We must rescue art from the modern intoxication with ugliness.

—–ROGER SCRUTON

In his brilliant new book, *Beauty*, British philosopher Roger Scruton offers a fresh perspective on the cultural crisis in America. In an age of declining faith, he writes: “when art bears witness to our spiritual hunger and longing, the degradation of art has never been more apparent. And the most widespread form of (this) degradation—–more widespread even than the deliberate desecration of humanity through pornography and gratuitous violence—–is kitsch.”1 The problem of kitsch will come as a surprise to those conservatives who have been preoccupied, these last thirty years, with cutting government funding to the arts, citing hundreds of “objectionable” federal and state grants to artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Andreas Serrano, David Wojnarowicz and Karen Finley. The real problem, explains Scruton, is the general decline in American culture, which has unleashed a flood of mediocrity and tastelessness, reaching even the roof of the peerless Metropolitan Museum of Art with a ten-foot-high chromium-yellow *Balloon Dog* (2000) by Jeff Koons, the same artist who captured honors as the 1987 Whitney Biennial with a life-size ceramic of Michael Jackson in white face carrying bubbles, his pet chimpanzee. “Kitsch is not an artistic phenomenon, but a disease of faith,” writes Scruton.2

A hundred years ago, before the start of World War I, if you were asked to describe the goal of the arts, “beauty” would have been considered a reasonable answer. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, such an answer would be considered an end to one’s career. Some prescient artists and poets of the nineteenth century and already identified the first seismic cracks in Western values as a catastrophic loss of faith. They reflected upon its implications and nuances, incorporating them into the darkness of their poetry and art, which they called modernism. *The Waste Land* (1922) by T.S. Eliot is but one example of hundreds. Subsequently, scholars and historians would divide the decades of the twentieth century into a progressive series of art movements and manifestos, ending with a whimper in postmodernism. Surveying the rubble, a few scholars began to receive the prolonged spiral into chaos and disintegration, with beauty as the most obvious casualty. Missing was not only a demonstrable evidence of beauty, in all its various modes of expression and form, but the very idea of beauty as a goal, a criterion, an integral part of religipis faotj amd civilization. How this happened, with devastating consequences for the West, is the focus of Scruton’s book.

Scruton devotes most of *Beauty* to a philosophical overview of the subject, beginning with the ancient classical world. In the last chapter, he examines the cause of its rapid disappearance, and the subsequent rise of kitsch. *Kitsch* comes from a German word, which originated sometime in the nineteenth century as a pejorative for mass-produced, low-quality copies or derivatives of high culture, paintings, statues, ceramics, etc. In the nineteenth century, kitsch appealed to the middle class, the bourgeoisie, oblivious to its aesthetic defects but attracted by its sentimental, religious and patriotic iconography. During the age of Napoleon, almost every object, hand-crafted or mass-produced, bore some kind of patriotic seal, portrait or reference to the self-anointed emperor of France. The Empire style, favored by Jacques-Louis David, Napoleon’s First Artist and Minister of Culture, transformed the rococo designs, furnishings and fashions of the royal court of Versailles to conform to a classical spartanism. During the nineteenth century, a growing class of professional critics and histortians evaluated the qualities of art, which had become increasingly important in shaping publick opinion. Every advanced nation in Europe had a Ministry of Culture.
The unbearable vacuum of kitsch

That made sense in the 1950’s, when Abstract Expressionist artists were still inspired by aesthetic formalism. But modernism ran out of steam about the same time as the war in Vietnam did. The arts and popular culture experienced a precipitous decline in quality. The New York Times captured the moment in a full-page editorial in 1990, written by its senior art critic, titled “Is ‘Quality’ an Idea Whose Time Has Gone?” Freed from the “racist” standards of excellence and beauty normally associated with classical antiquity, the Renaissance and the old master, artist began to produce works that look more like crude toys. Their enablers were the critics, scholars, curators and collectors who joined in the intellectual Ponzi scheme, which seems to have anticipated the maneuverings of the banks and stock markets some decades later. Scruton doesn’t draw an analogy between the collapse of the economy and the collapse of the art world, but he could have. The Vietnam War era spawned a second revolution from the “racist, heterosexual, religious” educational and cultural institutions disconnect from modernism itself, which was now associated with the “formalist” evils of the Academy. Once that last tie was severed, there was nothing left to identify as quality or taste. Anything became art. Once the dikes were broken, there was nothing to prevent the flooding of the art world with junk and vulgarity. The politicizing of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation replaced the criteria of excellence and beauty.

