

Nefer

The Aesthetic Ideal in Classical Egypt

Willie Cannon-Brown

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Dedicated to

*My parents
Robert and Joanna Cannon*

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Chapter One

Introduction

Extensive works have been undertaken on the study of ancient Egypt from anthropological and archeological perspectives. Some of these works include the writing system (hieroglyphics), art, architecture, sculpture, models, pyramids, temples, and tombs, mummification, and the daily lives of Egyptians. A large body of literature focuses on religion. Even though Serge Sauneron (1960) and others recognized that to understand ancient Egypt, it was necessary to understand other African cultures; no studies have been conducted on the aesthetics of ancient Egypt from an Afrocentric perspective.

Aesthetics, derived from the Greek work *aisthētikos*, generally means a sense of perception. Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) was “the first to coin the term Aesthetica and to use it to connote a “special science” in his dissertation on nature of beauty in poetry. Some early contributors to the field of aesthetics include Plato, Aristotle, Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), Immanuel Kant, and Benedetto Croce (1856–1952). Later writers on the nature of beauty include Hans-Georg Gadamer (1977/1986), Wassily Kandinsky (1977), and S. (Subrahmanyam) Chandrasekhar (1987) and Kariamu Welsh-Asante (1994).

The aim of this work is to use an African methodology, specifically the Dogon methodology, to discover the aesthetic ideal in ancient Egypt. *Giri so* (fore-word), *benne so* (side-word), *bolo so* (back-word), and *so dayi* (clear-word), are the four degrees of word knowledge.

To apply the *giri so* level to this study, it is necessary to examine existing literature. Chapter Two deals with a review of the aesthetic tradition. The next level, *benne so*, requires using information from *giri so* to reveal new knowledge. The application of this level is the identification of Afrocentric elements for methodological consideration, which are delineated in Chapter Three. The meaning of the Divine, the Beautiful from an African perspective discussed in Chapter Four uses knowledge from the two levels

to reveal *bolo so* (back-word). *So dayi* (clear-word) is achieved at the end of the final investigation. Chapter Five deals with the internal framework that will lead to comprehensive view of the aesthetic ideal in ancient Egypt from inside. The word Egypt can be traced to Amarna “Hikuptah.” Notice ptah, the god responsible for naming things and the god of crafts, is included in this word. Aigyptos from Greek and Egypte from French are more familiar terms to identify ancient Egypt but the people themselves used the word *Kmt* (Kemet). Kemet is the term used to refer to the country, and the people of Kemet are referred to as Kemetians.

The proposition is that the aesthetic ideal in Kemet is the divine concepts of *maat* (truth and justice) and *nefer* (beauty, perfection, and goodness). Although it has been said that *nefer* is one of the most used words in the language, the people of Kemet did not leave a definitive definition of beauty; *maat* and *nefer* are apparent ideal themes in the style of life for people of Kemet.

RATIONALE

Early European scholars, forerunners of modern anthropology, established the paradigm of anthropology by observing phenomena and recording their observations. Champollion the Younger, a Frenchman who deciphered the hieroglyphics from the Rosetta Stone in 1822, and other European scholars have contributed to a lens through which one knows or learns what the Kemetians said and how they lived their daily lives. However, it has been since the 1960s that Africans have undertaken a study of ancient life and culture; so new insight has been gained about the true understanding of the language, life, and culture of the Kemetians. The aesthetic ideal of Kemetians and how aesthetics is influenced by their values and beliefs and manifested in their daily lives is one area that remains to be investigated.

