

GREEK

AESTHETICS AS A PARADIGM OF SYMMETRY AND HARMONY

LA ESTÉTICA GRIEGA COMO PARADIGMA DE SIMETRÍA Y ARMONÍA

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ABSTRACT

Ancient Greek aesthetics laid the groundwork for Western artistic and philosophical traditions by positing symmetry (proportion) and harmony (balance) as universal principles governing both art and nature. These ideals informed seminal achievements and they continue to shape contemporary debates on objectivity in beauty. But, while classical scholarship has celebrated the purported universality of Greek symmetry, recent interdisciplinary studies reveal that aesthetic preferences for symmetry also emerge through cultural and cognitive development and are subject to expertise and context. This challenges long-standing notions of an unchanging, objective aesthetic paradigm and underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how classical principles function today. Therefore, in this research we aim to critically assess the Greek paradigm of symmetry and harmony. We found that it offers systemic coherence linking mathematical order, ethical virtue, and cosmic rationality; emphasizes on holistic structure; enables controlled emotional catharsis; and exerts a monumental, transhistorical influence through Rome, the Renaissance, and Neoclassicism. However, it legitimizes exclusionary ideals (masculine, elite bodies), enforces rigidity over dynamism, abstracts beauty into mathematical formulas divorced from sensory variability, idealizes perfection at the expense of material reality, and occludes historical contexts of slavery and hierarchy. Thus, we think that recognizing both the enduring legacy and the intrinsic biases of Greek aesthetics invites a revaluation of aesthetic theory that (a) accommodates pluralistic tastes, (b) informs inclusive cultural-heritage preservation policies, and (c) guides future scholarship toward dynamic models of beauty that bridge formal rigor with social and ethical complexity.

Keywords: Ancient Greek aesthetics, Universality, Art, Symmetry, Harmony.

RESUMEN

La estética griega antigua sentó las bases para las tradiciones artísticas y filosóficas occidentales al plantear la simetría (proporción) y la armonía (equilibrio) como principios universales que rigen tanto el arte como la naturaleza. Estos ideales informaron logros seminales y continúan dando forma a los debates contemporáneos sobre la objetividad en la belleza. Pero, si bien la erudición clásica ha celebrado la supuesta universalidad de la simetría griega, los estudios interdisciplinarios recientes revelan que las preferencias estéticas para la simetría también surgen a través del desarrollo cultural y cognitivo y están sujetas a experiencia y contexto. Esto desafía las nociones de larga data de un paradigma estético objetivo y sin cambios y subraya la necesidad de una comprensión más matizada de cómo funcionan los principios clásicos hoy en día. Por lo tanto, en esta investigación, el objetivo es evaluar críticamente el paradigma griego de simetría y armonía. Se descubre que ofrece coherencia sistémica, que vincula el orden matemático, la virtud ética y la racionalidad cósmica; enfatiza en la estructura holística; habilita la catarsis emocional controlada; y ejerce una influencia monumental y transhistórica a través de Roma, el Renacimiento y el Neoclasicismo. Sin embargo, legitima los ideales excluyentes (cuerpos masculinos, de élite), aplica la rigidez sobre el dinamismo, abstrae la belleza en fórmulas matemáticas divorciadas de la variabilidad sensorial, idealiza la perfección a expensas de la realidad material y ocluye contextos históricos de esclavitud y jerarquía. Por lo tanto, se cree que reconocer tanto el legado perdurable como los sesgos intrínsecos de la estética griega invita a una revaluación de la teoría estética que (a) acomoda los gustos

pluralistas, (b) informa las políticas de preservación cultural de la cultura inclusiva, y (c) guía futuros becarios hacia modelos dinámicos de belleza que corren el rigor formal y el rigor social con la complejidad social y ética.

Palabras clave: Estética griega antigua, Universalidad, Arte, Simetría, Armonía.

INTRODUCTION

Greek aesthetics has exerted a lasting influence on Western artistic theory and practice. From the philosophical treatises of antiquity to contemporary scholarship, Greek thinkers identified symmetry (*συμμετρία*) and harmony (*ἁρμονία*) as the pillars of beauty, not only in art but also in nature and the cosmos. Overall, these concepts were not merely formal guidelines but deeply rooted ideals that shaped the visual and intellectual culture of ancient Greece. Symmetry, often associated with mathematical precision and proportional balance, was believed to reflect the underlying order of the cosmos. Moreover, harmony extended beyond physical form, encompassing the unification of disparate elements into a cohesive whole. Together, these principles formed the basis of Greek artistic expression, influencing sculpture, architecture, and even philosophical discourse (Erika Sakaguchi, 2024; Peponi, 2010).

