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Original Research Article

An Analysis of Aesthetics in the Traditionalist's View (Frithjof Schuon, Burchardt, Rene Guenon, Coomaraswamy, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr)*

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Abstract

Aesthetics as the essence of art has always drawn the attention of intellectuals, critics, and philosophers. It has also been approached directly or implicitly by traditionalists. Traditionalism is a twentieth-century western school founded by Guenon, Coomaraswamy, Schuon and practiced by Burchardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Iran. The present study draws upon a cognitive approach to discuss some philosophical views and then examines the aesthetics-associated ideas of these five traditionalists. We attempt to criticize such views based on this assumption that the traditionalists' views on aesthetics are ambiguous and contradictory and irrational and include expressions devoid of truth or reality.

Ancient school philosophers' definition of aesthetics is mainly substantive and points to tangible matters. Comparatively speaking, the definition of traditionalists is merely vague, emotional, and contradictory. Such conceptualization has been extended to architecture and other arts. In many cases, this definition has even gone too far and caused ambiguity. However, the fact that many traditionalists have taken aesthetics for the truth itself is undeniable.

Keywords: *Aesthetics, Critics, Traditionalists, Symbol, Truth.*

Introduction

One of the major subjects discussed in defining and comprehending art is aesthetics¹, a matter related directly to feelings that only human beings most thoroughly appreciate it using their intuition and rational sense. Traditionalists have also greatly

admired "Beauty"² in their work. Publication and extension of their views on art and beauty date back to our country's history; however, what remains neglected is thorough critical assessments on these important school that has so deeply affected our intellectual, artistic, and cultural ground. Therefore, this study seeks to carry out a general review of some of the great philosopher's worldviews and then provide an introductory basis as well as critical and analytical scrutiny on Guenon³, Coomaraswamy⁴, Schuon⁵, Burkhardt⁶ and Nasr's⁷ views as world-

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famous traditionalists.

Up until now, beauty has been a case of study for aestheticians, philosophers, artists, and intellectuals and these studies can be broken down into two main spectrums. In certain belief systems, aesthetics is rather a divine matter and is taken for good deeds, especially in the ancient world and the traditional school of thought, beauty, good deeds, wellness, and nobility are of the same essence. What was good and noble was aesthetical and pure aesthetics was considered to be divine and found only in God's presence however aesthetics in the material world is rather a relative matter possessing some hints of the divine aesthetics. Indeed philosophers like Plato⁸ and Aristotle⁹ made different statements on aesthetics from Plotinus¹⁰, Baumgarten¹¹, and Hegel¹². So at first, we will take a look at the traditional view (that of Plato and Aristotle) on aesthetics and then head forward to Plotinus, Baumgartner, and Hegel's.

The beginning of philosophical reflection on aesthetics dates back to ancient Rome and Greece; when they took aesthetics for good deeds and had a moral approach towards it, unlike the new era in which aesthetics is mainly codependent with science and cognition. As a result, these studies were conducted based on knowledge rather than morality (Ghaffari, 2015).

Every phenomenon has its record in the past and its current state is in direct concern with that past and so conceiving a proper comprehension of their nature would be impossible without taking into account this history in which they were conceptualized and evolved. So to that end, though there might be numerous resources on our current subject in different library archives or websites especially focused on research articles, yet aesthetics in the traditionalist view, has never been thoroughly and individually studied as a case study therefore that doubles the need for research on this matter; and since it requires to review the extant studies to achieve the utmost model, the relevant studies were

reviewed; including: "the meaning of aesthetics in the traditionalist's view" by "Kamal Gharekhani and Hossein Ardalani", presented at the first home building architecture convention, "Traditionalists, aesthetics and art's hierarchy" by "Mohammad Hasan Ghafouri", a chapter in the bulletin of art and books academy, "at the presence of sacred art: art and aesthetics in Khaledeh's wisdom" by "Amir Hossein Farrokhzadnia".

Theoretical foundation

It should be stated that aesthetical concepts and traditionalists' views are mainly the basis, on which many of our key questions are raised in this research. Therefore, the above-mentioned concepts must be analyzed and examined in respect of their literal, terminological and operational nature.

