

# Even in Our Age of Ugly, Beauty Will Survive

“Beauty,” [wrote](#) philosopher Roger Scruton, “is vanishing from our world because we live as though it did not matter.”

Whatever we may think of Scruton’s observation, it seems clear our ideas of beauty are at best confused, at worst degraded, and always subjective.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is, of course, in many circumstances a valid proposition. A mother sees her baby as beautiful whether he is chubby or thin, sporting a thick head of hair or utterly bald. A college mathematics major can find beauty in a complex quadratic equation where others see only gibberish.

But then there are the more complex cases. A gallery of photos titled “[Before and after liberalism](#)” contrasts the images of young women, most of them high schoolers, with their university selves. To many viewers, the innocence and charm of these students in their first pictures will seem degraded by the shaven heads, tattoos, deadened expressions, and gender changes in the second pictures. Are these radical alterations appealing or appalling?

In the recent Miss Universe contest, where beauty is certainly a qualifier for entry, each contestant at one point is decked out, as Megan Fox [writes](#), “like a parade float.” The entrants are undoubtedly lovely, but their allure is buried beneath some of the most absurd costumes imaginable. The designers of this disaster have turned glamour into comedy.

And then there’s [The Embrace](#), a \$10 million, massive bronze sculpture unveiled on Jan. 13 on the Boston Common to honor Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife Coretta.

Inspired by a [photo](#) taken after King had won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize of King and his wife embracing, the monument aroused immediate [controversy](#). Many regard this sculpture of hands as an insult to both King and the black community. Quite a few have also described the statue as pornographic, noting that the sculpture resembles a giant penis.

The artist, Hank Willis Thomas, is clearly familiar with the human form, which then begs this question: Why not spend all that time, money, and metal on a recreation of King and his wife actually hugging one another?

As Coretta King's cousin Seneca [wrote](#), "Ten *million* dollars were wasted to create a masturbatory metal homage to my legendary family members—one of the all-time greatest American families."

In the photo that inspired the sculpture, we see a couple filled with joy, tenderness, and love, yet *The Embrace* engenders confusion and mockery in the viewer. Certainly *beauty* is not a word that leaps to mind when we look at this piece.

This acceptance and even celebration of the grotesque and the ugly exhibits itself across the culture. Future generations will surely gaze with stupefied wonder at our architecture, music, dress, vulgarity in language, nasty and divisive politics, declining liberal arts, and degraded, primitive art.

And yet...

Less than 20 minutes from my house in Front Royal, Virginia, is a tiny Catholic liberal arts school, Christendom College. On that campus, builders are putting the final touches on Christ the King Chapel, which some say should be more suitably called a cathedral. The chapel sits on the highest hill on campus, and the 116 foot Gothic tower and accompanying spires can be seen for miles. Incorporating 116 stained glass windows, pews, and other accoutrements, many of them purchased

from churches slated for demolition, this structure will seat 760 people. Its primary aim is to glorify God, to offer up a verse of thanksgiving in stone, marble, and mortar.

Some people familiar to me have criticized this building, pointing out, for example, that a more utilitarian structure would have cost less or that the money would have been better spent on the poor. Here we part ways, for I see instead a temple that calls people to worship, a monument to faith that will, if properly cared for, endure for centuries as a bridge between heaven and earth.

Those who designed, funded, and built this architectural gem clearly believe that human beings long for beauty and for her two siblings, truth and goodness. And if you've ever stood looking down in awe at the Grand Canyon or up at Michelangelo's *David*, if you've hiked in the forests and meadows of North Carolina's Cataloochee Valley, or if you've listened one evening to Henryk Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, then you too have probably experienced this joyful satisfaction of a yearning you may not have even known existed.

We can seek out, create, or fund such things as these and know that beauty is still alive. A culture can ignore or even banish beauty, but true beauty will never die. Like those tough flowers that push through a paved lot, fed by the sunlight and water of our heart's desires, beauty finds a way to blossom.

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