The historical development of Greek aesthetics dates back to the early Archaic period, where artistic representations gradually evolved from rigid, stylized forms to more naturalistic ones. By the Classical era, Greek artists and architects had refined these principles to an unprecedented degree, creating works that embodied balance, proportion, and idealized beauty. The Parthenon, for example, exemplifies the meticulous application of symmetry in architectural design, as its structure conforms to precise mathematical proportions that enhance its visual appeal. Similarly, sculptors such as Polykleitos codified aesthetic principles in treatises such as the *Canon*, which described the ideal proportions of the human body. These advances were not only artistic achievements but also philosophical statements, reflecting the Greek belief that beauty was intrinsically linked to order and rationality (Tabatadze & Kostenko, 2023).

For example, in Plato's work, beauty derives from participation in the transcendent Form of the Beautiful, but Plato also recognizes the importance of proportion: symmetry is associated with lack of beauty when it is absent (*Timaeus* 87D) and is linked to the proper organization of parts (*Republic* 529D–530B) (Celkyte, 2025). For his part, Aristotle identifies symmetry along with order (*taxis*) and clarity (*diaphanie*) as the main forms of

beauty, emphasizing that the parts must agree with each other and with the whole (*Metaphysics* M3.1078a30–b6) (McMANUS, 2005). This emphasis on the internal harmony of the object lays the foundations for an objectivist aesthetics, capable of measuring beauty by formal criteria. Iconic sculptures such as Myron's *Discobolus* and Polykleitos' *Doryphoros* represent anatomical idealizations where symmetry and contrapposto balance tension and repose. The choice of the body as a vehicle of beauty highlighted the conception of the human as a microcosm of divine order, reinforcing the ethical and philosophical dimension of aesthetics. Even so, the restriction to the masculine ideal excludes other cultural and gender representations, limiting the universality of the paradigm (Philosophy Institute, 2023).

Contemporary research in neuroscience and psychology has explored the preference for symmetry as an evolutionary bias linked to the perception of health and order. Studies using eye-tracking methods show that sensitivity to symmetry emerges in childhood, but the aesthetic preference is consolidated in adulthood, suggesting a complex cultural and cognitive construction (Huang et al., 2018). These findings question the claim of universality of symmetry and underscore the importance of contextual and formative factors. This aspect was pointed out in the work of Leder et al., (2019) which challenges the idea that symmetry is an absolute aesthetic principle: while non-experts prefer symmetrical stimuli, art experts show greater appreciation for asymmetry and subtle variations, revealing a disciplinary and cultural component in aesthetic appreciation. This suggests that symmetry may be only one of several vehicles of beauty, and that training and context influence perception and judgment.

In general terms, the power and longevity of the Greek paradigm of symmetry and harmony reside in several fundamental strengths (Sadeh, 2022):

1. **Systemic Coherence:** It offered a unified and theoretically grounded aesthetic system, linking the perception of beauty with mathematical, philosophical (cosmic order, rationality), and ethical (virtue as harmony of the soul) principles. This interconnectedness provided a solid and rational basis for aesthetic judgment, beyond mere subjective taste.
2. **Aspiration to Objectivity:** Based on mathematical proportions, such as the golden ratio (Yalta et al., 2016) and principles of universal order, it promised an objective and potentially universal criterion for beauty. This contrasted sharply with relativism and offered an aspirational ideal of perfection attainable through reason and technology.

3. **Emphasis on Structure and Wholeness:** The primacy given to the relationships between parts and to the cohesive whole (aesthetic holism) fostered a deep understanding of composition and form. This is evident in the integration of architecture, sculpture, and painting in the temple, or in the organic structure of tragedy.
4. **Controlled Formal and Emotional Success:** The works produced under this paradigm achieved a formally impeccable balance and serenity that remain powerfully compelling. Furthermore, the harmonious structure allowed, as in tragedy, for the channeling of intense emotions in a controlled and meaningful manner (catharsis).
5. **Incalculable Influence:** The legacy is monumental. It was assimilated and reinterpreted by Rome (Vitruvius), revived in the Renaissance (Alberti, Brunelleschi, Leonardo da Vinci with his Vitruvian Man), canonized in Neoclassicism, and remains a fundamental reference in Western artistic and architectural teaching (Martin, 2025).