Coming to America from Oxford University in England, Scruton paints a less terrible portrait than the period deserves. He understands the crisis philosophically, but he didn’t live it. I experienced that forty years, as first the high arts and then the so-called “low” arts or popular culture declined. Only Americans of a certain age can appreciate the golden age of American popular culture (1935-1960s), which not only preserved rigorous cultural and educational standards, but shaped the moral character of a generation that endured the Great Depression, World War II and the Cold War. Scruton refers to what came next, in his chapter “The Flight from Beauty,” as “the Disneyfication of everyday life.” But that’s not fair to Walt Disney. Being an Englishman, Scruton flourished between the two World Wars. Pinocchio, for instance, was released at the tail end of 1939, the year that produced the greatest number of screen classics in the hundred-year history of motion pictures.

Scruton paints a picture of us with a broad philosophical brush. He doesn’t go into detail about the tens of thousands of ugly, inane, banal, vacuous and scatological objects, big and small, that fill our museums, universities, urban buildings and public squares in New York, San Francisco and even the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Some of us have spent a lifetime arguing for taste and beauty. Scruton has captured the central issue in one word, kitsch. Our civilization has been persuaded to adopt a culture of kitsch—Koons’s puppy atop the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or his golden ceramic pig, the crown jewel of a recent Whitney Biennial. The Hollywood of John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, George Cukor, Elia Kazan and Stephen Spielberg now produces inane, plotless $100-million special-effect goop for the mind. The modernists who mocked the traditional works of the nineteenth-century Academy didn’t accuse them of irony and self-contempt, only of poor taste. Today’s kitsch is fueled by contempt, irony and self-hatred.

Scruton doesn’t yet recommend a Ministry of Culture for the United States, but his assessment of the present state of American culture couldn’t be lower. He blames the ‘relativism’ of our universities and cultural institutions, which dismiss critical judgment as purely subjective. “No tastes can be criticized, they argue, since to criticize one taste is simply to give voice to another, hence there is nothing to learn or to teach that could conceivably deserve the name of ‘criticism.’” The argument against relativism, and the subsequent destruction of all standards, is an argument that goes round in circles.
By condemning kitsch, Scruton provides not only a strong philosophical argument against it, but establishes a rallying point for artists, writers, architects and creative people in all artistic disciplines who are fed up with an establishment that embraces mediocrity and political correctness.

Scruton’s book *Beauty* is a solid, scholarly argument for a timeless philosophical foundation for the arts. For it is the arts, Scruton believes, that carry the message of beauty, excellence and spiritual hope from one generation to the next. “Beauty is a real universal value, one anchored in our rational nature, and the sense of beauty has an indispensable part to play in shaping the human world.” It is a message that Aristotle, Friedrich Schiller, John Ruskin and others have advocated. Its timeliness, in the face of so much detritus and loss of faith in national institutions, makes it appear fresh and cogent.

much of *Beauty* is devoted to its history and major themes: Judging Beauty, Human Beauty, Natural Beauty, Taste and Order, Art and Eros. The two names referred to far more often than any others are Plato (428 – 348 B.C.) and Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), which gives the reader some idea of where this book is going. Plato and Kant represent a cultural trajectory spanning some 2,000 years, when art and religion were inseparably bound. Scruton spends much time on Kant, because the German philosopher successfully argued that the contemplation of art should be divided into two separate categories: aesthetics and content. Most artists, poets, sculptors musicians and architects are aware of this separation; because of the demands of the medium they are intimately involved with—whether it’s marble, bronze, paint, words or film. Their job in the past had been to fuse the two elements of content and aesthetics together seamlessly, so the final result gave pleasure to our informed audience. Kant is very relevant to Scruton’s story of the way we were for 2,000 years, and the way we are now. Of course, it is not Kant’s fault that modern nations of the West began to favor aesthetics over content.

As in his earlier book *Culture Counts* (2007), Scruton sees the arts as the embodiment of beauty, as a spiritual remedy for the cultural collapse in America. This idea might be hard for many to accept, especially in light of the fact that, during much of the twentieth century, American culture permeated every other nation on Earth. However, at the start of the twenty-first century, the heritage of the recent past leaves us with high culture and mass culture that rival the intrinsic worthlessness of the hedge funds, junk bonds, mortgages and derivatives that have shaken our nation to its core. Those individuals and institutions who invested heavily in contemporary art are now slowly awakening to the painful fact that the value of much of the art produced in the last fifty years is no more than junk and kitsch.