Molefi Kete Asante (1991), as quoted by Ama Mazama (2003), defines Afrocentricity as “the study of the ideas and events from the standpoint of Africans as the key players rather than victims” (p. 5). This study is a study of Kemetetic aesthetic philosophy; therefore, the use of the Afrocentric paradigm is necessary. It will add to the body of literature that will help to “rescue and reconstruct ancient history and culture as part of African history and culture” (Cheik Anta Diop 1981, p.12).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although a number of studies have looked into the various ways the Kemetians viewed art, there is no adequate Afrocentric understanding of what

constituted Kemetian aesthetics. Most studies of Kemet have used an anthropological and archeological lens to examine the lives of the people of Kemet. Writers who have been interested in the archaeological or anthropological aspect of the society have not ventured into the causes of the failure of the society conceivably rooted in the spiritual decay of the community. Thus, the problem is how to gain an insight into this process. A number of questions can be formulated to reach a conclusion. What constituted Kemetian aesthetics? Why did the Kemetian civilization fail? Was the failure caused by a decay of spirituality in the behaviors of royalty and/or the society at large? Was it a breakdown of the divine aesthetic ideal in the society?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between *maat* and *nefer*, i.e. (perfection, goodness and beauty), and *maat* (truth and justice) in both social character and the aesthetic ideal in Kemetian life. It is no secret that *maat* and *nefer* were concurrently tangibly manifested in the Kemetian pyramids, temples, tombs, obelisks, and system of writing. Moreover, *neferu* is obvious in the elaborate rituals, festivals, business affairs, governmental affairs, military affairs, and personal adornment of the gods, as well as in the behaviors of living and transcended humans.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

An extensive investigation of *nfru (neferu)* and *maat* as the ancient Africans in Kemet's aesthetic ideal can be investigated on individual aspects of the society. *Maat* and *nfru (neferu)*, or the aesthetic ideal, is a complex ancient African philosophical concept that is boundless, interrelated and circular. This study will treat the aesthetic ideal from a holistic perspective rather than examine isolated parts of a whole. For the Africans in ancient Kemet, the Greek definition of aesthetic does not sufficiently describe the African concept of beauty; hence, the concept *nfru (neferu) and maat will be used throughout the study to replace the Greek word aesthetics, derived from aisthētiko.*

Chapter Two

The Aesthetic Tradition: A Review

HISTORY OF AESTHETICS

Aesthetics, derived from the Greek word *aisthētikos*, means “of sense perception.” Perception is how individuals think, feel, and make decisions based on, for the most part, the thoughts and feelings of the group to which they belong. This sense of perception comes out of the lower right quadrant of the brain, which governs emotions about tastes and feelings that are attributed to beauty in a creative or imaginative activity, especially the expressive arrangement of elements within a medium.

Although Plato (427–387 B.C.) was the first to express a need for standards of beauty in artistic expressions as a philosophical problem in Greece after his visit to Egypt, the term *aesthetica* was first coined and used by Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) in his doctoral dissertation on the nature of poetry, published in 1735. So the quest to understand the nature of truth and beauty in Western art forms ensues.

Benedetto Croce (1856–1952), an Italian philosopher, credits Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) as “the first discoverer of aesthetic science.” Croce, however, “made the field itself of aesthetics philosophically respectable, as a result of his having made an excellent case for its primacy in the understanding of human life.” (Romanell 1965 p. ix) For Croce, philosophy is defined as the “Methodology of historiography.” (xxiv) Croce’s aesthetic philosophy is spiritual in nature; hence, for him the first phase of the spirit corresponds to aesthetic form, the second to its logic, the third to its economy, and fourth to its ethic.

In Part I of his book, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1977/1986) explicates the relevance of the beautiful in art as play, symbol, and festival. In Part II, he addresses the festive character of theater, composition and interpretation, image and gesture, the speechless image, art and imitation, on the

contribution of poetry to the search for truth, poetry and mimesis. He also discusses the play of art, philosophy and poetry, aesthetic and religious experience and intuition and vividness.

Wassily Kandinsky (1977) in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, examines the spiritual revolution in art, the psychological working of color, the language and form of color, and finally, art and artists.

S. (Subrahmanyam) Chandrasekhar's (1987) book, *Truth and Beauty: Aesthetics and Motivations in Science*, is a collection of lectures that deal with questions of aesthetics and motivation, the aesthetic base of the general theory of relativity, and the final lecture deals specifically with "Beauty and the Quest for Beauty in Science." The major themes in the lectures are the quest for beauty in science and the origin of the different patterns of creativity in the arts and in the sciences.

