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Pretty

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PRETTY

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Jared S. Moore once said "strange to say, though the adjective 'pretty' is undoubtedly the most frequently used of all esthetic terms, the concept is rarely mentioned, and almost never seriously discussed, by writers on esthetics!" (Moore, 1948). This is still true today. There are no articles on prettiness or pretty in aesthetics guidebooks or even in the previous edition of this encyclopedia. Some may argue that this is simply because the pretty is not distinctively different from the aesthetically pleasing or the beautiful to warrant a distinct entry. However, the absence of discussion is doubly surprising since prettiness is often mentioned as one of the three main aesthetic qualities, along with beauty and sublimity. Part of the reason for this neglect is that the pretty is often held in low regard: the phrases "merely pretty" and "superficially pretty" are common. In the fine arts, it is seldom a compliment to say that something is pretty. However, it is often considered appropriate to refer to pieces in the decorative or popular arts as pretty, for example a vase or a song. Prettiness is also important in natural and everyday aesthetics, as people frequently refer to pretty landscapes, houses, and gardens. Prettiness is generally contrasted to beauty: it is frequently said that someone is pretty, although not beautiful. Finally, the pretty is a highly gendered concept: girls and women are more often referred to as pretty than boys and men, and when the latter are considered pretty there is often a hint of homosexual interest. Because of its gendered nature, the pretty is frequently the object of feminist critique, although some self-described third-wave feminists have sought to defend it (Rowe, 2006).

"Pretty" goes back to the Old English praettig for tricky, cunning, or crafty. It later came to mean clever, artful, or ingenious without the earlier negative implication. More currently, when applied to persons (especially women and children) it means attractive and pleasing in appearance. When applied to things it means something pleasing, nice or agreeable. A common definition of prettiness is "beauty of a delicate, dainty, or diminutive kind, without stateliness." (O.E.D.)

"Pretty" sometimes appears in translations of Plato, for example in the *Meno* (Edith Hamilton trans.), where Socrates refers to pretty young gentlemen liking pretty similes about them. Yet, unlike beauty, there is no dialogue on the pretty. In the *Gorgias* Plato refers to cosmetics (which might be seen as the art of making a body pretty) as a mere knack only intended to produce gratification or pleasure, as contrasted to gymnastics, which is a true art productive of the good.

The pretty only becomes philosophically significant in the Enlightenment. The main interest there is to distinguish it from beauty. Dominique Bouhours (1628-1702) believed, for example, that a thought should not be called beautiful if it is only pretty (i.e. merely pleasing) (Tatarkiewicz, *The History of Aesthetics*, 2005). Diderot, writing as an art critic in the 18th century, preferred strong male beauty to the elegant prettiness of the painter Francois Boucher (1703-1770). One anonymous commentator on the salon of 1751 complained that "everything is pretty in our century, but nothing is really beautiful." (Hyde, 2006) Ever since, the Rococo era has been associated with prettiness.

Early aestheticians seldom discussed the concept. For example, Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757) does not mention it. However, Santayana (*The Sense of Beauty*. 1896) observed that Burke treats beauty in

terms that read much like a discussion of prettiness, and that in doing so Burke makes the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime more extreme. (See Korsmeyer, 2006) When it was discussed the attitude towards prettiness was generally negative. Hume ("Of the Standard of Taste," 1757) does not mention the word "pretty" in his famous essay on taste, but he does speak of "frivolous beauties..[which] rather merit the name of defects" (comparison, he believes, is necessary to recognize these) and "a species of beauty, which, as it is florid and superficial, pleases at first" but is found incompatible with just expression of reason or passion, palls to the taste, and is eventually rejected with disdain, or at least ranked lower. He further writes that "the coarsest daubing contains a certain luster of colors and exactness of imitation, which are so far beauties" and would therefore be admired (wrongly, he suggests) by a peasant or Indian. Samuel Johnson, in his dictionary (1766), sums up 18th century attitudes to prettiness by defining it as "Beauty without dignity; neat elegance without elevation."

Kant, in his early work *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) focuses on the prettiness of women. He distinguishes between a pretty and a beautiful woman, the former only giving us non-moral pleasantness. He observes that very pretty persons can lack moral feeling. In *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), he uses the term "pretty" in its aesthetic meaning only once, saying that a poem may be very pretty and elegant but without soul (#49): only the latter is fine art. Kant does talk there at length about "the agreeable" which he distinguishes from "the beautiful. This term can be seen as playing a similar role to the pretty.

Somewhat similar to Kant, but with a feminist twist, Mary Wollstonecraft (*Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792) compared the pretty woman as a mere object of desire to the fine woman who inspires emotions through her intellectual beauty. The 18th century in general saw feminine taste as directed to the pretty and charming, whereas masculine taste was for the profound and difficult.

(Korsmeyer, 2006.) Flower painting, for example, was seen as pretty and was associated with women. (Parker, 1998).

The early 19th century was a period of heightened evaluation of the pretty. This was first attacked by John Ruskin, who in *Modern Painters* (1846), says that "there is not any greater sign of the utter want of vitality and hopefulness in the schools of the present day then [an] unhappy prettiness…" In 1863, Francis Turner Palgrave (1924-1897) called for avoiding saccharine prettiness, which he considered popular in England and Europe during that time (Codell, 1990). Friedrich Nietzsche is dismissive of the pretty. For example, Zarathustra (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1885, Walter Kaufmann tr.,) says, "Let the little girls say, 'To be good is what is at the same time pretty and touching.'" In *Human All to Human* Part II (1880, Paul Cohn tr.) Nietzsche says in one aphorism (#292) that to become beautiful a woman must not want to be considered pretty and should put aside thoughts of being pleasing.

