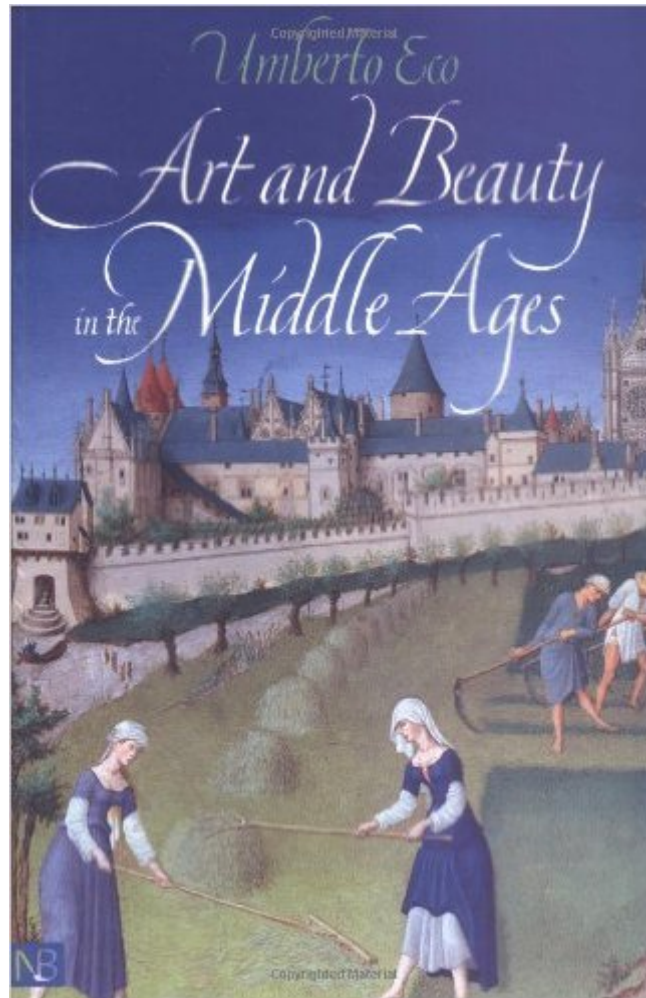


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Art And Beauty In The Middle Ages



Synopsis

In this volume, the Italian novelist and playwright Umberto Eco aims to present a learned summary of mediaeval aesthetic ideas. Juxtaposing theology and science, poetry and mysticism, Eco explores the relationship that existed between the aesthetic theories and the artistic experience and practice of mediaeval culture.

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Customer Reviews

This is a fascinating and enjoyable survey of the approaches to and embodiments of beauty in the Middle Ages through the 13th century, which is when the Middle Ages gave way to the High Middle Ages (which culminated - or bottomed out, depending on how you look at it - in the Protestant Reformations). Great theologians and mystics such as St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bernard of Clairvaux are dealt with, as well as lesser figures such as Hugh of St. Victor and Abbot Suger. Theology and mysticism, architecture and music, science, philosophy and even love poetry are brought together as Eco paints (no pun intended) a highly detailed exposition of the ways in which beauty shaped the lives of those in the medieval era. It is, in many ways, a tour through a land that is as strange as it is wonderful. The entire world - every created thing - was, early on, *seen* as a symbol that was to be read just as the Bible was read: with a sense that it existed not just as it was, but as something beyond itself too, pointing ultimately to God, for God had created it. Nature is understood to be what sociologists and philosophers would now call "enchanted": filled with mystery, depth, existential and metaphysical meaning. The rise of Aristotelian metaphysics (re:

science and philosophy as a single entity - they weren't separated back then) is what eventually quashed this such that the world was no longer seen as a cosmic spiritual thing so much as a created thing that could be studied as having its own laws. St. Thomas Aquinas, "the Angelic Doctor", did much to push this view and it eventually won out. The medieval era looks curiously modern in this regard.

An extremely important book that answers marvellously our prejudices against the Middle Ages. It explores in great details their literature and philosophy to show how people understood beauty then. He sees three phases. First the aesthetics of proportion in direct connection with the Greek mathematical heritage and the biblical teachings about the wisdom of the creation by God who projected his own balanced vision and essence in every single creature. Second the aesthetics of light which reveals a more sensorial and even sensual approach to beauty in the fact that light and colors are beautiful at first contact and felt as such without any reflection. Finally the aesthetics of the organism that sees beauty in the fact that a complex composition is the creation of perfect balance among all the elements that are themselves balanced in the same way at a lower level. The second great approach is that of allegorical and symbolical beauty. For philosophers and theologians beauty was to be found in the meaning of things and meaning was to be found in the allegorical and symbolical value of every element considered because for them nothing existed that did not represent the higher level of divine nature, divine perfection. Even a representation of the devil can be beautiful if it shows perfectly the ugliness of the beast in him. Yet Thomas Aquinas reveals his deeper sense of beauty in the fact that he provides this concept with a certain amount of autonomy. This autonomy had been in the air for many centuries but he is the first theologian to accept it as an important element in his evaluation of beauty. We find the same dilemma with art. At first art is nothing but what is produced by the manual work of people.

Quite often the middle ages are the forgotten link between the Classical period and the Renaissance. Moderns assume that Renaissance thinkers and artists rediscovered the works of ancient Greece and Rome and had this amazing and original break with medieval tradition. Umberto Eco (author of *The Name of the Rose* among other works) dispels this myth with this overview of aesthetic and artistic theory in the years from AD 500 to 1400. Eco shows the classical roots of medieval theory and theology. Platonic thought was dominant early on, where his ideal world of forms was the standard by which beauty and artistic craft were measured. Aristotle was rediscovered during the middle ages; his systematic approach was assimilated and imitated by the

Scholastics. The centrality of symmetry and proportionality for beauty began with Pythagoras's focus on numbers. That focus was re-enforced and enhanced by the biblical notions that creation is good (cf. Genesis's account of creation) and that the world was made according to number, weight, and measure (cf. Wisdom 11). The world is both good and knowable in a mathematical way. It conforms naturally to the transcendental notion of beauty--that which is seen as good gives delight. The medievals had much more to say about beauty than art. Beauty is a property all things have, both things in the natural world and things made by man. Often, artistic objects were judged beautiful by their symmetry to the world of ideals or of nature. Innovations in artistic theory were rare but not unprecedented. The theoretical trend followed the cultural trend--the great artistic achievements of the age were the cathedrals. They were built by many and varied artists whose anonymity was assumed. The work was done for God, not personal glory.

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