

Aesthetics

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Aesthetics plays an important part in the theological and philosophical tradition that started in Greece and flowed right through the Christian intellectual world to the present. Such a concept is not referred to in classical Judaism. Does this mean that the aesthetic plays absolutely no part in Jewish life? Not at all. But it does mean that we need to define our terms.

The view of the great 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was: "That which constitutes aesthetics lies outside the realm of the language game." In other words, it can mean so many different things to different people that it is all but impossible to know if what one person means when he or she uses the word is the same as anyone else's meaning.

Initially "aesthetics" referred specifically to Greek philosophical discourse relating to art and beauty. Plato believed it was a mental recognition of beauty to which beautiful objects conformed that causes them to be beautiful. It involved such issues as proportion, harmony, and unity of parts. Similarly, Aristotle decided that the elements of beauty were order, symmetry, and definiteness. Such criteria were then applied to church architecture, sculpture, and painting (whether Eastern Orthodox icons or Western imagery). Greek and Roman art and architecture represented a kind of perfect model—except that different eras and different cultures were already offering very different standards and criteria of beauty.

During the Enlightenment, European thinkers began to place less emphasis on form and more on beauty itself. Immanuel Kant declared that beauty was a judgment of a subjective but common human truth. All people, he said, could agree on what was beautiful. In fact, they could not! They came to realize that there were all different kinds of beauty—prehistoric, African, and Asian—and the idea that beauty lay in the eye of the beholder began to gain ground. Even so, when the Impressionists first appeared, the established art world refused to accept their new and different way of looking at art. Gauguin introduced Polynesian beauty. Picasso was inspired by African forms and cubism paved the way for completely nonrepresentational art.

Once we entered that era of the possibility of monkeys or children producing "modern art", the issue of intentionality became a touchstone. Should the aesthetic intentions of the artist in creating the work of art, whatever its specific form, bear any relationship to the final product as a work of art? Or should a work of art should be evaluated on its own merits independent of the intentions of the artist? The inability to define art or to decide on intentionality opened up endless possibilities. We moved on to action, performance art, and a world in which anything is possible. Even if one wanted to say that it had to stimulate the senses, expand the onlooker's awareness, all such phrases became irrelevant.

No universal definition of art is possible anymore. Art should be thought of simply as a cluster of related concepts, as Wittgenstein suggested. Alternatively, one can say that "art" is basically a sociological category. Whatever art schools and museums and artists define as art is considered art, regardless of formal definitions. If anything defines "good" art now, it is how successful dealers are in choosing and marketing their artists.

Throughout this whole period there still were doctrinaire theologians who insisted on a connection between aesthetics and truth. Not unlike those Jewish thinkers who insisted on using Maimonides as a philosophical template, despite the fact that Aristotelian philosophy had long since lost its primacy. And Judaism was castigated because it made no such connection between truth and aesthetics. But did that mean that beauty had no place in Jewish life, in Jewish sensibility, and indeed in worshipping God?

Both Christianity and Islam, of course, made a great deal of art in the service of their gods. The great cathedrals of Christianity—their architecture, stained glass, paintings and sculpture—were all dedicated *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, "to the greater glory of God", which became the motto of the Jesuits. All medieval art was carried out under the supervision of the Christian guilds, which refused entry to non-Christians. That was why Medieval Jews were only able to use Christian art forms to decorate their religious texts. But the use of human imagery so particularly pervasive throughout the Catholic world caused an instinctive reaction amongst Jews against art.

Such exclusion applied under Islam too. Except that their religious art was entirely nonrepresentational and presented no such problem to Jews. This is reflected in Maimonides taking a much more positive attitude to Islam than to Christianity. Whereas he was prepared to accept Allah as the equivalent of God, he was not prepared to countenance the Trinity as other than idolatry. This was carried over to the difference between Islamic art and Christian art.

In his *Shemonah Perakim*, Chapter 5, in talking about healing the human mind, Maimonides recommends listening to music and appreciating beautiful gardens and architecture. These surely are aesthetic experiences. One can hardly imagine a Jew living under Medieval Christianity recommending this. Quite the contrary, one would have been exhorted to cross over to the other side of the street.

It is true that the mainstream halachic tradition always looked very negatively towards art both because of its association with Greece and the polemic against Greek Wisdom, *Chachmat Yavan*, because of the polemic wars with Christianity. In addition, since the destruction of the Temple and exile, the emphasis in Judaism was on mourning for the lost Temple, which resulted in a series of ascetic responses limiting pleasure, music, and anything associated with Rome and its successor Christian cultures.

If the Torah forbade making images in order to worship them, how could one differentiate between appreciating a piece of Greek sculpture when it represented, in its nakedness, a very physical Greek approach to the human

body, as well as the form of ancient Greek gods and goddesses? Once the association of human images with gods was made, it would be very difficult for a Jew to determine the difference between aesthetic pleasure and genuine spirituality. It was not until the enlightenment that Western culture began the process of detachment from religious worship.

Nevertheless, historically there can be little doubt that the architectural designs of both the Tabernacle and the Temple drew on others from outside of Judaism. The proportions of the Tabernacle conform to Mesopotamian designs of royal throne rooms and palaces. A visit to the Metropolitan Museum will illustrate the association most clearly. The winged cherubs mirror Assyrian winged gods and holy animals. Similarly, the mosaics found in the Dura-Europos synagogue of 244 CE are all Graeco-Roman of design.

The command to appreciate beauty and employ it in the service of God goes back to Exodus 15:2: "This is my God, and I will glorify him." This quote is mentioned thirteen times in the Babylonian Talmud in relation to using visually beautiful objects in the service of the Divine. Any Mitzvah relating to physical objects can be heightened by looking for the most beautiful example. It is a commandment to look for the beauty in objects. "These things broaden a person's mind, a beautiful home, a beautiful wife, and beautiful objects (vessels)." (Bavli Brachot 57b) Similarly, the use of beautiful plants and vessels (Bavli Sucot 28b). The Yerushalmi mentions Rabban Gamliel making a blessing over a beautiful non-Jewish woman (Yerushalmi Brachot 63b). There is a blessing to recite over unusual or beautiful creatures.

One may argue that the absence of a theory of aesthetics in Judaism is a result of the contexts that Jews found themselves in, a reaction against Greek philosophy for example. But I would argue that Judaism was simply not interested in the theory of aesthetics, any more than in a specific theory of economics. Its concern was with human behavior. Beauty was seen in through the constraints of halacha.

Insofar as premodern Jews indulged in philosophical speculation, they focused more on the concepts of God, nation, and law than on how to perceive the physical world. Judaism, one might say, was more concerned with beauty itself, rather than a theory of beauty. Just as it expressed no interest in specifying terms and theories of government, even though governing was important, so it left definitions and theories of aesthetics to others while it pursued enhancing spirituality through good deeds and the study of Torah.

Yet today one can find an appreciation of art, both classical and modern, within the most Orthodox of societies. As one would expect, they avoid subjects that might not be all that appropriate. Modesty, after all, is regarded more highly than beauty. But if you can have both, why not? A Mondrian or a Rothko can hardly be offensive!