

Beauty, the Beholder, and the Buddhist Artefact:

Aesthetic Experience, Psychology of Art, and the Ontology of Beauty

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Editorial Note

This article draws on and develops arguments elaborated in the author's ongoing research into Buddhist artefacts and postures in Thailand. The psychological and aesthetic frameworks introduced here are brought into dialogue with existing material: readers familiar with the author's prior work will recognise the conceptual continuities; readers new to it are directed to those works for the fuller theoretical context. It was produced in collaboration with Claude (Anthropic): the author provided the theoretical framework, the arguments, the conceptual positions, and the discursive choices; Claude assisted in their elaboration, organisation, and referencing.

Abstract

This article examines beauty as it arises in the encounter between the beholder and the Buddhist artefact. The inquiry is conducted across three interlocking registers: ontological, psychological, and Buddhist-philosophical. *Ontologically*, beauty possesses no independent being: it is a predicate constituted in an act of judgement issuing from the encounter between beholder and artefact (Zamaros, 2004; 2025). *Psychologically*, the article draws on evolutionary aesthetics (Dissanayake, 1992; Dutton, 2009), perceptual theory (Arnheim, 1954; 1969), psychoanalytic accounts (Kris, 1952; Ehrenzweig, 1967; Jung, 1964; Winnicott, 1971), cognitive and pragmatist approaches (Dewey, 1934; Goodman, 1968; Briesen, 2014), neuroaesthetics (Zeki, 1999; Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999), and the disciplinary history surveyed by Andrijauskas (2022). Panofsky's (1955) three-level schema (pre-iconographical, iconographical, iconological) maps the beholder's modes of aesthetic decision onto the artefact's successive layers of significance. *Buddhist-philosophically*, the article situates these accounts within the distinction between worldly and transcendental beauty, mediated by Worringer's (1907) opposition between empathy and abstraction. It follows that the Buddhist artefact functions as a threshold object: its crafted fascination both serves and risks eclipsing the transmission of the Dhamma it is designed to convey.

Keywords: beauty, aesthetics, Buddhist art, psychology of art, beholder, aesthetic experience, Theravada Buddhism, Thai sculpture, making special, empathy, abstraction

1. Introduction

The question of beauty is structurally paradoxical: it is the most immediately given of all aesthetic facts in that the beholder is moved before understanding why, yet it resists conceptual containment with a persistence that has occupied philosophy, psychology, and theology for millennia. The Buddhist artefact makes this paradox acute as it is not merely an object that happens to be beautiful, it is an object designed to use beauty as an instrument, to draw the beholder in, to hold attention, and thereby to initiate or deepen the transmission of the Dhamma.

Let us explain what this means: the present article approaches beauty from three converging directions. The first is ontological: what kind of thing is beauty, and does it exist? The second is psychological: by what mechanisms does the qualification ‘beautiful’ arise in the encounter between beholder and artefact? The third is Buddhist-philosophical: how does the tradition understand the function of beauty, and what is the relationship between worldly and transcendental beauty?

A distinction, as the starting point, is necessary between on the one hand, aesthetics, understood as epistemology, pertaining to the *aesthetic* (αἰσθητικός) and which concerns the manner by which the beholder processes the world through sensing (bodily, non-linguistic perception) and apprehending (conceptual, linguistic categorisation) (Zamaros, 2004). On the other, there is beauty as a qualification that arises within the perceptual field. Aesthetics is therefore not synonymous with beauty; it is the inquiry into that field itself. To conflate them is to confuse the predicate with the inquiry into the conditions that make predication possible.

What, then, is beauty? Chatterjee (2014, p. 3) calls it a deceptively “silly” question. At its most fundamental, the inquiry bifurcates along a well-worn philosophical fault line. Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 1078 a34–b2) located beauty in the artefact itself whose chief forms are order, symmetry, and definiteness. Hume (1757, Essay XXIII) countered this approach in that beauty is *not* a quality in things themselves, but solely existing in the mind that contemplates them.

Neither position, taken alone, is, in our view adequate: the first ignores that no two beholders respond identically to the same object; the second cannot explain why certain objects consistently command admiration across cultures and centuries. What both positions miss is

that beauty is constituted in a dynamic encounter between what the artefact offers and what the beholders bring in this running into an artefact: their perceptual habits, emotional history, and cultural formation.

Establishing the mechanisms of that encounter is the task the psychology of art which we shall develop under part 3 thereupon premise a Buddhist viewpoint by means of examples. In the meantime we need to tackle some ontological issues which are unique to beauty.