WESTERN CONCEPT OF BEAUTY

Beauty . . . How is it defined? How are standards set to judge the value of beauty? Who sets the standards for how beauty is to be perceived? The etymology of a relatively modern word (c. 1275) beauty, from the Latin word *bellus*, suggests judgments of appearances, especially of women and children. One abstract definition of beauty is for the greater part, some quality in bodies acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses. Another definition is combined perfection of form and charm of coloring as affords keen pleasure to other senses, e.g. sight or hearing. A concrete definition of beauty is "A beautiful person or thing; esp. a beautiful woman." It is also used colloquially to mean an exceptionally good specimen of something. The concrete meaning "a beautiful woman" is first recorded in 1483. The definition of the word beauty has been expanded and applied in several ways.

After careful consideration of beauty as a philosophical concept, George Santayana (1955) calls

the "philosophy of beauty a theory of values" . . ."the definition that should really define must be nothing less than the exposition of the origin, place, and elements of beauty as an object of human experience. We must learn from it, as far as possible, why, when, and how beauty appears, what conditions an object must fulfill to be beautiful, what elements of our nature make us sensible of beauty, and what the relation is between the constitution of the object and the excitement of our susceptibility (p. 11).

THE MEANING OF ART

The etymology of the word art “can be traced to the Greek word “*ἀρετή*,” which means excellence of a person, an eminent endowment, property or quality. It also means ability, fitness, solidity, soundness, and proficiency. Socrates linked the meaning of the word “*aretai*” with self-knowledge as well as with moral excellence or virtue.” (John C. S. Kim 1994, p. 20) Art is generally defined as high quality conception or execution found in works of beauty; such as that found in productions such as plastic art, architecture, music, dance, poetry, literature, religion, festival, celebration, science, and religion. Croce (1962) cautions “the doctrine which defines art as the pleasurable has a special name (hedonistic aesthetics) . . . it appeared back in the Greco-Roman world during the period of romanticism, prevalent in the eighteenth century and flourished again in the second half of the nineteenth century. . . .” (p. 11). The intent of medieval art was to educate the followers of the faith; therefore, art and religion as opposing concepts were introduced to the Western world because of the dualism created by Christianity (bear in mind, not by the Greeks) between body and soul. In this context, to invest in one’s body was to take the focus away from the soul; therefore, beauty and art in depictions of the body were deemed profane and sinful.

THE MEANING OF THE BEAUTIFUL FROM AN AFROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE

In the African context, the concept of beauty and good are synonymous. Dona Marimba Richards (as cited in Welsh-Asante, 1996, p. 73) says, “The meaning of Western aesthetics and standards of beauty implies the development of ‘taste,’ which can be created.” Welsh-Asante (1996) argues that “Aesthetics reflects and expresses cosmology, sometimes explicitly” like those in the Kemetian creation scene and “as in the headdress of the *Gelede* (Nigeria) and sometimes only by implication. Explicit in the cosmology are symbols that permit us to follow the patterns that connect or tie it to the general aesthetic (p. 16).” Welsh-Asante has selected the *Kiswahili* word *Nzuri*, which means good and beautiful, to talk about African aesthetics. *Kiswahili* and other African languages use the same word to refer to the concept of beauty and good interchangeably. *Iwa* is the Yoruba word for good and beautiful. For example, one might say *Ōlẹwā*, which means s/he is beautiful and has good conduct and is reflected in selected African languages such as Igbo, Aja, Nhosa, Lingala, Fon and can be used to show evidence of linguistic and cultural connections to ancient Kemet. In his essay,

“*Mpai*: Libation Oratory,” Abu Shardow Abarry points out that for the Ga people of West Africa “to be good or moral then is to do things that bring dignity, satisfaction, respect, peace, happiness and prosperity to fellow humans and the community” (as cited in Welsh-Asante 1996, p. 88). African character is beautiful character. Good character and physical beauty are logically concatenated.