The term kitsch also had political implications. Critics pointed to classical fascist artists, sculptors and architects such as Arno Breker and Albert Speer, with their chillingly cold, aesthetically inhuman work. In his powerful essay “The Practice of Beauty,” James Hillman blames fascism “for perverting discussions of beauty during most of the twentieth century” by their misappropriation of the subject of beauty, too often neglected by the political left. The term kitsch was also applied by left-wing critics, such as Dwight MacDonald, to the mass-produced popular culture of Hollywood and Madison Avenue. American modernists such as the New York School-theorists Clement Greenbrig and Harold Rosenberg, and Abstract Expressionist artists Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock used the term kitsch to dismiss the traditional nineteenth-century figurative art, exemplified by William Adolphe Bouguereau’s scenes of ancient mythology and classical feminine beauty. Greenberg’s argument against traditional figurative painting and sculpture was primarily an aesthetic argument in favor of “art-for-art’s-sake” and “action” painting, but he ignored a deeper problem, one that is relevant to our own time. By the start of the twentieth century, many Europeans had already lost faith in Western civilization. The horror of
World War I, with its racism, imperialism, hypocrisy and greed, confirmed the worst fears about the decline of the West.

The first seven chapters of Beauty are a historical and philosophical overview, from the ancient Greeks to the rise of modernism in the late nineteenth century. The eighth and final chapter begins with T.S. Eliot’s poem The Waste Land, which represents the Rubicon that separates the once fertile lands of Western civilization from the barren desert we have been traversing for most of the twentieth century. I don’t think Scruton ever uses the word postmodern or postmodernism to characterize the wasteland.

When Scruton identifies kitsch as the major cause for our cultural decline, he is no longer talking about the West, or Europe, or even the French avant-garde; he is talking about us. What was once a credible argument against traditional Western culture—compromised by the faults clearly evident by the close of World War I—has, by the end of World War II, been turned upside down. The art world, in the flush of victory, adapted the ruthless unbridled principles of the business world and began—as Suzi Gablik charges in her prescient 1984 work Has Modernism Failed?—to grind out mass-produced art-forms that increasingly presented beauty and quality as irrelevant to art. Instead, as Scruton points out, the left chose to abandon beauty for irony and kitsch. Everything that is demonstrably wrong about kitsch—its vulgarity, insincerity, tasteless and cheap qualities—was quickly validated by the cultural establishment.

Political kitsch was merged with the ironic tastelessness of post-modern art. The most sentimental gaudy, vulgar commercial products, such as lawn ornament or carnival prizes, were merged with posters of Marx, Mao and Che, curated with great fanfare at the major art museums.

The biggest difference between the modernists and the postmodernists is their take on the subject of kitsch. Modernism rejected the frayed traditional values of nineteenth-century postmodernist culture embraced the worst aspect of kitsch. Scruton selects T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land as “the most influential work of twentieth-century English literature” because the poem artfully describes the soulless desert quality of the modern city: “with images and allusions that affirm what the city denies. Our very ability to make this judgment is the final disproof of it. If we can grasp the emptiness of modern life, this is because art points to another way of being.” In other words, the alienation and despair captured so poignantly in Eliot’s poetry carry the seeds of beauty. In contrast, Scruton sees in the evolution of kitsch “not an artistic phenomenon, but a disease of faith [that]...has infected the entire world of culture.” This degradation of culture, he warns, is worse than the any degradation of humanity, worse than pornography and gratuitous violence. “Art cannot live in the world of kitsch, which is a world of commodities to be consumed, rather than icons to be revered. True art is an appeal to our higher nature, an attempt to affirm that other kingdom in which moral and spiritual order prevails.”

The mistake conservatives make is focusing on pornography, instead of mediocrity. Scruton encourages us to focus on excellence and beauty, and not to despair: “It is one mark of rational beings that they do not live only in the present. They have the freedom to despise the world that surrounds them and to live another way. The art, literature and music of our civilization remind them of this, and also point to the path that lies before them: the path out of desecration towards the sacred and the sacrificial. And that in a nutshell, is what beauty teaches us.”

And what is beauty? Scruton wisely avoids answering this riddle. So do we. To analyze beauty in terms of set rules or ideas is to fall into the trap of pedantsics. Beauty is like freedom; each generation has to fight for it.
NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 191.
4. Scruton, *Beauty*, p. X.
7. Ibid., p. 191.
8. Ibid., p. 192.
9. Ibid., p. 194.

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