Aesthetics is a philosophical branch discussing matters concerned with "beauty" and naturally matters resulting from critical examining of art. From the linguistic perspective, the term "aesthetic" in the Greek language hints at sensory perception, feelings, sensitivity (aesthesia), and also the sensible (aistheton). Yet, this term has appeared in many contexts regarding the sensible, the theory of beauty, and a certain branch of art's philosophy throughout the history of thought. The very deep connection between the science of aesthetics and the sensible is what could not be overlooked in the term's conception and definition (Afzal & Radi, 2014).

Traditionalism is a school that during these two past centuries has stood against modernity and its accomplishments to protect science, art, civilization, and supreme human values and to suggest appropriate solutions for the crisis-stricken western man. The most major claims of the school are acknowledging the sublime unity of religions, religion plurality, sacred science, and spirituality: the same goes for Khaledeh wisdom. Traditionalists have conceived their epistemological, ontological, and anthropological principles and premises based on the immortal

wisdom philosophy, and they have broadened it to different territories like the supernatural, religions, science, civilization, art, and ancient tribe's rituals. Subsequently, this approach has been gaining followers in the Islamic world as well in the last two, three decades (Behsoodi, Mohseni, & Salem, 2018). Consequently, concerning the theoretical framework of the current research, it is worth mentioning that this research follows a cognitive approach when outlining and criticizing the traditionalist's view on aesthetics. Thus the research utilizes a combinatory theoretical framework, such as putting to use existing theories and concepts and then challenging them in favor of the discussion. Hence the theoretical framework of this research is composed of reviewing the previous sources pertinent to our subject.

Research methodology

The current research can be categorized as a case study. To analyze and criticize the traditionalist's view on aesthetics, we used the qualitative method. Our approach to analysis was this research comparative (moving from the general to specific) the descriptive-exploratory. First, using content analysis, the total structure of the studied subject was outlined. For this purpose, we searched and extracted sources through library research. We also consulted available valid internet databases. The existing references were mainly pertinent Persian and translated books, articles, and studies. Finally, to achieve a distinctive and usable conclusion, the gathered data was analytically examined and challenged. It is hoped that this can create a positive path forward for studying traditionalists.

Philosophers and Intellectual's point of view on beauty

The word aesthetics was first used by Alexander Baumgarten in the 18th century, meaning to recognize through senses. Later, he used this word to hint at capturing beauty through senses, especially in

art. Kant took the word to a whole new level when he used it to make aesthetical statements regarding both art and nature. The concept is once again expanding its definition in these recent times (Gharekhani & Ardalani, 2014).

What the traditionalist theoreticians, or at least a certain spectrum of them, suggest when defining "beauty" is rather different from that of the philosophers and intellectuals of other schools. Up until this day, philosophers have proposed a variety of definitions for beauty. Since beauty is a relative thing, it is only natural that its definition and examples be the same. Those with clear sight have at times known beauty to be physical, and at times they have believed it goes beyond and belongs to the metaphysical. A certain group of old western philosophers took beauty the same as truth and believed in true beauty which is the absolute good. For Islamic philosophers, beauty's origin is the presence of God itself, one who carries the absolute beauty and whatever worldly beauty is only a reflection of that ultimate beauty shining from the world above, the world in which perfection is all there is. Now, we will exceed to quotes statements from some of the pioneers in western and Islamic philosophy then introduce and analyze the traditionalist's works.

Beauty in the old western philosophy

The founder of classic aesthetics, as perceived generally and in present and the past is Plato. Plato is among the pioneers who have ever thought about art and beauty and their social and educative characteristics (Zohali, 1987). To Plato, beauty has a real existence and all matters in the physical world are beautiful due to the share they get of the general beauty, in other words, the absolute substantive beauty (*ibid.*). Plato believes that to seek the ultimate beauty, one must start with the earthly beauties and gradually reach the original that is everlasting and absolute.