However, elevating this model to a universal paradigm overlooks its intrinsic weaknesses, its historical limitations, and the valid criticisms it has provoked. Among the most common, we can mention:

1. **Exclusivity and Normativity:** The classical ideal of beauty (young, athletic, masculine, free-spirited Greek) was profoundly exclusionary. Women, the elderly, children, non-Greeks ("barbarians"), slaves, and "imperfect" bodies were either left out of its canon or represented in stereotypical or marginal ways. Recent feminist and postcolonial research dismantle the supposed universality of the ideal, showing how it served to naturalize social and gender hierarchies.
2. **Rigidity:** The obsessive pursuit of order, proportion, and serenity could lead to a certain formal rigidity and the suppression of the irregular, the excessively dynamic, the ugly, or the chaotic—elements also constitutive of the human experience.
3. **Mathematical Abstraction vs. Sensory Experience:** The emphasis on abstract mathematical proportions risked disconnecting beauty from concrete sensory experience and subjectivity. Is beauty really reducible to a formula? Or does the perception of harmony also depend on cultural, historical, and individual factors?
4. **Idealization vs. Reality:** Classical art, especially sculpture, sought to represent not the concrete individual with their imperfections, but an idealized essence, a perfected humanity. This, while powerful, implies a certain denial or stylization of material and individual reality. Later radical realism (Roman, Caravaggio) would rebel against this.
5. **Hidden Historical Context:** The idealization of classical art often decontextualize works, forgetting that they emerged in societies with slavery, strong gender hierarchies, and in a context of political (between polis) and religious (cults of the gods) competition. Formal harmony concealed very real political tensions.

Thus, the Greek paradigm of symmetry and harmony has left an indelible mark on the history of aesthetic thought, offering conceptual tools that still inform theoretical and practical reflection. The objective of this work is to critically examine how these classical ideals were constructed and transmitted, to assess their enduring influence and inherent biases, and to propose pathways for integrating more pluralistic and dynamic conceptions of beauty into contemporary aesthetic theory and practice.

DEVELOPMENT

Being paradigmatically formulated first in the natural philosophy of Heraclitus (the most beautiful of monkeys is ugly in comparison with the human race), and later developed in the doctrine of Socratic-Platonic idealism, the issue of anthropological aesthetics was formed as a narrative of philosophical-anthropological discourse (Goncharova, 2022). In the words of the ancient Greek philosopher Plotinus, every beginning plays a fundamental role in the existence that follows. In this context, Greek aesthetics, being essentially humanistic in nature, served as a driving force not only in the advancement of science and art during the later development of humanity but also in the evolution of interpersonal relations. "There is, then, a stable element, that which puts off one form to receive the form of the incoming entity" (Gerson et al., 2018).

Like many philosophical directions, the history of aesthetics also begins in antiquity. The Pythagoreans, in their philosophical explanation of numbers, also touched upon aesthetic concepts. The notions of beauty, harmony, and kindness formed by the ancient Greeks played a progressive role in the history of aesthetic thought. It is even known that ancient specialists (Pythagoras and his followers) used music to treat certain human illnesses. "The thinking way of 'Everything is number' permeated into art and evolved to arithmetic or geometric analysis and the consequent emphasis on form and scale" (Wang, 2016).

"Musical harmonies, the Pythagoreans maintained, had the power to both evoke and express feelings" (Sharpe, 2021). Today, this method is used in medicine under the name of music therapy. The Pythagoreans interpreted the laws of nature through mathematical methods and explained societal rules through numbers. They believed that the proportions of numbers created beauty. In this way, the Pythagoreans laid the foundation for rational thinking

in aesthetics. Before them, aesthetic ideas were explained mostly in abstract terms and were disconnected from practical application.

It is unequivocal that theater held an unparalleled place in the formation of the ancient aesthetic worldview. Theater, as a space where people gathered and performances were shown, was indispensable for the maturation of the worldview of ordinary people. During this time, performances were enacted with great passion and in a manner that stirred the audience. The classical governance formula "Bread and circuses" was fully relevant in the Greek city-states. Theater performances were free of charge; even during Pericles' rule, state funds were allocated to support theatrical productions.