One example of the African concept of feminine beauty is found in Sylvia Ardyn Boone’s (1986) study of feminine beauty among Mende females. Beauty for the Mende is physical, metaphysical, and an historical fact. “Beauty as a concept in Mende thought operates on three planes of existence—in the world of spirit, in the world of nature, and in the life of humans. . . . *Haenjo* is the person who in her appearance most approximates the canons of perfection.” *Nyande* means both to be good and to be beautiful. Women are expected to be beautiful, graceful, delicate, curvaceous, pretty, clean, fresh, perfumed, groomed and adorned. Moreover, they are expected to be good, kind, sweet, patient, gentle, modest, loving, helpful, cheerful, honest, and understanding (Boone 1986, pp. 129–138). An Igbo woman said that in her culture beautiful would never be used to describe a woman’s physical beauty if she displayed what the community determined to be bad character.

Another example of the concept of African beauty is further illustrated when Malidoma Patrice Somé (1994) writes:

His [the priest of the earth shrine] appearance was unearthly . . . *Kyééré* had abandoned any notion of external aesthetics, but one could see beneath the surface of his wasted body a spirit far more beautiful than any representation of the divine. The experience of such a spirit made me disregard the ugliness of his body as something superfluous to the expression of beauty, integrity, honesty, and genuine life that glowed all around him.

Kyééré was an old man, so Somé says he abandoned any notion of external aesthetics, not that he never paid attention to outer appearances. Somé continues to ponder how outward beauty is viewed and what it really reflects about the reality of lives (p. 184).

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN ART

Willie Abraham (1962) helps in understanding the role of Kemetian “art” in the people’s lives when he talks about Akan art form:

The Akan expressed their philosophico-religious idea through art, through the timeless, immemorial, silent, and elemental power so characteristic of African traditional art. Indeed this is the main reason why it was not lifelike in a representational sense. Forms had to be distorted. In art there was a moral-philosophical preoccupation, which led it to portray forces of the world. To portray a force, it was essential that it should not be treated like something assimilated, and consequently like something overcome, as the rendering of it in lifelike figures would have been (p. 111). Moreover, Kofi Awoonor, (1976) says, “It is in the relationship between man and the first ancestor, the Creator, that art becomes a proper instrument of man’s world and an expression of the world beyond the grave” (p. 54).

In an article titled “Elements of the African Aesthetic” (The Global Gallery Online, 2004, May) presents four elements of the African aesthetic:

The first element is the **resemblance to a human being**: African artists praise a carved figure by saying that it “looks like a human being.” Artists seldom portray particular people, actual animals, or the actual form of invisible spirits. Rather, they aim to portray ideas about reality, spiritual or human, and express these ideas through human or animal images. The next element is **luminosity**. The lustrously smooth surface of most African figural sculpture, often embellished with decorative scarification, indicates beautifully shining, healthy skin. Figures with rough surfaces and deformities are intended to appear ugly and morally flawed. The third element is **self-composure**. The person who is composed behaves in a measured and rational way; he or she is controlled, proud, dignified, and cool. The final element is **youthfulness**. A youthful appearance connotes vigor, productiveness, fertility, and ability to labor. Illness and deformity are rarely depicted because they are signs of evil.

For this discourse, it is useful to recognize that Western philosophical nomenclature leaves room for a worldview without God as the beginning of existence; therefore, Western philosophical nomenclature is inadequate to examine and explain concepts within an African worldview. In an article published online titled “Locating a text: Implication of Afrocentric Theory,” Molefi Kete Asante argues: “words have function, meaning, and etymology.” For Cheikh Anta Diop (1981), “in order to understand a people, it is necessary to understand three cultural factors—historical, linguistic, and psychological” (pp. 211–219); hence, it is imperative that vocabulary from African languages be selected and defined to describe