

d?

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This question has been at the heart of so many debates over the centuries that it is hard to sum them up. In the Western tradition of Ancient Greece, philosophers such as Plato developed the notion of *kalóagathia* to signify the expression of goodness in beauty. In both the Ancient Greek and Roman traditions the connection between beauty and goodness was thought to be God-given. The artists needed to remember and locate a perfect pattern or proportion that was to be found in *nature* and created by the gods. One such beautiful thing to be found in nature was the *human body*, the most central element in the history of Western beauty. The Greeks represented the human body, often naked, with a subjective perspective in mind, to be read or interpreted by a human eye. For instance, the famous *Discobolus* sculptures and its many replicas from Roman times until today, were meant to express the beautiful moment at which a young man powerfully launches the discus from his hand. By

looking at this sculpture we can practically feel the moment of the launch. The “beauty” in it lies in the idea that the sculpture captured the exact moment at which the launching occurred.

Capturing bodily movement and its dynamism has never ceased to excite artists. Over time, artists tried not to merely capture the “inception” or “description” of a movement but also its effects on our human perception. The invention of photography and the cinematograph at the end of the 19th century put on the table a whole new way of seeing movement in time. In the painting *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* from 1912, for example, the futurist Giacomo Balla showed the effects that “chronophotographism” had on the way we see movement, in this case a little dachshund walking on a leash next to a lady whose dress is moving in synchronicity with the dog’s moving paws. Fast-forward to recent documentaries about basketball or soccer, where many different camera positions capture the motion of a unique athlete’s body and powerful moves. For instance, the documentary *Zidane, A 21st Century Portrait* (2006) by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, was shot with seventeen synchronized cameras positioned around a stadium in order to capture a spectrum of movements by the soccer star that would be impossible to see at the same time from a single anthropomorphic perspective. During the editing process, Zidane’s athletic movements, which were captured in different ways, close, wide, extreme close, up-side down, etc., were intercut in ways that our human perception would never be able to perceive on its own. The power of filmic narration allows us to disassemble and reassemble movement in its singular parts to understand the overall feeling that something like “playing soccer” produces.

We have never stopped wondering about the natural physiognomic possibilities of human

bodies. The body has not only been the reference point for Western beauty standards though. For example, in the Kayan tradition of Myanmar, rings are used to extend the necks of girls to create a resemblance to a dragon shape, a symbol of motherhood. As this example and the *Discobolus* show, beauty is not grounded in nature itself, even if nature might be a reference point, but is a construction of culture and a belief-system. Beauty “says” how a culture wants a particular body or body part to be seen and perceived: the discobolus is a beautiful, strong, muscular athlete; the neck-stretched Kayan girl is a beautiful mother to be.

These examples demonstrate that the spirit of *kalókhagathia* has never left the construction of beauty. While we are learning values and judgments about the appearance of these bodies, we are also being informed about their supposed morality. This idea of beauty may also lead to its dark side. In the 18th century, Johann Kaspar Lavater, a popular Swiss doctor, categorized and ranked people into types using their bodily traits, such as skull size and the shape or setting of the eyes. In his famous drawings, he claimed that “a less bent forehead” or “a less prominent nose” would be an indication of a person’s inner and outer beauty. This kind of physiognomic reading became very popular in the 19th century with Sir Francis Galton, Charles Darwin’s cousin, who applied the newly invented technique of portrait photography, which he believed was an “objective technology,” to develop averaged composite faces for his work in statistics.

These same composite photographs are today created by algorithm and used to average out irregularities and create the “golden mask of beauty”¹ that is used from cosmetic surgery to photoshop-ping. The new god of beauty is the computer. One decisive factor, however, remains the same from

Ancient Greece to today's digital makeover culture. Beauty and the change of a face or some other body part are supposed to bring out the "better self" that was always there, but in need of a particular technology or device that supplies a perspective that allows it to be seen. In this sense, the construction of beauty, as the term "construction" indicates, figures beauty as having to be "carved out" by humans in order to be complete.

1 The golden mask, or Phi mask, consists of a series of lines that define ideal face characteristics and proportions. Conceived by Stephen R. Marquardt, an American maxillofacial surgeon, the mask was created by analyzing the physiognomic traits that embody the universal canons of beauty.

