



BETWEEN
— T I M E S —

Journal Edition: Beauty

The Shape of Beauty: On Goodness, Truth, and the Things that Draw Us In

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*If thou of fortune be bereft,
and in thy store there be but left
two loaves, sell one, and with the dole,
buy hyacinths to feed thy soul.*
— John Greenleaf Whittier

As I write, I'm sitting in my studio, surrounded by sketches, half-finished paintings, and the lingering scent of turpentine and linseed oil, with perhaps a faint note of procrastination hanging in the air. I've recently returned from a painting trip to the island of Iona, part of my ongoing project to paint the Holy Islands of the UK.

While there, I was struck again by the early Celtic Christians, whose tradition sits at a gentle angle to my own Reformed leanings, and their attentiveness to both Scripture and the natural world, seeking God's revelation in each and discovering in both a quiet, pervasive beauty.

My own experience of painting on Iona, however, was rather less tranquil. In fact, I was marooned. The weather turned so decisively that the ferry stopped running, and I was, for some time, properly stuck. It is the sort of situation that begins as mildly inconvenient and slowly acquires the tone of a minor expedition. Pilgrimage, it turns out, sometimes comes with a certain amount of logistical improvisation. Yet I was grateful for the extra days to paint, not least in such a hauntingly beautiful place.

As an artist, I am invested in the idea of beauty. This is true not only in the practical work of making something one hopes might be considered beautiful, but also as a Christian who believes that beauty originates in the character of God and lies close to the heart of the gospel. To me, beauty is more than a social construct, a human

invention used to advertise products, elevate certain tastes or reinforce structures of power. It is bound up with the justice of God, and woven into the fabric of creation itself.

In times of conflict, environmental strain, and cultural fracture, beauty can seem like something of a luxury. Faced with such realities, we might reasonably ask what possible difference it makes to speak of beauty, let alone to spend time making things that are beautiful.

Can a painting stop a war? Can a sculpture restrain an invading army? Can a sunset halt climate change or resolve injustice?

At first glance, the answer appears to be no. And if beauty is understood purely in terms of utility, of immediate function or measurable outcome, then it is easy to dismiss it as decorative at best, or as a form of distraction at worst; something that softens the edges of a broken world without ever truly addressing them.

As the philosopher and writer Roger Scruton famously observed, ‘If you consider only utility, the things you build will soon be useless.’ I often think of this when considering traditions of design that place function above aesthetic value—whether in the more austere edges of Brutalism or in the assumption, sometimes found within Christian communities, that the message matters more than the medium that carries it.

Yet this may be to misunderstand the nature of beauty. Beauty is not an optional embellishment added once the practical work is done. Rather, it is one of the ways meaning becomes tangible and persuasive. The form of a thing is not separate from its content; it shapes how that content is received, understood, and remembered.

Beauty, rightly understood, is not merely an optional extra, nor the frosting on the cake. It reaches deeper than surface value. It is bound up with what it means to be human, and with our apprehension of goodness and truth. More than that, it is intimately connected to our understanding of justice, and to the character and presence of God. On these terms, beauty does not become less relevant in times of crisis, but more so. This is an idea we encounter repeatedly throughout Scripture. In moments of exile, wilderness, poverty and suffering, beauty is not abandoned as a luxury. Rather, it becomes a sign of hope, dignity, and the enduring presence of God.

Beauty, Goodness, and Truth

The Bible contains several words that gesture towards beauty. One is *na'eh*, meaning lovely or fitting. The prophet Isaiah declares, ‘How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news.’ In the Song of Songs, beauty is tied to desire, delight, and relational presence.

Another significant word is *tov*, often translated as good. It appears throughout Scripture, not only to describe moral goodness, but also the richness and rightness of creation itself. When God declares creation to be ‘good,’ the word carries a depth that holds together beauty, truth, and moral coherence.

This intertwining of beauty with goodness deepens it beyond surface aesthetics. It allows for a more enduring and complex understanding, one that can even accommodate paradox. As Umberto Eco observed, beauty may arise from the contrast of opposites, where even the broken or the imperfect can possess a certain dignity. Beauty, in this sense, is not the absence of imperfection, but something that can, at times, emerge through it.

A Garden at Giverny

Though we often struggle to define it, we more readily recognise beauty when we encounter it. My own curiosity about the relationship between art and experience has frequently led me to the gardens of painters. Many artists, including Gustave Caillebotte, Pierre Bonnard, Emil Nolde, and Max Liebermann, were not only observers of beauty but cultivators of it.

If you follow the slow current of visitors along the Seine to Giverny, you eventually arrive at the home of Claude Monet. His garden is less a backdrop than a living composition, a place where colour, light, and form converge in quiet harmony.

I was struck not only by the garden. In the house itself, each room seemed arranged to welcome light, framing the outdoors as an extension of the interior. The kitchen, painted a vivid yellow, was filled with Japanese prints and delicate etchings, a reminder that beauty, once invited in, has a tendency to make itself at home.

Monet continued painting even as war encroached upon his world. During the First World War, as the threat of conflict drew near and many of his neighbours fled, he remained in his garden, brushes in hand, continuing to paint. For him, the act of making beauty was not escapism but resistance, a quiet insistence that destruction would not have the final word. Beauty, in this sense, is not decorative, but defiant.

The Feet of Those Who Bring Good News

If beauty is an act of resistance, perhaps it is best approached through experience. Isaiah's image of 'beautiful feet' is striking, not because of any particular admiration for feet themselves, but because of what they carry. Beauty, in this sense, is not static. It moves. It delivers. It brings good news. In a classical sense, beauty involved a careful ordering of forms; in the Dionysian tradition, it emerged through movement, abandon, and a certain cheerful disregard for restraint.

There is, perhaps, a quiet parallel here with the role of the artist. Artists, like those messengers, carry something into the world, shaped by their encounters, their struggles, and their hope. The beauty they offer is not merely decorative but communicative.

If we understand beauty as something we are invited into, something experienced rather than simply observed, then it begins to appear in unexpected places. It surfaces in ordinary moments, in acts of care, in glimpses of meaning that interrupt routine. It is less about perfection and more about presence.

And at the heart of the Christian story, beauty takes on its most unexpected form. In Christ, we see not only harmony, but sacrifice; not only glory, but suffering. The cross is not beautiful in any conventional sense, and yet Christians have long spoken of Christ as the 'beautiful Saviour.' Here, beauty and justice meet, not in the absence of brokenness, but through it. Not by avoiding suffering, but by entering into it and redeeming it.

Beauty matters, then, not simply because it pleases, but because it reveals. It points beyond itself, drawing us towards what is true, good, and ultimately towards God himself.

Perhaps that is something I glimpsed, in part, on Iona, sitting atop a rain-soaked hill with brushes in hand as the weather tried to scare me away. Not beauty as escape from reality, but as something that quietly holds its ground within it.



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