

Beauty and the beasts

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 6, 1999](#) issue

Beauty is back" was a disturbing cover story in, of all places, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 4). "Some Scholars Focus Again on Aesthetic Values," the subtitle explains.

"Beauty is back" would be an unnecessary headline in many corners of the world. You hear beauty when a gifted high school student effortlessly (which means after much effort) plays a flute number at a friend's memorial service. You see it in the eyes of new parents and their child. Beauty is never absent from most galleries, most museums, most concert halls or many a set of well-executed athletic maneuvers. Beauty never left the soup kitchens and shelters where Christ's people serve Christ's people, where the servers in turn are served with mumbled half-thanks and sometimes a surprising witness to joy after a hunger is satisfied. Beauty never left the eyes of couples, whether newly attracted or married 50 years, whose faces reflect the glow of love. Beauty is evident also in the handshake that binds the promises between the trustworthy, and in the voices of consolation.

If the *Chronicle* article is right, the one place you would have had trouble finding beauty this past year was the academy. The avant-garde continue to make great leaps backward in this area. Sutt Heller says aesthetics was missing at this year's Modern Language Association meeting, and only two of some 500 papers at November's American Studies Association meeting took it up. But eventually more of the experts will catch up. Giles Gunn, a professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, says: "The public doesn't understand--and isn't much interested in supporting--a humanities that doesn't address the aesthetic." Graduate students are restless for change, says Heller, who quotes Stanford's Marjorie Perloff: "They want to talk about literature. And the faculty are struggling to keep up with them."

Today's college faculties have busied themselves for a generation reducing literature to politics, which can stand on its own, or reducing aesthetics to the notion that beauty has to do with elitism. Harvard Professor Elaine Scarry observes: "The political arguments against beauty are incoherent." Plato, Aquinas and Simone Weil contended that "beauty assists us in our commitment to justice."

The lovers of beauty who have the guts to confront the theorists who avoid the difficult pursuit of aesthetics would not deny that connections between art and power can enthrall. They would not fail to bewail the ways that the search for beauty has been severed from the search for justice. They simply don't believe that poetry, music and art are only about dominance, hegemony and brute power. Few would deny that aesthetics needed shaking up until long-overlooked works by long-overlooked groups--e.g., those made up of women and racial minorities--were brought to light. But now some courageous academics are saying that some of what was brought to light does not stand the test of critical judgment.

John Carlos Rowe reports that he hears seniors in the academy say they entered their profession because they love to read. He responds: "Sure I love to read. But there are limits to enjoyment." Not in the biblical mode: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." In God's realm there are "pleasures forevermore."