

# Midterm Portfolio W06

Miriam Heiss  
HUM110

# What Constitutes Beauty?

Beauty in art means that one is able to relate to the art, or place themselves in the piece of art. The paintings I look at the most are the ones that allow me to place myself in them, the ones that invite me to think and reflect. I can't see myself in portraits, and I can't put myself in an idyllic pastoral scene (like those painted by Thomas Kinkade) and expect to gain any sort of edification or see things from a new perspective. The music I listen to the most are the songs that I can relate to, or aspire towards. Art is meant to help people understand and explore the human condition, both for the creator and the consumer. If it's not relatable, if I can't find myself in the art, then it is nearly impossible to see it as truly beautiful.



# Visual Art

Albrecht Dürer, John Linton Chapman, Giovanni-Battista Piranesi, and Georgia O'Keeffe



Christ Taking Leave of His Mother  
Albrecht Dürer  
1504



This is a wood engraving depicting Christ leaving His mother, before He was arrested and crucified. It is incredibly detailed, with very delicate lines making fabric look crumpled and wood look worn. It also conveys different emotions through faces and body language, in a very impressive way considering the small size and the medium used.

I'm not sure if Dürer had a specific intent behind this piece of art, but it was possibly to contextualize the events of the Bible. One of the women in the scene is wearing typical clothes for a late 15th century peasant. Perhaps Dürer wanted people to think about the event depicted as something that could take place in a time contemporary with the viewer.

I think this piece of art is beautiful because it fulfills Roger Scruton's criteria for beauty, as well as my own. It invites contemplation and taps into our imaginations. Mary is faceless, allowing the viewer to put themselves in her place, imagining how they would act around the Savior in that situation. The piece is relatable for all viewers. People play different roles throughout their lives, perhaps they are drawn to the woman comforting Mary because they have needed a comforter or have given support to someone. Maybe their attention is on the woman in the middle, seemingly numb and helpless, because the viewer has felt that way. Dürer allows viewers from all times and all emotional states to put themselves in this piece, which makes it beautiful.



Via Appia  
John Linton Chapman  
1867



The painting on the previous slide is named after the Appian Way in Rome, one of the oldest Roman roads. It depicts an abandoned, broken road with the ruins of a vaguely Roman society, with 2 figures to the left of the main dilapidated building. It's quite a bright scene, with the majority of the painting being a clear blue sky.

John Linton Chapman was born in a southern city while slavery was still very prominent. Many scholars believe this scene was commentary on how the Confederacy fell, and how the government attempted to rebuild the region. I agree with this interpretation, I think the wasted landscape shows that the Confederacy fell, but that the ruins go deep into the society. I think Chapman also wanted to show that there is a greater possibility to rebuild, with the open sky. Even if the past culture is ingrained in the society now, there is still a way for the South (and other cultures) to move beyond antiquated ideas.

I consider this painting beautiful because it allows contemplation and shows potential, or something for the viewer to aspire towards. It invites the viewer to move past old ideas, and look to the future for bigger, brighter opportunities. It shows that despite how broken society is—past or present—there is the potential for rebuilding and improvement. One could also reflect on their own life, and realize that no matter how broken they are, there can always be new growth, as seen in the plants growing on the large crumbling brick building. The viewer can also place themselves in the shoes of the two figures. It invites questions and more contemplation about what they were doing that caused them to rest? Are the ruins they look out on their own or some monument from a great society in the past? The questions generated and the thought that goes into the interpretation of the painting allows it to be beautiful, because the viewer can relate or place themselves within the art.



The Drawbridge  
Giovanni-Battista Piranesi  
1761

This is an etching of a fantastical building with winding and seemingly endless stairs. There is a large drawbridge in the center, and ropes sweeping down. It is part of Piranesi's series *Carceri d'invenzione* ("Imaginary Prisons") which are all pieces made of seemingly impossible architecture.

Piranesi made all of the *Carceri d'invenzione* to fit with the 18th century "sublime," meant to induce feelings of awe and terror. There isn't a known reason, but perhaps he was exploring his own mind, as the enclosed spiraling seems to be similar to how one might view a brain. Small and enclosed, but infinite and confusing at the same time.

I consider this beautiful because I can put myself in the piece of art. Not physically, but mentally. It invites introspection and reflection to the state of my own mind, and taps into my imagination. Am I spiraling infinitely, thinking forever and getting nowhere? I can also ask myself where I would consider myself to be in the sketch. It also conveys the human experience of decision and consequence. Many people think and overthink whatever action they take, leading to indecision. That's an option, shown at the bottom, with the people standing in the shadows on the stairs. No decision gets you nowhere, and making the wrong decision may be daunting and scary, but one has to move along their path somehow, because being stuck feels worse than not moving at all.

Red Barn, Lake George, New York  
Georgia O'Keeffe  
1921

I don't consider this painting to be beautiful for multiple reasons. First of all, I personally don't find it particularly aesthetically pleasing. But it also fails to meet other standards of a beauty that is deeper. There is not a lot in the painting that can help the viewer understand the human experience. The only thing I could understand from O'Keeffe's painting was a fear of the unknown, which is the first thing I thought when I looked into the gaping hole of the barn door. But I don't think the message of fear is very beautiful. Showing a fear that is overcome, inviting introspection as to why one may have that fear, or at least leaving some sliver of hope is what makes things beautiful, because humans aspire for hope.