By contrast, William Morris, saw "pretty" as high praise. In his utopian *News from Nowhere* (1890) a wondrous bridge over the Thames is described as having splendidly solid stone and graceful, strong arches. John Helmer (1979) has argued that Morris was well aware that words like pretty and quaint had negative connotations but sought to revive their more obsolete, positive, meanings to highlight problems with our current economic organization.

Andrew Cecil Bradley (*Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 1909) is the first to see the pretty as on a continuum, with the sublime on the opposite end and beauty, in the particular sense of that term, in the middle. For Bradley, "beauty" has two meanings, one referring to aesthetic qualities in general, and one to a specific quality which may be contrasted to such other particular qualities as the sublime and the pretty.

Clive Bell (*Art,* 1914) was severely critical of the pretty. For example, he saw a philistine as someone who believes "a beautiful picture is a photograph of a pretty girl…" He seems positive about the pretty when he says, of William Powell Frith's *Paddington Station* (1862), that, although it

"contains several pretty passages of color" it is not badly painted. However, he goes on to deny art status to the work, which he considers merely descriptive. In later sections of *Art*, Bell often uses "pretty" as a term of disparagement. For example, he criticizes officials of the Byzantine Empire for choosing pretty patterns over significant design.

Adolf Loos ("Ornament is Crime,"1913) and Le Corbusier (*Towards a New Architecture*, 1921) similarly attacked the pretty in design and architecture by way of their critique of decoration. Of various historical styles, including any with non-functional decorative elements, Le Corbusier says "they are to architecture what a feather is on a woman's head; it is sometimes pretty, though not always, and never anything more." In the 1970s and 80s postmodern architecture was often associated with prettiness because of its revival of decoration and playfulness. However, Robert Venturi, an originator of that school, contrasted the seductive prettiness of some postmodernists against his own work, which he said was either ugly and ordinary or gauche and intense. (Finkelpearl, 2001)

Two of the leading English-speaking aestheticians of the 1930s were John Dewey and Robin G. Collingwood. Dewey (*Art as Experience*, 1934) says little about the pretty. However, he sees aesthetics as covering everyday life as well as art and nature. In accord with this, and contrary to Loos and Le Corbusier, he has some positive things to say about decoration. He believes that humans have decorative needs that are filled by such artefacts as wall-paper, as well as by such natural phenomena as flowers and even by aspects of art. However, isolated external forms of decoration are, in his view, empty embellishments. Although Collingwood (*The Principles of Art*, 1938) also says little about the pretty, he observes that what he calls "amusement art" often consists of "pictures of pretty girls, variously dressed and undressed," thus implying that the pretty is a subject matter of amusement art, not art proper.

With the rise of analytic aesthetics came a new, more classificatory, approach to the concept. Frank Sibley in his "Aesthetic Concepts " (*Philosophical Review*, 1959) included "pretty" as one of his aesthetic concepts (along with beautiful, dainty, and graceful), seeing it, along with lovely, as a term that people with only moderate aesthetic ability can use. He later ("Objectivity and Aesthetics," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1968) observed that "pretty" is a "common generic term" like

"lovely" which is often used by "the many." Such terms are to be distinguished from those used by "the few" to make more subtle distinctions.

Although Francis Sparshott (*The Structure of Aesthetics*, 1963) thought of the pretty as part of a group of key aesthetic qualities that included the sublime and the beautiful, he gives it low status. After observing that it is applicable to feminine things and to pets, he says that it is not worthy of serious attention and is trivial.

Nelson Goodman (*Languages of Art,* 1976) mentions the pretty in a comment on the irrelevance of beauty to art appreciation. As he puts it, "Folklore has it that a good picture is pretty. At the next higher level, pretty is replaced by 'beautiful,' since the best pictures are often obviously not pretty. But again, many of them are in the most obvious sense ugly." The passage continues with a critique of the concept of beauty. In reply to Goodman, Ruth Lorand defends beauty, but in another article she associates the pretty with the cute, which, like Sparshott, she sees as trivial. (2007, 1994) Arthur Danto in his on-going critique of the role of aesthetics in art (*The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art,* 2004) speaks of Marcel Duchamp as throwing off the bondage to prettiness.

Not all contemporary theorists see the pretty as trivial or problematic, however. There has been a recent tendency to consider "pretty" and similar terms to be at least worthy of attention. John Morreall (1991) has looked into the concept of cuteness, and Robert Solomon (1991) has positively explored kitsch and the sentimental. (See also Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, 2012). Carolyn Korsmeyer (2006) has observed that the contrast between petty and beautiful may yield as many insights as that between the beautiful and the sublime. Like Bradley, she argues that pretty and beautiful can be seen as points on a continuum of aesthetically pleasing appearance, where what she calls "difficult beauty" is further up the continuum. Contemporary feminist film theorist Rosalind Galt (2011) is critical of the denigration of the pretty within film studies. She sees the pretty as a feminine form of seduction, ornamentation, and perversion, which needs to be defended to defend the image itself. (See Leddy, 2012b.)

In environmental aesthetics the pretty is sometimes denigrated: for example in attacking views of nature that are not environmentally sound. Aldo Leopold, however, somewhat like Korsmeyer, sees the pretty as on a developmental continuum: "Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words." (*A Sand County Almanac*, 1989, p. 96)

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