, and the impression of beauty could also be occasioned by various combinations of the features of the objects.

However, the openness of the formula also indicates an abstraction. Because it is so comprehensive and could be applied to so many different beautiful objects, this rule by itself does not tell much about each particular beautiful object. While it is true that we could identify this rule from the arrangement of various elements of a certain fashion design, each design is an idiosyncratic manifestation of the rule. The silhouette, color, pattern, and tailoring of the garments could be arranged in so many different ways that one could not find two identical arrangements. Although each beautiful dress is in accordance with Uniformity amidst Variety in a certain way, the fashion critics and designers are really focusing on the *details* of the garments when they make the judgment of beauty. We see that each beautiful dress renders a very different

aesthetic experience from the other, and Uniformity amidst Variety turns out to be too general and abstract when it comes to particular cases. In other words, the theory comes into life when it manifests itself in particular cases.

On the other hand, as we try to find the similarities between the beautiful things, their difference just could not be neglected because it is each individual's particularity that makes it beautiful in a special way. The difference between beautiful things is as important as their similarity. Because the visual experience of each individual is so different, we could not help but reconsider if there is really a common feature or a set of features that run through all the beautiful things. Here Wittgenstein's family resemblance theory comes right in place and shifts our attention to the particularities of each object. If we allow definitions to exist without a sharp boundary (like the light of the lamp), it seems that the definition could still work very well in our daily use of languages. Since a general rule of beauty is too abstract and does not tell much about the object, just focusing on the particularity of each individual and trying to find the overlapping features between the individuals might give us more concrete information about beauty.

By bringing forward the family resemblance theory, Wittgenstein points out a very profound problem in the conventional ways of thinking: there is always a craving for generality and a tendency to explain things in a reductional way. Such a way of thinking leads a lot of philosophical problems into the metaphysical abyss because a lot of questions just could not be answered in this way. As he said, words such as beautiful and good are first used as a substitution for gestures and facial expressions of approval. We invented these vocabularies and then want to ask ourselves what the meanings of these terms are. Since these words are used casually in daily languages, it does not seem possible to find a very accurate explanation for them with strict rules.

Because the term beautiful does not give much information about the object of judgment as it is merely an expression of approval, the descriptive language always holds a secondary place compared to the experience and actions of the object. Wittgenstein is thus quite right by saying that the sense of beauty is merely a sense of correctness. Reviewing the history of fashion, it indeed seems that such a sense of correctness is different in different cultures of periods. This discrepancy makes the languages of beauty totally different games in different eras and cultures. Therefore, to bring in completely different fashion designs the designer must also invent a new language of fashion.

Rei Kawakubo's design for *Commes des Garçons* is an illustrative example of Wittgenstein's view on the sense of correctness for beauty and the linguistic aspect of beauty. As her designs render a completely different aesthetic experience compared to the prevailing styles in the western fashion empire in the early 1980s, she forces people at that time to reconsider the definition and rules of fashion and beauty. Her deliberate combination of "beautiful" materials and "ugly" shapes of body blurs the boundary of beauty and ugly, confusing people's taken-for-granted rules of correctness for beauty. If no such designs were presented to the public, people might not be able to realize how preconceived the ideas of beauty are in their minds. Without seeing these provocative designs, they might not be able to see the empty space between the conventional duality of beauty and ugly. Hence, Kawakubo's intention corresponds with Wittgenstein's thoughts that not every word's definition needs to have a sharp boundary; what was regarded as the opposite of a certain idea might find its way fusing into that idea.

Kawakubo's design also reveals the beauty of a very different kind; that is, in Wittgenstein's words, beauty of a culture of a period. The Japanese aesthetic *wabi-sabi* manifests

itself eloquently in her designs that show the beauty of a sign of age and nature, bringing in a perspective of beauty that has never been taken into account in the Western-dominated fashion world. This action and its result correspond, again, to Wittgenstein's thoughts on the discrepancy between cultures of a period. Even though both are called "beauty", it could manifest itself in radically different ways in the context of eastern and western cultures. What is natural to one culture becomes radical and provocative to another. In such a communication of the two systems of aesthetics, both sides come to see the limit of the idea of beauty that they take for granted. What is preconceived comes to the surface and is problematized. Beauty is therefore no longer a clear-cut definition with rigid rules restricting its possibility because all the necessity becomes a possibility. As long as there is a general family of beauty, its members could grow and give birth to new members. The new members might not share any similar feature with the elder members, but this does not negate their identity as part of this family of beauty.

## Bibliography

Aristotle. *Poetics*. London: Penguin, 1996.

Bolton, Andrew. *Rei Kawakubo/Comme Des Garçons: Art of the In-Between*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017.

Hutcheson, Francis, ed. W. Leidhold. *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc, 2004.

Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. *Philosophical Investigation*. Third ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations": Generally Known as The Blue and Brown Books /by Ludwig Wittgenstein*. Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1958.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Edited by Cyril Barrett. Berkeley: University of California Pr., 1967.