Quoting from Aristotle, in the world of art as well,

visible form is the very absolute, and visible cause is nothing but the absolute cause. There is nothing but passion for perfection and the beauty of the visible form in the actual cause also known as the artist. “The absolute cause resulted by the visible cause” (Aristotle, 1999, 470 cited in Norouzi Talab, 2019, 15). An artist makes the artistic thing; meaning he innovates artistic things to picture the idea of beauty. He/she doesn’t make the subject or meaning, all he/she can do is to create the form. The artist’s goal is to create beautiful forms (Norouzi Talab, 2019).

Plotinus describes the condition of beauty’s manifestation and fulfillment of artwork as such: “the soul can’t see beauty if it is not beautiful to start with. Hence, those willing to see good and beauty must first become similar to God. Because God is the origin of beauty. The soul is of a Godly nature and is part of the beauty, whatever it reaches, makes it as beautiful as it possibly can.” (Plotinus, 1987 cited in Norouzi Talab, 2019).

Baumgarten assumed a link between a human’s aesthetical awareness and his sensory understanding of beauty. He discussed in his book of aesthetics: aesthetics (theory of free art, ritual for the lower class’s awareness, the art of thinking beautifully) is the science of visible awareness. However, what Baumgarten means by the lower class’s awareness is being aware of the natural beauty which partly opposes the concept of artistic beauty as in art created by mankind. He considered artistic beauty as free art and believed in aesthetics to be the first step to recognizing the sensible (Ahmadi, 2016).

Hegel suggests that beauty is the rational outburst or the reasonable form of the visible (Safian, 2004). He believed that aesthetics is not a precise term and he argued that sensory comprehension is only one part of the philosophical work of understanding beauty and the title aesthetics is only putting light to that part. Hegel makes a distinction between art and natural beauty and he argues that artistic beauty is brought to life by a subjective soul and for that very

reason is superior to natural beauty. Thus, it appears that artistic beauty is superior and more sublime than natural beauty. It should also be mentioned that artistic beauty is conceived of the human mind organism and is superior to the natural beauty in the creation of which a human had no part. He states in a chapter regarding artistic art: “artistic beauty is the soul’s unmediated conception, so beauty appears in the soul” (Ahmadi, 2016).

Beauty from the traditionalists’ point of view

Schuon brings up his aesthetic opinions in Plato’s metaphysical system and the phrase allied to him that says beauty is the glory of truth. In his opinion, beauty, like the glory of truth, has metaphysical fundamentals (since it is not separated from the truth) and on the other hand, it is an objective reality (since it is the glory of truth). Schuon expresses in metaphysical fundamentals that beauty begins with manifestation and in fact, it is similar to perfection; it means that beauty, on the one hand, represents absolute and on the other hand, it represents illimitation. In the other words, in beauty, discipline is a symbol of absolute and mystery, is a symbol of illimitation. Also, both in nature and art, perfection is obtained from the coexistence of discipline and mystery. Beauty, the glory of truth has two aspects: mystery and discipline; Briefly, the source of beauty is the divine truth, or more precisely, it is illimitation or its creative aspect (Teymoori, 2015, 12-13).

From Schuon’s point of view, beauty is a spiritual concept. Beauty is not limited to art or anything else. The rational dignity of beauty gives this truth a universal state, so it can be reminded that the beauty is rational and even supra logical but it is not passing over the field of logic. According to Schuon, this is the intellectual truth within the beauty that connects it to God. As long as beauty is attached to God, it is worship and if it disconnects from God, it will be nothing more than an idol. It is now necessary to know on what basis Frithjof Schwan expresses the divine

origin of beauty. According to Schwann, beauty is a truth that springs from divine love (Farokhzadnia, 2015, 81).

Rene Guenon, whose thoughts have been very influenced by theorists after him, argues that: Symbol and secret are not purposes and it is merely a tool for another purpose. The sensory and physical aesthetic content of the symbol is not considered and attention to sensory aesthetics is considered a subsidiary issue by traditionalists (Mousavi Gilani, 2014, 45). Symbolism and symbolic attitude towards existence are among the most important teachings of traditionalists.

