Graduate Course

Byzantine Beauty
Readings on Aesthetics from the Medieval World

Hilary term, Wks 2, 4, 7, and 8
Friday, 12.00–13.00,
Ioannou Centre, 66 St Giles’, First Floor Seminar Room

*It is not sufficient to see and to know the beauty of a work. We must feel and be affected by it.*
Voltaire “Taste” in *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764), §1.

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Description

Beauty is often held as an absolute value and is primary with the sense of sight. We see beauty in works of art, people, in nature, in objects, and the similar. Yet, according to the great eighteenth-century philosopher, beauty is not only perceived by the mind but also with the individual’s sensibilities. So how do we feel the visual? And how do we express what we see? Authors from Byzantium (ca. 600–1450) were aware of a convoluted multi-sensory experience through which beauty was received and tried to put their individual experience into words. This course uses their texts as an impetus to observe constant cultural transformations of the empire. It underpins how individuals formed, used, and perpetuated two contesting traditions: the Christian and the Greco-Roman. It highlights the role of fine arts and literature as carriers and expressions of transformation, and overall, it looks at how beauty – as an abstract cultural value – shaped and expressed the medieval world.

Among the pre-modern worlds, Byzantium stands out not only because of the central role of literacy in the higher social echelons (who are best represented by the surviving evidence) but also because of the fact that its cultural production resulted from a debate within a multicultural society between the classical/late antique and the Christian traditions. Skillful authors and their patrons would ensure a position in the higher social echelons with the production of literary works. Simultaneously, the dominance of the one of the two contesting (but not opposite) cultural tensions created by these two traditions depended on current affairs and influence from other neighboring Western and Islamic cultures.
This course delves into 400 years of European cultural history using an abstract notion that is central to understanding any premodern or modern culture: beauty. We will discuss the critical approaches regarding the transformation of the sense of beauty. Some of these texts refer to human-made beauty, including works of art that still exist and others that have been lost for good, representing not only Christian but also Islamic and “pagan” aesthetics. Others refer to the beauty of nature or that of the human body. These texts are written in a code created by rhetorical conventions and a symbolic language. We will crack that code to appreciate the differences from our modern concepts of beauty. We will seek various definitions of this abstract notion. We will uncover manipulations of the aesthetically pleasing in the politics of spiritual or civic life. We will discover how beauty bridged gaps between cultures and how different sociocultural groups gave different meanings to this term.

Teaching Aims and Objectives

Aims:
- to learn about aspects of the Byzantine Civilization and Medieval SE Mediterranean
- to develop appreciation for different understandings of an abstract cultural idea
- to discover beauty as a individually defined attribute
- to develop understanding of multi-culturalism in the Medieval World
- to enhance skills relevant to critical and close reading of texts in translation
- to enhance skills relevant to critical interpretation of art and literature
- to develop ability to synthesize and integrate information and ideas
- to develop ability to interpret literary passages and products of the visual culture in their sociocultural context

Objectives:
- to learn to appreciate important contributions to the subject of beauty
- to learn about different forms of writing in a pre-modern literature
- to become acquainted with aspects of the Byzantine culture
- to learn techniques and methods to explore further visual and literary artworks from pre-modern cultures
- to discover how literary and material artefact shape and enforce cultural identities.

Prerequisites: No previous knowledge of Byzantine literature or Greek is required. All texts will be offered in English translation.
You are encouraged to consult the following article before the launch of the course:
Format/Requirements: The course will be taught as a discursive lecture course. While I will provide a broad introduction to the weekly topic and we will read together selected passages from the list of the assigned readings.

Teaching Material: The assigned readings from primary sources and a bibliographical guide (incl. research and study tools) will be available online.

Bibliography

Weeks & Readings

Wk. 2: Kosmos, Beauty, Phantasia and Byzantine Rhetoric


Further Reading
Wk. 4: Aesthetic Theory and the Human Beauty in Byzantium
Anna Komnene, The Alexiad, transl. E. R. A. Sewter (selected passages)

Hatzaki, M., “The good, the bad and the ugly,” in A companion to Byzantium, Blackwell companions to the ancient world Ancient history, ed. L. James, Malden, Mass./ Chichester 2010, 93–107.

Further Reading
Hatzaki, M., Beauty and the male body in Byzantium: perceptions and representations in art and text , Basingstoke 2009, esp. 8–24, 39–42.

Wk. 7: Pagan and Islamic Aesthetics in Constantinople
Nicholas Mesarites, Description of Muchroutas, tr. A. Walker


Further Reading


**Wk. 8: The Beauty of the Space: Nature and the City**

Theodore Hyrtakenos, *Description of a garden*, tr. M. Mavroudi


**Further Reading**