2. The Non-Being of Beauty: An Ontological Clarification

An ontological clarification is here at stake that dispels a confusion latent in the formulation ‘*beauty is...*’, that is, an inquiry into the *being* of an entity that exists in itself.

Beauty, strictly speaking, is an adjectival qualification, not an entity. It is erroneous to ask a tree what ‘green is’ since the tree does not know it is green; thus, it is the beholder's perceptual and linguistic apparatus that renders a tree ‘green’. Thus, it is a category mistake to pose the question ‘what is beauty?’ as though beauty subsisted independently of an act of the beholder’s qualification.

It follows that *beauty has no being*. To state ‘beauty is...’ conflates a predicate with a substance. It follows that the question ‘what is beauty?’ is misconceived as posed.

This conclusion is grounded in the more fundamental relational character of the ob-ject itself. As Zamaros (2025, p. 2) elaborates in his inquiry into the coming into existence of Buddhist artefacts, an ob-ject “exists in conjunction with the perceiving mind”. Etymologically, the *ob-jectum* is the thing put before the mind or sight, constituted in a dynamic process of “focality, selection, attribution” between the perceiving mind and the things surrounding it. The artefact does not exist as a beautiful thing independently of the beholder's encounter; it is constituted as *ob-ject*, as something presented to the senses, and *only during the act of beholding*.

Beauty, however, as a predicate of the artefact, arises one step later, in the judgement that the beholding encounter produces. This is not idealism in the Berkeleyan sense (*esse est percipi*) but a more precise claim: the object's properties, including its beauty, are actualised *as a result*

of and after the encounter, and are certainly not stored in the object awaiting discovery or extraction. To say that an artefact is beautiful, which presupposes the artefact's existence, involves its beholding, and a decision.

Accordingly, there is a meaningful act of predication where the predicate 'beautiful' presupposes a *sub-ject* who perceives, an *ob-ject* that is perceived, and a judgement that informs the encounter of the previous two.

Like fire and smoke, beauty thrives on the existence of the artefact; remove the latter and the former vanishes.

The inquiry proposed here is, in consequence, not into what beauty *is*, but to uncover the conditions under which the predicate 'beautiful' is constituted.

This relational position resonates with Dewey's (1934) account of aesthetic experience: beauty is not a property sitting in the object waiting to be discovered, nor a purely subjective projection, but the quality of a live creature's interaction with an environment rendered consummatory. Aesthetic experience is not separate from ordinary experience but its heightened, unified form.

Chatterjee (2014, pp. 63–64) concurs:

Beauty is not to be found exclusively in the world or in our heads. Our minds are part of the world... The experience of beauty comes from the interactions between our minds and the world. Our brains evolved to find some objects universally beautiful... Parameters that contribute to beauty in faces, like symmetry and averageness, are universally appealing.

Applied to the Buddhist artefact, this means that the experience of beauty is the achieved form of the beholder's active engagement with an object crafted to reward precisely such engagement: Ploychum (in Katipromrat, 2021, p. 63) argues that material or worldly beauty is un-real (ไม่มีจริง, *asacca/abhūta*), not because things lack perceptible features, but because their perceived beauty arises from the interaction between those features and the beholder's defilements (กิเลส, *kilesa*) — desire, attachment, craving — rendering beauty subjective

(จิตวิสัย, *cittavisaya*). The resonance with Hume is striking, though the Buddhist diagnosis goes further: the affective states that produce the experience of beauty are held to distort clear perception, and hence their elimination becomes the condition of access to a more fundamental, transcendental beauty — a point developed in detail in Section 6.

3. The Psychology of Aesthetic Experience

The psychology of art, as Andrijauskas (2022) demonstrates through his comparative survey, crystallised historically at the intersection of aesthetics, philosophy of art, physiology, psychiatry, experimental psychology, and art history. From its origins in German experimental aesthetics — Fechner's “aesthetics from below” (*von unten*) based on empirical observation, and Lipps's theory of *Einfühlung* as “a distinctive act, completely independent of ideas and associations and deeply rooted in the structure of the human psyche” (Lipps, in Andrijauskas, 2022, p. 6) — through its French, British, American, and Soviet developments, the field has produced frameworks of direct relevance to the Buddhist artefact.

The following sub-sections survey those most pertinent to the present inquiry.