Coomaraswamy, after getting acquainted with Guenon's works, was influenced by his ideas in the field of traditional art and left valuable works. He stated his interpretations in the language of art and simultaneously he criticized modernity and the art influenced by it (Jawaani Joni, Kafshchian Moghaddam & Bozorgmehr, 2015, 33). Swamy has dedicated an ample part of his research to the importance of beauty functions, especially in traditional art. According to him, beauty is a tool that guides us to a purpose, and beauty itself is not the purpose of art. As far as he thinks in traditional art nothing is beautiful unless it is suitable for the purpose which it was made for. The general purpose of the work was to free the people living in this world from misery and lead the two bliss, that's why a traditional man will not be satisfied with merely enjoying what he should bless, because his mind is not focused solely on the surface of the aesthetic aspect of the work of art, rather it is focused on the true cause or logic beyond the beauty (*ibid.*, 37).

The motivation and logic behind beauty are not to create a beautiful structure but to achieve the truth. This is how Coomaraswamy sees function and practical role as the basis of the display of beauty in traditional art, not in its visual sight and appearance. As well as he is not only finding this kind of art useful but also considers it beautiful because of following

the correct examples (*ibid.*, 37-38). According to his opinion, anything that is made well and based on the truth is definitely beautiful, because perfection lies inside it. Since perfection and beauty coincide, the production process helplessly tends towards a beautiful manufactured; However, this way of achieving beauty is quite different from saying that the artist intends to discover and express beauty. In the workshop of a traditional master, beauty is not the ultimate cause of the work, but its unavoidable consequences (*ibid.*, 38). In fact, it should be noted that traditional arts were the same as decorative-applied, usefulness and application in everyday life were coincident with goodness, truth, and beauty.

According to Burckhardt, based on the spiritual worldview, the beauty of an artistic phenomenon is nothing but the transparency of its symbols; That is, the only art that is qualified for the title of art is that which combines truth and beauty (Faghfoori, 2008, 62). Burckhardt also considers beauty in Islamic art to be essentially a manifestation of general truth and believes that the source of beauty of objects is the attributes of divine beauty and perfection. An object is perfect or beautiful as far as it reflects one of the divine attributes (Norouzi Talab, 2019, 315). Burckhardt believes: From the perspective of Islam, beauty is inherently the manifestation of the truth of the form. In terms of its meaning, the content of the form and the beauty of the content are in accordance with the divine word and the revelation of the Qur'an. The rules of tradition and the spirit of tradition, between the arts, give the traditional arts a sacred dimension. The mission of art in the Islamic view is to honor the substance (*ibid.*, 282). According to him, beauty originates and flows from the esoteric and inherent truth of Islam. This inner truth is monotheism (*ibid.*, 294). Such interpretations and comments attributed to Islamic art have also existed in pre-Islamic and original Iranian art.

Nasr believes that beauty is a kind of function itself. The use of beauty is the human desire to satisfy the

need for beauty and acknowledge him towards what is reflected from the beauty. If we look at work of architecture in a physically way alone, architectural decoration will seem useless, in other words, in traditional art, the object was first made for a specific purpose and to meet a need, and then it was decorated and the beautiful side was added to the object this way. Hence, it is possible that, like nowadays, an applicational object lacks decoration and beauty, and a beautiful and artistic object lacks usage. It should be said that in the traditional world, these two aspects were seen not in width but in length.

In traditional works, the form serves the meaning and is not against its meaning (Peyghami, Peykani, Rezaei & Shakibi, 2020, 75). According to him, what makes sacred art aesthetic is not its design, color, and elegance. The greatness of a building like a mosque or a church is of course important, but what gives them eternal beauty is the resonance of the divine word and the presence of God in every corner of these buildings (*ibid.*, 75). But in general, what comes out of Nasr's words is that art, in his view, is indulgently something that has overshadowed the flow of life. Beauty is not the purpose and end of art, but art is the reflection of the manifestation of God's infinite beauty (*ibid.*, 73).

