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Kant on Tattoos, Architecture and Genderbending

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Kant's Aesthetics: Tattoos, Architecture, and Gender-Bending

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In his discussion of dependent beauty in the *Critique of Judgement* Kant writes, "much that would be liked directly in intuition could be added to a building, if only the building were not [meant] to be a church. A figure could be embellished with all sorts of curlicues and light but regular lines, as the New Zealanders do with their tattoos, if only it were not the figure of a human being. And this human being might have had much more delicate features and a facial structure with a softer and more likable outline, if only he were not [meant] to represent a man, let alone a warlike one" (Kant 1987, 77).

Kant is difficult to teach to beginners, but this is one good passage to focus on. Indeed one can have fun deconstructing it. The passage comes in section 16, which is titled "A Judgement of Taste by which We Declare an Object Beautiful under the Condition of a Determinate Concept." We are introduced here to the famous distinction between free and accessory beauties. The latter are dependent on concepts and on our notion of the purpose of the thing being considered. This is the section in which Kant commends flowers, birds, crustaceans, designs *à la grecque,* wallpaper, and music-not-set-to-words as free beauties. He then refers to the beauties of human beings, horses, and buildings as presupposing a concept of perfection and hence as merely adherent or dependent.

The point in the quoted passage is that objects of merely adherent beauty are judged according to their purpose, and that therefore it is inappropriate to add to them elements of pure beauty, which is to say, elements that can be liked in the direct intuition. However, it is not immediately obvious why this should follow. Why not have representations of flowers, birds, and crustaceans in church architecture? Why not include arabesques and designs *à la grecque?* Certainly all of this *has* been done, and to good effect. It seems that Kant is just allowing his Pietist prejudices to come to the fore.

The same would seem to hold with respect to his attitude about Maori tattoos. Kant is criticizing the Maori for decorating human beings with designs which, ironically, he considers examples of pure beauty elsewhere. He seems to think that since the beauty of human beings is adherent beauty, we should not combine it with the free beauties found in nature. But why?

The fun comes with the contemporary relevance of some of these issues. Many of our students today wear tattoos and are eager to discuss issues related to tattooing. This is an opportunity for livening up a class. One could even show a clip of the film *Once Were Warriors.* Tattoos play an important role in this film about the contemporary Maori. The professor could ask whether parents who disapprove of tattoos might have some justice on their side. Perhaps the beauty of the human body is most properly considered unadorned. But then

if this were true it would seem to follow that beauty should be appreciated without *any* adornment, including clothes and makeup. One could even bring up the Greek conception of the nude in this context. A modified thesis might be that non-natural changes in skin pigmentation mar the unadorned body, although this poses problems for salon tanning. This might also be an appropriate time to discuss whether tattooing is an art form, and whether it meets any of the current definitions of art.

Another stage of the discussion could center on architecture. The attack on decoration in architectural theory is notorious. Adolf Loos, for example, believed that decoration was crime. This was one of the founding assumptions of modernist architecture. Clearly, Loos was in line with Kant. Postmodern architecture, by contrast, went in another direction. Kant would count its use of decorative elements from different cultures as adding material to buildings that appeal directly to intuition. Roger Scruton, by contrast, holds that architecture is essentially a decorative art. Hence, he does not seem to have any problem with decorative elements in architecture. A description and analysis of Scrutons theory of architecture might be tied in to this discussion (Scruton 1979).

A consideration of the quoted passage may also be connected with the discussion of ornamentation in section 14, made famous by Derrida. By contrast to section 16, Kant here describes ornamentation as *adding* to our tastes liking. It does this by way of its form. Nor is architecture excluded, since Kant explicitly mentions colonnades around magnificent buildings. Ornamentation is here significantly differentiated from finery. The latter commends the work to our approval by way of mere charm. Only finery, and not ornamentation, impairs genuine beauty. One would think that that would be true for tattoos as well!

Perhaps Kant disapproves of tattoos because they permit a charm of sense to be linked with the human figure. In section 17 he refers t the human figure as the ideal of beauty. Could tattooing interfere with this ideal in some way? But remember that, for Kant, tattoos are in the same category as objects of pure beauty, and therefore are not mere matters of charms of sense, except insofar as they feature bright colors. Some tattoos have elaborate designs and thus meet Kants requirement for beauty quite well. They too can set the imagination and the understanding into free and harmonious play. Kant must, therefore, have thought that a tattoo somehow interferes with the expression of the moral which is characteristic of the ideal of the beautiful, and which he associates with the human body and its representation. He just never says how.

The final sentence in the quoted passage is perhaps the most interesting from a contemporary perspective. Kant can be seen here as undercutting his earlier point about the New Zealanders. After all, they used the tattoos originally to enhance their warlike look. It is questionable that simply adding formally attractive ornamentation to the body detracts from the purposiveness of the form under the concept "warrior" when that ornamentation is added to enhance that look.

The quote is also relevant to issues of gender identity. Kant is saying that men, especially warlike ones, should not be represented as having gender traits associated with women, for instance delicate features and soft facial structure, even though (it is implied) this would make them more beautiful. The idea here seems to be that female gender features are to a male figure (or a representation of a male figure) as tattoos are to that same figure.

Yet, the example of female-typed gender traits works differently from the example of tattooing. The former might interfere with a warrior-like look, whereas the latter enhances it. The former would transform the basic

structure of the face (one could illustrate this with computer morphing), whereas the latter may simply enhance the underlying structure, for example the fearsomeness of an angry look.

This might be an occasion in the classroom for some imaginative thinking about cross-gender identity issues. Imagine, for instance, how the use of facial tattooing might transform the delicate features and soft facial structure Kant speaks of. One could also consider how male peacemakers might be represented with female-type gender traits, for example Jesus in some of Caravaggios paintings (see Berger 1977).

Earlier in section 14 Kant insists that there are appropriate purposes and perfections not only for humans in general but also for males, females and children specifically. Thus, for Kant, female gender traits would be perfectly appropriate in a female figure. Still, by taking the male figure as more central, Kant has, by implication, associated female gender traits most strongly with the pure beauties of nature. This is also a possible subject for discussion.

Finally, this passage could be useful as a way of introducing Richard Shustermans notion of somaesthetics as developed in his recent book *Practicing Philosophy* (Shusterman 1977). As he argues, "philosophy needs to pay more critical attention to the variety of somatic practices through which we can pursue our quest for self-knowledge and self-creation." Students who engage in tattooing often say that this practice is importantly connected with their own quest for self-knowledge and self-creation.

Once students are intrigued by the issues raised here, the instructor may wish to direct the discussion to the more traditional question of whether Kant can consistently speak of two kinds of beauty, and why he needs to introduce the notion of adherent beauty at all (see Guyer 1977, 215-27).

Berger, John (1977) *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin.

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