As a factor of social development, theater united all social strata, imparting social-ethical, aesthetic, as well as religious-spiritual ideas. It was discovered in 2017 that the acoustics of Greek theaters were designed so well that spectators seated in the back rows could hear the actors' voices clearly and fully. Interestingly, the Greeks reduced costs by utilizing natural advantages; theaters were built on hills and rocky places, which minimized expenses.

But what main principles does Greek aesthetics prioritize? First and foremost, harmony and the establishment of rules for mutual coexistence. The Greeks sought balance and order not only in architecture and sculpture but also in the living human body, considering these the primary criteria of aesthetics. The inner perfection and order of the works created and their human bearers were regarded as aesthetic values.

The Greeks sought beauty not only in external appearance but also in inner qualities. Their pursuit of perfection was directed at both the physical characteristics and the spiritual world of humans. They deified and highly valued the beauty of the human body because ancient Greek painters and sculptors strove to create an ideal aesthetic representation of the human form. Such efforts were especially evident in sculpture and architecture.

They also searched for ideals that truly represented beauty and perfection. When seeking answers to questions like "What is perfect?" and "What is beautiful?" they referred to heritage and the ideal forms and standards known at that time. This kind of idealization was expressed in depictions of the human body, nature, architecture, and other art forms.

Naturally, Greek aesthetics were unified with philosophical ideas. Ancient philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as philosophical schools (such as the Milesian school), investigated the source and essence

of beauty, humanism, and the aesthetic. For example, Aristotle tried to explain beauty through order and measure, where "measure" meant a standard or criterion.

Greek aesthetics also developed in different art forms, such as theater, music, and poetry, which clearly reflected aesthetic ideas (Lather, 2021). Ancient Greek culture placed great importance on aesthetics, and artists created sculptures and architectural works that crafted worlds suited to diverse tastes. Ancient Greek myths are also of interest in this context. Myths, as the first source of philosophy, also constituted the initial sources of aesthetic ideas. It is known that myths arose before the formation of class society. Based on this fact, it can be said that the history of aesthetics goes back much further. Regardless of where myths originated, their qualities are universal. Courage, heroism, and bravery occupy a fundamental place in myths.

Thus, the following are characteristic of Greek aesthetics: the concept of mimesis—imitation of nature as it is; symmetry and harmony, which form the core components of the concept of beauty; catharsis, which involves the purification and elevation of emotions; and the concept of cosmos, representing the order and aesthetic beauty of the universe. In the modern era, state patronage policies are necessary to consistently uphold aesthetic values. Often cultural sites are located far from cities and remain neglected. Therefore, it is constantly necessary to implement appropriate preservation policies. Hence, protecting the cultural heritage that has formed from ancient Greek culture—the cradle of human civilization—until the present is a priority for every state.

Humanity owes its modern achievements to our ancestors. From this perspective, the gems of Greek culture today carry a universal character and must be collectively preserved and promoted. This aligns with James I. Porter's view:

In other words, if some new approaches to Greek aesthetics are willing to break aesthetic norms for material reasons, why not allow a permanent break from the norms and a revolution of feelings long excluded from aesthetics? This might require a fuller reevaluation of several theoretical hypotheses or perhaps lead to new confusion. (Porter, 2010).

Greek art, which encapsulates historical eras and times, itself has a multicultural basis. Many peoples incorporated into the Roman Empire contributed to the formation of Greek culture. From all these facts, it is evident that Greek culture is the carrier of humanity's spirit. That is why this heritage remains relevant today with practical, pragmatic, enlightening, and humanistic aspects. The post-industrial

stage directs humans more towards smart technologies. Rhythms quicken, and people hurry. There is less time for spiritual matters. Reading and visiting cultural sites retreat into the background.

Most Greek philosophers were essentially anthropocentric, considering humans the center of all creation and beauty. Philosophers such as Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato and their various schools constantly searched for harmony and aesthetics (Chandrinou, 2015). This once again shows that humans—their fate and will—are more precious than anything. Therefore, any work of art or cultural object must first be tasteful to captivate the human heart. Despite periods of development and chaos in Greek culture, the main thread of ideas was always love and selfless affection for humanity. The phase dominated by love corresponds to the cosmic perfection period, where hatred is pushed out of the cosmos, and the world turns into a cosmos embodying order and beauty (Asadov, 2022).