Critique of the traditionalists' point of view of aesthetics

Generally, aesthetics is one of the crucial topics in the definition and recognition of art that traditionalists are also attached great importance to art and (beauty) issue and in their works, they have dealt with the aesthetics of religious arts, including Islamic art, directly or implicitly. The most famous of them are reviewed in the following article. In the following, we will critique and evaluate these votes.

The views of the traditionalists are connected to the religious views and opinions, which is compatible with the views of Plato and Aristotle, while the views of philosophers such as Hegel, Baumgarten, and

Plotinus are empiricist and rationalist. It can be said that if according to the traditionalists, the originality of beauty is the truth itself and a transcendental matter and according to some philosophers, it relies on rational principles in tangible matters, in fact, beauty among the traditionalists and philosophers who mentioned in the present study is defined in two different phases.

The definition of beauty, according to traditionalists, is very different from its meaning in other schools and perspectives. From their point of view, beauty is not in the sight of the viewer, rather, it originates in the nature and essence of objects. They believe that God is the spring and source of all the beauties of the universe and that God is the absolute and true beauty and every other beauty in the universe is only a tiny display of that infinite beauty. Consequently, since God is the absolute beauty, there is no obscenity in creation. In other schools of thought, it is the viewer who considers an object or work to be obscene or beautiful and a single work may have a different effect in the eyes of two viewers. One considers it beautiful and the other obscene. Of course, If, Based on traditionalists' discussion say that beauty should always represent the truth, there will be no need for interpretation of human or divine beauty against pseudo or even evil beauty that are mentioned in different ways and in various schools of thought and culture, including the opinions of philosophers. However, the characteristics of true beauty, or in a sense, religious, are indicative that beauty does not always represent truth, but because of its characteristics, it can agree or disagree with the truth. Beauty can sometimes be opposed to truth.

On the other hand, traditionalists generally refer to a kind of beauty in works of art that has an existential dignity and contrasts with the usual sensory meaning, and what matters is the absence of such thinking in our cultural and traditional background on the beauty topic. In other words, the concept of beauty, as they see it, has no place in our intellectual and

historical tradition. Hence, there are various debates and disagreements around the feasibility of basically considering knowledge as Islamic aesthetics or not. As mentioned earlier, philosophers in general, with some disagreement, considered beauty to be a sublime matter. Some believe that beauty is only in reality, while others believe that beauty can exist in external aspects and nature. It is also important to note the differences between philosophers and traditionalists because somewhere the viewpoints are distant and elsewhere the viewpoints of traditionalists and philosophers are close. Obviously, in the world of tradition and the east and west of the world, beauty and goodness were one and were inspired by the divine origin. In the modern world and new thinking, where human intellect and will replaced revelation and gradually distanced itself from the divine world, the standards of aesthetics and art also underwent profound changes.

Conclusion

Beauty is one of the complex philosophical and relative concepts that philosophers, thinkers, and aestheticians have offered various opinions about it from the past to the present. Some have considered beauty to be based on truth and goodness, while others have considered beauty to be tangible and others have attributed it to the transcendent and the sublime. Muslim philosophers have assumed the source of beauty as transcendence and absolute, and have considered the beauties of this world as a parade of the beauty of the absolute Creator. A range of contemporary traditional philosophers and thinkers, in defining and analyzing beauty, especially its manifestation in the arts of the Islamic era, have resorted to emotional and poetic discussions, far from vague logic and interpretations that have obvious contradictions.

The relationship that some of them have expressed between beauty, truth, and then perfection is not logical and correct. On the other hand, the

traditionalists' consideration of the inherent and specific meaning and concept for forms and beauty as a symbol is also objected to, because different forms and beauties of art are conventional due to the goals and conditions that create them or the cultural context of their formation between different ethnicities and communities, and their meaning and concept also varies according to the culture of countries. In general, it seems that the definition of beauty provided by them is not comprehensive and complete, and in many cases mentioned earlier, it has many ambiguities and problems.