3.1 Evolutionary Aesthetics: The Art Instinct and Making Special

The most fundamental question the psychology of art poses is whether aesthetic response has biological roots. Dutton (2009) argues that the arts must be understood in terms of a cluster of features — skill, pleasure, imagination, emotional resonance — that persist across human history and arise spontaneously wherever artistic forms are invented. These features constitute what Dutton (2009, p. 16) calls the “art instinct” that is “peculiarly human impulses and drives that underlie our culture”. This instinct is cross-cultural in its basic structure, even as its specific expressions vary.

Dissanayake's (1992) account in *Homo Aestheticus* provides the most directly applicable evolutionary framework. She proposes that the core of art as behaviour lies in the universal human tendency to “make special”, involving the differentiation between an order, realm, mood, or state of being that is mundane and ordinary, from what is unusual, extra-ordinary, or supernatural (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 50). This operates through elaboration, exaggeration, and

formalisation, that is when language is used poetically, when costumes and decor are striking and extravagant, when choruses and dances allow communal participation, the content acquires special import “by virtue of the effort and attention expended upon it” (ibid., p. 52).

By extension, what is made special in Buddhist sculpture is not metaphorical but literal and operationally precise: the canonical procedures for casting, consecrating, and installing a Buddha image are acts of marking-off by investing an object with a quality of significance that the ordinary manufactured object lacks.

As the end result, the formal properties that Silpa Bhirasri (in Yodkeaw, 2023) identifies in the posture *Pang Leela* (ปางลีลา, Walking Buddha) — the elegant curvature, the rhythmic movement, the lotus-bud head, the proportionate neck — are the sediment of a tradition of encoding perceptual attractors that render the object not merely well-crafted but extra-ordinary in Dissanayake's precise sense.

3.2 Neuroaesthetics: Peak Shift and the Visual Brain's Search for Essentials

Zeki's (1999) foundational work in neuroaesthetics demonstrates that aesthetic experience is not a culturally-specific overlay on neutral perception but is implicated in the very processes by which the visual system abstracts invariant features from variable stimuli. The visual brain is an active seeker of constancies, the enduring properties of objects and situations of stability, beneath the noise of perceptual variation; it is a situation of comfort as antidote to stressful social conditions. One of these universals are stimuli that exaggerate the defining features of a perceptual category relative to the naturalistic exemplar (Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1999).

Thus, the idealised forms of Buddhist sculpture, the perfectly symmetrical face, the serene expression that remains recognisably Buddha's across its innumerable instantiations, are artefacts the visual brain finds rewarding precisely because they present essentialised, stable forms that satisfy this search for serenity. At the same time, the elongated earlobes, the ushnisha, the perfectly circular halo, the elongated fingers are not naturalistic but heightened as defining features of the ‘Great Man’ (mahāpurisa) beyond any individual instance. The beholder's perceptual system responds to these amplified signals with heightened activation, experienced as a quality of the artefact rather than a property of the neural process.

3.3 Gestalt Psychology and the Dynamic Logic of Visual Form

Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception* (1954) and *Visual Thinking* (1969) constitute in our view the most sustained and rigorous account in the psychology of art of how visual form is experienced not as neutral geometric configuration but as dynamic, expressive force. The starting point is a claim that is at once empirical and philosophical (Arnheim, 1954, p. 16):

just as a living organism cannot be described by an account of its anatomy, so the nature of a visual experience cannot be described in terms of inches of size and distance, degrees of angle, or wave lengths of hue. These static measurements define only the “stimulus”, that is, the message sent to the eye by the physical world. But the life of a percept — its expression and meaning — derives entirely from the activity of the perceptual forces. Any line drawn on a sheet of paper, the simplest form modelled from a piece of clay, is like a rock thrown into a pond. It upsets repose, it mobilizes space.

Arnheim's lapidary conclusion follows (*ibid.*): “Seeing is the perception of action”.

What precisely are these perceptual forces? Arnheim (*ibid.*) argues that they are “assumed to be real in both realms of existence — that is, as both psychological and physical forces”. Psychologically, the beholder registers the “pulls” towards the object beheld. But since these pulls have “a point of attack, a direction, and an intensity”, the forces are physical. At the same time these forces are *physiological* since “every aspect of a visual experience has its physiological counterpart in the nervous system” (*ibid.*, p. 17).