# Music

Laufey, mxmtoon, Olivia Dean, and Taylor Swift



# Laufey - Falling Behind

"Falling Behind" is from Laufey Lín Bing Jónsdóttir's 1st album, "Everything I Know About Love." It uses bossa nova elements in the rhythm and in the instrumental color of the song. It primarily uses piano and drums to isolate her vocals, creating a warm, cozy feeling, with lyrics evoking relatable feelings of longing and melancholy.

Laufey wrote her song "Falling Behind" to express how she felt as a 22 year old who didn't have anyone. She had just moved to Los Angeles and felt as if nothing was going her way, and that she wasn't keeping up with the fast paced life of her peers. She felt as if all her friends were falling in love or in relationships, and she wasn't, and she discovered that other people felt that way as well, and wrote a song for all the "hopeless romantics" to let them know they are not alone.

I consider this song beautiful because it helps me better understand the human condition, invites further contemplation, and expresses very common aspirations. In the song, she expresses that she feels very alone, which is a very common human experience. Realizing that other people experience the same feelings of thinking you are meant to be alone helps me understand the human condition because I know I am not alone in feeling these things, and am not going to be alone in life. That's also a very common aspiration, because it is a common experience. People usually don't enjoy feeling left out, or alone, and Laufey's song gives an almost hopeful message that everyone has a person, her friends, strangers she sees strolling in the city, even the sun and the sky. Everything works together in the world, and one cannot be entirely alone.

[Laufey - Falling Behind \(Official Audio\)](#)



 Everything  
I Know  
About Love

# mxmtoon - rain

mxmtoon's "rain" comes from her 3rd album, "Liminal Space." It offers a slower kind of pop, with harmonizing vocals and rich accompaniment with acoustic guitar and soft percussion. It's quite a mellow song, and some of the instrumental ornamentations evoke nostalgia and longing for an ideal reality.

mxmtoon wrote this song after she was given an opportunity to move back to her hometown in California after living in New York for 4 years. She was reflecting on her time in California—missing it, even—when she realized she'd built a life in New York she would miss as well. She felt stuck in-between places, not quite fitting in anywhere, and wrote the song as a sort of processing tool for how she was feeling.

I consider this song beautiful because it invites contemplation for my own experiences, and encapsulates the human experience. Humans tend to think in the past or the future rather than the present, and her lyrics are a reminder of that, and they almost encourage you to think in the present. "When I'm sitting in the sun, I think about the rain" is something I think a lot of people experience. Even when we are in a positive time in our life, we compare to negative times, we think about the past, and we forget what is right in front of us. It also expresses how many people feel like they don't belong anywhere, like they don't really have a home. It's a reminder that nobody is alone in any way they might be feeling, whether that is sadness or nostalgia, they will eventually learn how to fit in somewhere.

[mxmtoon - rain \(official visualizer\)](#)



# Olivia Dean - So Easy (To Fall in Love)

"So Easy (To Fall in Love)" is from Olivia Dean's 2nd album "The Art of Loving." It incorporates a lot of jazzy elements, as well as bossa nova, to create a sort of timeless song. She uses a lot of interesting instrumentation that doesn't show up in many pop songs today, and it creates a very unique, happy, and memorable song.

She wrote the song to remind women that loving themselves is the first step toward loving other people. She wanted to put into words the importance of switching one's perspective from "do they like me?" to "do I like them?" It's a song that she intended to be a positive thing in people's lives, to let people know that whoever they date is lucky to be with them, and that they are lovable.

This song is beautiful because it conveys aspirations and describes a common human experience. Listening to lyrics like "It's so easy to fall in love with the way I do my hair..." is a reminder that everything about one's self is lovable, even simple things. Humans want to be accepted, and they want to feel like they belong and that they are loved, and Olivia Dean's song puts these aspirations into words. Her song also fits really well with the rest of the album, with an almost seamless transition from the previous song, and it allows her album to tell almost a complete story. The previous song is called "Close Up" and is essentially about how if you truly love someone you won't make them feel unseen and unappreciated. "So Easy (To Fall in Love)" continues this theme, finding small and simple things that she does with the people she loves, like laughing with them and walking around with them.

[Olivia Dean - So Easy \(To Fall In Love\) \(Lyric Video\)](#)



# Taylor Swift - The Life of a Showgirl

I don't consider Taylor Swift's song "The Life of a Showgirl" to be beautiful. It also doesn't meet many of Roger Scruton's definitions of beauty. It doesn't really invite further contemplation, instead of her lyrics being "show, don't tell," many of them are very plain and to the point or very rudimentary metaphors. It doesn't help us understand the human condition, because not very many people are able to relate to lyrics like "Now I make my money being pretty and witty." That is why I consider it "ugly." The instrumentation doesn't add any beauty or depth to it either. It uses many elements evocative of musical theatre, giving a "boom clap" feeling, which isn't necessarily bad, but it's not cohesive with the rest of the album. It was also released shortly after a large government shutdown began in the United States, one that threatened the SNAP benefits of many people. The lyrics about being rich and "married to the hustle" seemed somewhat tone-deaf considering the employment status of many government workers and people across the country.

[Taylor Swift - The Life of a Showgirl \(Feat. Sabrina Carpenter\) \(Lyric Video\)](#)

