



Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond (Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts)

Whitney Davis

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The pioneering work of Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768) identified a homoerotic appreciation of male beauty in classical Greek sculpture, a fascination that had endured in Western art since the Greeks. After Winckelmann, however, sometimes the value (even the possibility) of queer beauty in art was denied. Several theorists after Winckelmann, notably the philosopher Immanuel Kant, broke sexual attraction and aesthetic appreciation into separate or dueling domains. In turn, sexual desire and aesthetic pleasure conceived as discrete categories had to be profoundly rethought by later writers.

Davis argues that these disjunct domains could be rejoined by such innovative thinkers as John Addington Symonds, Michel Foucault, and Richard Wollheim, who reclaimed earlier insights about the mutual implication of sexuality and aesthetics. Addressing texts by Arthur Schopenhauer, Charles Darwin, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, and Sigmund Freud, among many others, Davis criticizes modern approaches, such as Kantian idealism, Darwinism, psychoanalysis, and analytic aesthetics, for either reducing aesthetics to a question of sexuality or for removing sexuality from the aesthetic field altogether. Despite these schematic reductions, sexuality always returns to aesthetics, and aesthetic considerations always recur in sexuality. Davis particularly shows that formal philosophies of art since the late-eighteenth century have had to respond to nonstandard sexuality, especially homoeroticism, and that theories of nonstandard sexuality have drawn on aesthetics in significant ways.

Many of the most imaginative and penetrating critics wrestled productively, though often inconclusively and "against themselves," with the aesthetic making of new forms of sexual life and new forms of art made from reconstituted sexualities. Through a critique that confronts history, philosophy, science, psychology, and dominant theories of art and sexuality, Davis challenges privileged types of sexual and aesthetic creation imagined in modern culture-and still assumed today.

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