

5 Judgment of Beauty



Psychological experiments on facial attractiveness show that male and female assessments of human beauty are similar, and that there are clear mappings between attractiveness and sexual fitness¹. Beautiful people of either sex and any race will have higher cheekbones, a thinner jaw and larger eyes relative to the size of the face than the average. There is cross-cultural agreement too, which may be a surprise when we consider the conventional belief that tastes in human beauty are socially determined². The "50 Most Beautiful People in the World" as judged by *People Magazine* have faces that fit the criteria. Doubtless *People* considers their figures too, since body shapes of the chosen few show little diversity in either the male or female category. *People* also relies heavily on expert opinion:

The experts agree: There's no one quite like Michelle Pfeiffer. "Unbelievably beautiful," says Rob Reiner, who recently directed her in the romantic comedy *The Story of Us*, due at Christmastime. "She has become more luminous the more mature she has become," says *Deep End of the Ocean* author Jacquelyn Mitchard. And Michael Hoffman, director of this month's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, calls Pfeiffer

¹ D I Perrett, K A May, S Yoshikawa, "Facial shape and judgements of female attractiveness", *Nature*, vol 368, 17 March 1994, pp 239-242 and later papers by the same authors show that observers of different cultures and different genders all showed the same preferences for both men and women of different cultures. A surrounding body of literature examines the extent to which these preferences are related to emotional expressiveness, sexual maturity, fertility, youth or 'cuteness' derived from parental protectiveness towards young.

² See, for example, Chapter 1 of Gombrich's *The Story of Art*.

"the Greek ideal," adding that "the closer you get the camera to her face, the more beautiful she is. It has something to do with the structural perfection of her beauty, the marble-y cool quality of it."³

With a set of measurable criteria for the face, and agreed body shape norms (as accepted not just by *People* but throughout our society), we expect and often find agreement on human beauty. But are these just the standards of our age? Art gives us a cross-check on the universality of judgments of beauty. There are thousands of exemplars to compare against our own opinions and our cultural norms. In this section I will consider some of these.

By tradition, and from the limited evidence available, Raphael had the same qualifications as Paris for making judgments of beauty: he was good-looking and gracious, and, though married, he seems to have been susceptible to sexual temptation.⁴ But Raphael's judgment of beauty perhaps deserves greater respect than Paris', because of his extensive knowledge and appreciation of the human form. If we can argue that someone who paints people with breathtaking expressiveness, vigour and truth has special authority to be beauty's judge, then we can look to Raphael's representations of beauty for standards.

Our starting point is *The Judgment of Paris*, but Raphael's version immediately presents problems. First, the work was a collaboration between Raimondi and Raphael. It is not clear how much the figures' rendering owes to Raimondi, though a Raphael study for Aphrodite in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, has a similar pose to that used in the engraving, but with slimmer hips. Whichever artist was responsible, it is clear that the goddesses have smaller breasts and thicker waists than would be judged attractive by the standards of present-day popular culture. To see whether this reflects a different criterion of beauty we can look at more paintings by Raphael himself. From these we can also gain information about facial beauty which is very hard to judge from the medium of engraving. So we will consider two other works of Raphael's, famous for their portrayal of human beauty.

³ *People Magazine*, 10 May 1999

⁴ One wonders if it is similar attributes that qualify *People Magazine*'s "experts".



Raphael, *The Nymph Galatea*

Here is how Ernest Gombrich describes the beauty of *Galatea* in *The Story of Art*:

There was another quality in Raphael's work that was admired by his contemporaries and by subsequent generations - the sheer beauty of his figures. When he had finished the 'Galatea', Raphael was asked by a courtier where in all the world he had found a model of such beauty. He replied that he did not copy any specific model but rather followed 'a certain idea' he had formed in his mind. To some extent, then, Raphael, like his teacher Perugino, had abandoned the faithful portrayal of nature which had been the ambition of so many Quattrocento artists. He deliberately used an imagined type of regular beauty. If we look back to the time of Praxiteles, we remember how what we call an 'ideal' beauty grew out of a slow approximation of schematic forms to nature. Now the process was reversed. Artists tried to modify nature according to the idea of beauty they had formed when looking at classical statues - they 'idealized' the model. It was a tendency not without

its dangers, for, if the artist deliberately 'improves on' nature, his work may easily look mannered or insipid. But if we look once more at Raphael's work, we see that he, at any rate, could idealize without any loss of vitality and sincerity in the result. There is nothing schematic or calculated in *Galatea's* loveliness. She is an inmate of a brighter world of love and beauty - the world of the classics as it appeared to its admirers in sixteenth-century Italy.

Part of the magic of *Galatea* is her unusual pose. She is balancing herself as her dolphin-drawn sea-chariot sweeps to the left, and at the instant of the painting she is in motion. The pose or gesture is not particularly graceful or beautiful - rather it is unusual - yet the impression we have is that she is fully in control. The crowding of the picture seems to slow her down, yet her expression is exhilarated and joyous. Attributes we normally associate with beauty, like face and figure, are turned and partly hidden, but it is clear she has a classical oval face, and her body shape is certainly not an hourglass. Her beauty is her vivacity.

