

On Beauty: Changing Perceptions

By PRU FOSTER

A beautiful painting can fill us with awe and peace, a haunting melody can remind us of our mortality, a poem can transport us to other spaces. The pursuit of beauty is probably one of the noblest endeavors of humanity. The frightfully strong passions that we experience in the presence of beauty might suggest that “what is beautiful” is fundamental to human nature. However, what we perceive as beautiful changes.

Many of us will know of the classic example of changing perceptions of female beauty. The earliest known representations of humanity are small statues of large-breasted, rounded pear-shaped women from some 24,000 years ago. Indeed, the “ideal” woman remained plump, except for a few exceptions, until the early parts of the 20th century, all over the globe. Until then, a heavier woman had appeal because she had long-term access to food and wealth. As humanity became more food secure and wealthier, we started to ascribe beauty to dangerously thin women. Another trait that is universally described as beautiful is average features—and this, too, changes over time. For example, we find an average-sized nose or average eye shape beautiful, probably because that is what is familiar to us. But this kind of average depends on who we see, which changes as people mix and diets change. One beauty trait that does not change over time is symmetry. Researchers believe our appreciation of symmetry derives from survival pressures: asymmetries can indicate past disease or injury.



An urban native garden in Mt. Vernon, Baltimore. Photo by Ashley Bowers.

Our perception of beauty in the landscape is driven by very similar factors: symmetry, familiarity, wealth displays, and survival cues. For instance, we used to fear the wilderness because it was unfamiliar and threatened our existence. Europeans used to think that mountains and forests were to be avoided at all costs—think of the many fairy tales that foretold doom if you stepped off the path. In the 1700s, this began to change—in part due to the spread of Natural Theology, which preached reverence for the Almighty’s work. A further shift occurred in the ensuing centuries, and

eventually, wilderness became a place to seek beauty and serenity. No doubt, part of our modern-day sentiments arose from a familiarity with wilderness and a better understanding of how to cope with its dangers.

We now stand at another inflection point in our perception of beauty. This change in perspective also involves our security and will be accelerated by familiarity. We stand at a point where more than 50% of the world’s habitable land is no longer wild, we’ve lost nearly 3/4 of wildlife populations relative to 1973, and climate change is accelerating this loss. We are on the precipice of a drastic system change that threatens our survival. And this is likely to impact what we perceive as beautiful. For instance, in the recognition that the main driver of habitat destruction is raising livestock, many of us perceive a vegetarian diet as beautiful. Similarly, as we recognize that our native landscapes support biodiversity, growing numbers of people perceive native plant gardens as more beautiful than overly managed exotic collections. And as our exposure to and familiarity with native landscapes increases, our collective appreciation of native landscapes will grow.

And what a difference this change in perspective is making. Lawns in the US cover more than twice the area of our national parks, covering more land than corn, wheat, and fruit trees combined. Many readers will know that in and of themselves, lawns have very little ecological value. They are not only very poor at supporting wildlife, but they actively spread biodiversity loss

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Acidic Oak-Hickory Forest garden, Reserve Hill. Photo by Rod Simmons,



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in the form of carbon emissions from lawnmowers, fertilizer and herbicide-rich runoff which devastates our waterways, and by acting as barriers for native animals and plants. If our lawns, or even half of our lawns, were converted to native landscapes, it would make a massive difference to biodiversity loss on land and in the water.

Why this love affair with our lawns? Can we break up with them? Lawns first appeared in medieval times around castles so the inhabitants could see approaching enemies. A closely-trimmed expanse of grass became a cultural ideal

in the 16th and 17th centuries when these extensive lawns came to symbolize wealth—only very wealthy landowners could afford to employ people to cut their lawns with scythes. The invention of the lawnmower opened up lawn trimming to the lower classes. Today, our obsession with lawns is less a symbol of wealth and more a result of decades of familiarity and habit. Most homeowners have lawns, we know how to care for them, and we continue to maintain them despite the cost, labor, and environmental negatives.

Here, there is hope. More and more of us are landscaping with natives, leaving the leaves, and providing wildlife

corridors. As we do so, we notice that our wild and wondrous native gardens host far more birds, butterflies, lizards, and frogs than the close-mown and less interesting grassy expanses of our neighbors. We are rewarded with overflowing sensations of beauty and awe at life's complexity. Although many native gardens begin as a love affair with plants and their critters, these tiny slices of Eden are shifting our perceptions of what is beautiful and reminding us all to protect life, near and far.

Blessing on the blossom.

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