Endnotes

1. Admissible, pleasant, beautiful, pretty, fair, belle against ugly and obscene (Moein, 2003, 541).
2. Aesthetics
3. (1958-1886), Rene Guenon the famous metaphysician, mystic, famous French sage, was born in 1886 in the French Blois (Farokhzadnia 2015, 19)
4. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, is one of the most prominent traditionalist philosophers. He was born on August 22, 1877, in Ceylon. Coomaraswamy's Eastern roots linked him to Eastern religion and art and the creation of valuable artworks in the field of Eastern religious art. Coomaraswamy was influenced by Rene Guenon after his acquaintance with his works and left valuable works in the field of traditional art (Jawaani Joni, Kafshchian Muqaddam & Bozorgmehr, 2017, 33).
5. Fridtjof Schwann was born in 1907 in Basel, Switzerland. From the beginning, he became acquainted with Eastern and Western art. As a child, he was very interested in studying works such as Bhagavad Gita and One Thousand and One Nights, as well as Plato. At the age of 61, after the death of his father, he left school to study spiritual teachings and became acquainted with Guenon's works during those years. He was fluent in German, French, Arabic, Sanskrit, and English, and through this, he became acquainted with the works of Eastern wisdom, including Islamic mysticism. He traveled to North Africa and during this trip, he met Sheikh Alevi, one of the scholars and elders of the Shadhili dynasty, and converted to Islam and received the name of Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad from his sheik. Schwann extended Guenon's teachings and rushed to visit Guenon, and Guenon mentions him in his articles as our best friend and colleague. Schwann is fascinated by pure metaphysics manifested in sacred art, so he considers art and language to be such that they cannot fully accept the infinite divine beauty (Farokhzadnia, 2015, 67-69).
6. Titus Burckhardt was born in 1908 into a famous family in Basel, Switzerland. His father, Carl Burckhardt, was a Swiss sculptor, and his grandfather, Jacob Burckhardt, was a famous art historian. Burckhardt, in philosophy and the supernatural and the knowledge of the existence and the knowledge of the religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Maoism, Christianity, and Islam, and the traditional arts and alchemy and cryptography, is a preacher of the wisdom of the time and the sequel to Guenon, Kumaraswamy, and Schwann (Farokhzadnia, 2015, 97).
7. Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr was born in 1933 at Tehran. His father Seyyed Vali Ahl Nasr was a famous medic, researcher, congressman, cultural administrator, and president of the literature Academy of Tehran University. His mother also was a descendant of Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri. After graduating high school he traveled to the United States and got

his bachelor of physics from the University of Massachusetts. Then in 1956, he got his master of geology and geophysics from Harvard. Two years later he managed to get a PhD in philosophy and the history of science. He then returned to Iran and taught in many universities as well as Tehran University. He is the founder of the research institute of philosophy and wisdom in Iran and has held conferences and courses throughout the world (Farrokhzad Nia, 2015, 137). It is worth mentioning that Nasr's ancestor was a Sufi and Nasr himself was a sectarian and one who appraised Schuon, and he was also part of Shah's court and also of the Farah Pahlavi foundation.

8. (429-347 BC), One of the most astonishing writers in the western literary tradition and also one of the deepest, most comprehensive, most influential creators in the history of philosophy. He is a top-level Athenian citizen whose interest in political events and philosophical movements of his time can widely be seen in his work (Kraut, 2017, 14).

9. Aristotle (famous Greek philosopher) known as "the first teacher" was of Plato's pupils and founder of the Peripatetic philosophy. He was born in 483 BC in Stagira, a small town in North Greece (Masoumi, 97, 3).

10. Plotinus (203-273), is one of the New Platonic philosophers. He was born in Egypt and brought up in Alexandria (Bouzari Nezhad, Ghafari & Beenaye Motlagh, 87, 36).

11. Baumgarten (German philosopher 1714-1762) is known for aesthetic studies.

12. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (German philosopher 1770-1831) is an idealist philosopher who spoke of "The dying of art" and is one of the most outstanding aesthetics theoreticians (Pakbaz, 2015, 1640).

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