The aesthetic theories and ideas that emerged before our era were further developed by ancient Greek aestheticians like Democritus, Heraclitus, and Aristotle, aimed at elevating humanity spiritually (Khalilov, 2010). Can art make a life of suffering bearable? Can art show us who we are? Does art merely give us momentary perceptual pleasure? As we look at the art of the Greeks, keep these questions in mind. As you watch movies and television, look at commercials and advertisements, and consume and create online media, think about the role that art serves today (*Classical Greek Aesthetics-Plato-Aristotle*, 2015).

Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle discussed beauty, art, and their influence on the human soul. Socrates believed that true beauty is linked with spiritual perfection and that people must pay attention to the beauty within themselves. Plato developed aesthetic thought at the metaphysical level, suggesting in his “realm of ideas” theory that the beauty we observe in this world is merely a shadow of the absolute “idea of beauty.” He regarded art as imitation (mimesis) and sometimes argued that art could mislead people. Aristotle, while also seeing art as imitation, claimed that this imitation produces catharsis in people. His ideas on the tragedy genre in the work “Poetics” form the basis of modern aesthetic theory. These ideas reaffirm that Greek aesthetics, as a socio-cultural system, is a spiritual and practical bridge between the past, present, and future. Greek monuments provide practical value, and Greek theoretical schools ensure this unity spiritually.

What features seem more important for the aesthetics of this era? First, the development of aesthetic observational skills both socially and individually. At the first level of

cognition, individuals begin to perceive and evaluate the manifestations of the surrounding world through observation. In this context, the triumph of the positive in choices between beauty and ugliness, sublimity and simplicity, tragedy and comedy, and other such opposites is important. Another aspect is the complex structure of Greek aesthetics. The theories, styles, and genres that form it had to adapt to qualitative changes over centuries. Here, the confrontation between relative independence and strict determinism, the unity of uniqueness and universality—phenomena that may appear very complicated—can be observed. Nevertheless, harmony was achieved, and the aesthetic aspect of Greek spiritual culture showed its strength.

The first condition of aesthetics is its flexibility—that is, the ability of the aesthetic to appeal to every taste. For example, what is vast for one person may be spaciousness for another; what is simple for one may evoke richness in another. This flexibility is determined by the possibilities of imagination and the culture a person belongs to. As an example, the Parthenon temple might evoke a sense of historicity for some and sanctity for others. These facts show that Greek monuments, with their symmetry and harmony, are spiritually flexible and possess a mostly formal appeal. This stems from the idea confirmed by ancient Greek philosophers: beauty is objective by nature, and it is the human task only to describe it. In other words, beauty exists naturally, and perceiving it and transforming it into art forms depends on humanity's skill.

Besides, is important to highlight that ancient aesthetics influenced the religious doctrines of Christian philosophy during the Middle Ages and later had a formative impact on Renaissance European art and philosophy, providing new content. The ideas of this period have served as the foundational basis of aesthetic theories for centuries. Ancient Greece holds a unique and influential position in the annals of human history. Its contributions have left an indelible mark on the Western world, encompassing areas such as philosophy, democracy, literature, and architecture (Carter, 2023).

But there is no doubt that aesthetic feelings in the 21st century have new meanings. Today, people prefer instantaneous, easily accessible cultural examples and thus turn more to smart technologies. Nevertheless, the culture created by humanity, of which Greek culture forms a large part, continues to generate interest in the modern stage due to its enlightening power. No matter how far people move from their past, they cannot escape its charm. Greek thinkers seemed to have thought and created for these days.

CONCLUSIONS

Greek aesthetics encompasses the human values and cultural types created by ancient Greek civilization. It represents a spiritual heritage seeking harmony, beauty, simplicity, order amid chaos, and balance in society. It reflects a world where society and the individual—two complementary phenomena—constantly need harmony and development. In this sense, the Greeks, with rare examples in philosophy, ethics, and cultural studies, have created a legacy for humanity. As we have addressed, it can be concluded that ancient philosophers did not regard aesthetics as an ideal like it is perceived today but as an integral part of everyday life. In other words, aesthetic beauty is not a result but the beginning itself, and its continuation depends on each individual's development trajectory. This legacy—evident in the Canon of Polykleitos, the Parthenon's golden ratios, and the theater's cathartic unity—continues to inform contemporary notions of objectivity in aesthetics while also inviting critical reflection on its historical exclusions and formal rigidity, reminding us that aesthetic appreciation is as much shaped by cultural context and individual development as by apparently universal principles. Therefore, it is important to underscored the imperative to preserve and adapt this humanistic heritage in an age of rapid technological change and shifting values.

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