

*The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, by Mary Carruthers. Warburg Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 [2013]. Pp. vii + 233. ISBN: 9780198723257 (paperback). ISBN: 9780199590322 (cloth).

CARRUTHERS PRESENTS a thorough and wide-ranging examination of the philological and lexical evidence for the reception and pleasure derived from beauty and the aesthetic arts. She traces the classical origins of aesthetic classifications and their medieval reconfigurations. *The Experience of Beauty* is structured as a series of six essays with an introduction. These essays focus on the effects that the arts and artefacts have or are designed to have upon their audience.

In the medieval period, the arts occupied a privileged space, an arena that overlapped with the “ludic play space” embedded in, yet differentiated from, the everyday (17). Carruthers emphasizes the practicality of medieval treatises on the arts, be they visual, literary, or musical. Indeed, the medieval English term for poesy is “making.” The artefacts produced by the arts are conceived in a manner similar to games, they contain elements, segments of the day-to-day. In this playful milieu monstrosity, marvels, and topics not normally discussed can all be considered. The objects thus generated invite active audience interaction. Just like human life itself they are compounds that exist in a continuous state of movement and change. All artistic products form part of tripartite relationships with their creators and their audiences.

The second essay shifts attention to the senses and the importance of style. For Carruthers the sensations, changes that happen inside the body, and people’s responses to them are pivotal to the medieval artistic enterprise. She notes that for Aristotle and Aquinas aesthetic experiences are multifarious wholes, with ranges of constituent affects intended to delight each of the senses (47). In essence, *The Experience of Beauty* argues that first and foremost in medieval aesthetic theories the recipients must be attentive before they can be directed towards what is “delightful” and away from what is “painful and fearful” (54). The second essay concludes with the premise that artistic objects are agents of change that promote a “complex mixing of *dulcis* (pleasure) with *utilis* (benefit)” (79).

These concepts of pleasure and benefit are unpicked in the third and fourth essays. The third essay teases out the complex and intertwined medical, lexical, theological, philosophical, and rhetorical meanings of sweetness, a harmonious combination of elements, and its affects. Carruthers follows this discussion with a consideration as to why the term taste became the chief expression for articulating artistic evaluation and whether there are any premodern theories

that contributed to its preferment in the eighteenth century. She finds that for Augustine and Aquinas “logical proofs” (134) are insufficient to sway human judgement. Humans will only accept what they perceive to be believable. In order to persuade one’s audience *dulcis* (sweetness), *honestus* (worthiness), and *utilis* (benefit) need to be combined in equal measure. Worthiness in the lexicon of the medieval period anticipates the later use of taste.

Essay five turns to the vexed concept of aesthetic variety, which in antiquity through to the early modern period, as Carruthers sees it, conflated the meanings of a temporal succession of different elements and the experience of distinct constituents in one artistic object at one specific moment in time. Variety generates harmony. Not only is music polyphonic, but the favoured vernacular literary genres such as romance involved multiple episodes and threads within one whole. Medieval theologians and rhetoricians took pains to stress the importance of fully considering and appealing to the diversity of one’s intended audience. In medieval usages of the category of variety it is possible to trace a reconfiguration of earlier aesthetic schema, which, *The Experience of Beauty* reasons, is attributable to the nature of the Church from its inception and the necessity of articulating the Incarnation. There is a greater emphasis on the heterogeneity or the multivocal within the univocal, what Carruthers terms the “polyfocal” (151-5).

The final essay commences with a consideration of the agency of artefacts, which act on the minds and senses of their audience each time they are experienced. Carruthers reiterates that aesthetic delight is generated by sensory experiences, which are compositions of antithetical concepts, occasioned by multifarious details and elements, engendered by riddling games, intriguing patterns, and the symmetry of opposites, and the result of antithesis itself with all its concomitant forms. Thereafter follows an exploration of the medieval artistic concept of beauty, which, like its opposite, ugliness, is constituted in the experience of the human senses and is solely concerned with the exterior.

Carruthers’s insightful consideration of the reception of beauty and artistic products reveals medieval emotive responses to and articulation of the aesthetic arts. It provides us with a nuanced account of premodern aesthetic vocabulary through which the sensations and pleasures occasioned by beauty and the arts were conveyed. As such, *The Experience of Beauty* encourages us to look at the agency of artefacts rather than to focus exclusively on the nature of the objects.

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