In contrast, the *Sistine Madonna* has a serene, calm beauty.



Raphael, *The Sistine Madonna*. (With detail)

In common with Raphael's other Madonnas, the Virgin's body is clothed with utmost modesty. Yet this Madonna is unusual in looking outwards rather than down at the child. This allows us to see the perfect symmetry of her face, her large eyes, high cheekbones and narrow jaw. These features strongly suggest that, for the face at least, standards of beauty have not changed since the renaissance. It is ironical that this painting is famous for its mischievous putti at the bottom of the frame, yet at its apex renders one of the most beautiful faces ever painted.

So in Raphael we see facial beauty and beauty in motion. But in body shape, his women do not conform to the standards of today. We could trace standards of figural beauty through artists, schools and movements to try to determine how much of the criteria of beauty are determined by era, how much by place, and how much by personal taste. Here I will consider just two other artists, chosen because they both painted *The Judgment of Paris* several times. Lucas Cranach was the leading painter of Saxony in the sixteenth century; Peter Paul Rubens was the Flemish master of the seventeenth.



Lucas Cranach. Two versions of *The Judgment of Paris*

Cranach painted *The Judgment of Paris* at least a dozen times, almost all composed in the same way, with the same sleepy Paris, the same white horse, the same rocky background. The goddesses are posed differently in different versions, but always on the right of the picture presenting different aspects to Paris and to the viewer. The goddesses' figures are

waifish and anaemic, frail and interchangeable. It is worth considering whether Cranach's goddesses do indeed represent a standard of beauty. Their plain faces almost suggest that Cranach had 'got' the story - that the judgment was by bribery and not beauty - and considered the possibility that the goddesses may not, after all, have been particularly good looking. But this seems far-fetched: there is nothing in tradition to suggest the goddesses were both ugly and deluded. More likely is that Cranach was representing a particular standard of beauty with mixed success. That standard clearly favours girlish figures. The contrast with Raphael is obvious. The reasons are not. Cranach painted only a few years after Raphael, but Raphael was from Mediterranean Europe, Cranach from the Germanic north. Raphael was the painter and architect of popes; Cranach was a personal friend of Martin Luther. So we might think that the difference comes from the prevalence of a particular body type in a particular ethnic group, or from psychological outlooks rooted in different worldviews. But then, what is to be made of Rubens - a northern European and a Protestant?



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgment of Paris*, 1632-35. National Gallery, London



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgment of Paris*, 1638, Prado, Madrid

Rubens painted *The Judgment of Paris* at least four times. The two samples given here represent the midpoint and the endpoint of his treatment of the theme, and there is considerable difference in their depiction of female beauty.

The first Rubens shown above is, perhaps, the best known version of *The Judgment of Paris*. It includes all the iconographic elements of the Raphael, but with delightful variations: Hera's peacock is picking a fight with Paris' dog, Cupid has better things to do than cling to Aphrodite (but he does them just out of the frame as if to say they are none of our business), and Athena's shield hangs on a tree, accentuating the gorgon's strangled appearance. The women are voluptuous, perhaps even fat, accentuating the traits that characterized Raphael's goddesses.

But in the Prado Rubens the figures come close to a modern ideal of female attractiveness. The goddesses are posed dynamically, just as Raphael had posed his *Galatae* a century before, and that motion is part of their appeal. But they reveal themselves with larger breasts and slimmer waists than their predecessors. The contrast in Paris' pose between the two Rubens paintings anticipates the judgment of modern viewers: the earlier nudes may, perhaps, be beautiful, but the later ones are sexy. Painted for the Torre de la Parada hunting pavilion, this painting exemplifies the start of a trend in European painting - where the classical nude, providing desexualized masculine and feminine models for display in public or religious contexts, was displaced by the sexually-alive female nude, designed for ownership by wealthy and powerful males. If this is true, we may judge that standards of sexual attractiveness have not changed significantly since Rubens. Rather, it is the meaning of human beauty that has changed.

For Raphael and Cranach the representation of the female was a choice between the girl and the woman. A beautiful girl would be pre-sexual, as, perhaps Cranach's were intended. Today, when we look at these pictures, we are uneasy, because the girls are naked, for us nakedness implies sexuality, and the girls are too young. The alternative rendering was a woman, and that meant not just sexual maturity but maternity too. Thus the ideal woman was one whose figure shows evidence of childbirth, whose form offers warmth and comfort for the child as well as for the man. Pre-Rubens, the beauty of the female nude was conditioned by these two possibilities. Post-Rubens, the beauty of the female nude (and of the female in general) has been defined increasingly by sexual desirability *without* maternity. In the Prado *Judgment*, Rubens' shows us the threshold of this change. Today, in an age of sexuality and childlessness, our idea of beauty is fully aligned with the form of unrealized fertility. As further confirmation of this, note that the figure that most conforms to current ideas of beauty in earlier versions of the *Judgment of Paris* is often that of Athena, the virgin goddess. Rubens' National Gallery painting above is an example.