A concrete example from Buddhist sculpture clarifies what is at stake. Consider the seated meditating Buddha in the *dhyāna mudrā* (the gesture of meditation associated with posture ปางสมาธิ – Pang Samathi): both hands resting palms-upward in the lap, one placed on the other, thumbs lightly touching. Described in purely metric terms as two horizontally oriented oval palm forms symmetrically placed along the median axis, certainly capture the stimulus, but miss the percept entirely. What the beholder actually experiences is a configuration of forces: the downward gravitational pull of the seated weight bearing into the earth through the crossed legs, held in counterbalance by the upward thrust of the spine and the vertical axis culminating in the ushnisha; the inward containment of the hands, which, turned palms-up, do not reach

outward but fold back upon themselves, creating a closed circuit of energy within the figure's own boundary; and the slight forward incline of the head, which introduces a vector of directed tension between the lowered gaze drawn earthward and the rising flame of the *sikha* (ศิขร) above the ushnisha.

What the beholder experiences is not the stillness of an artefact but a perfectly balanced system of opposing forces which is at the same time coherent bringing about the perception of serenity. In other words, serenity, as an outcome, is not a label assigned to the percept; it is the perceptual event of experiencing these forces as held, resolved, and consummated.

Yet the system in place is far from being serene: drawing on Kandinsky's crucial distinction (in Arnheim, 1954, p. 415) between “movement” and “tension” in that the latter “is the force inherent in the element; as such it is only one component of active movement. To this must be added direction”, Arnheim is able to single out a unique property which renders an immobile sculpture appear alive rather than frozen: “it is a property inherent in shapes, colors, and locomotion, not something added to the percept by the imagination of an observer who relies on his memories. The conditions creating dynamics have to be sought in the visual object itself” (ibid.). Indeed, “every visual object is an eminently dynamic affair” (Arnheim, 1954, p. 413) and *obliqueness* seems to be the most elementary means of generating such tension: “perceived spontaneously as a dynamic straining toward or away from the basic spatial framework of the vertical and horizontal” (ibid., p. 425). Rodin (in ibid.) confirmed this in the context of sculpture: in order to indicate movement in his busts, he gave them “a certain slant, a certain obliquity, a certain expressive direction”.

The *Pang Leela* posture seems to create tension thus: the forward lean of the body is an oblique deviation from the vertical axis that generates directed tension, a straining toward or away from the upright. The slight lateral turn, the counterbalancing swing of the arms, and the advancing foot, each introduces an obliqueness that the beholder's perceptual system experiences as a vector, a directional pull. What Silpa Bhirasri describes (in Yodkeaw, 2023) as the grace of the *Pang Leela* “as though moving forward” with arms swinging “in rhythm with the movement of the legs”, the body showing “an elegant, gentle curvature” is, in Arnheim's vocabulary, the formal achievement of translating “the temporal sequence into a timeless pose” (Arnheim,

1954, p. 424) in which all the directed tensions of the walking movement are held simultaneously in dynamic equilibrium.

This tension is captured by the beholder as expression (Arnheim, 1954, p. 455):

Our senses are not self-contained recording devices operating for their own sake. They have been developed by the organism as an aid in reacting to the environment, and the organism is primarily interested in the forces active around it — their place, strength, direction. Hostility and friendliness are attributes of forces. And the perceived impact of forces makes for what we call expression.

The serenity of the Buddha's face is thus not perceived first as a configuration of geometric features subsequently interpreted as serene; the serenity *is* the primary perceptual event, and the geometric features are its vehicle. The beholder is moved before they can say why. This is not a deficiency of attention but the normal priority of expression in perception.

With Arnheim (1969, p. v) then “artistic activity is a form of reasoning, in which perceiving and thinking are indivisibly intertwined. A person who paints, writes, composes, dances... thinks with his senses”.

3.4 The Beholder's Share: Gombrich

Gombrich opens *Art and Illusion* (1960, p. 6) with a formulation that announces the epistemological stakes of the entire work: “Works of art are not mirrors, but they share with mirrors that elusive magic of transformation which is so hard to put into words”, that is “the gradual modification of the traditional schematic conventions of image making under the pressure of novel demands” (Ibid. p. xlii).

What informs the relationship between artists and beholders is not just the medium in use as “form and function”, but also the “schema” which informs “the beholder's share in the resolution of ambiguities” (Ibid. p. 30).

A schema in the Kantian sense (in Zamaros, 2011), is a representation that unites category and appearance as a pure representation (as opposed to a mere representation emanating from

sensing), seen as *pure a priori imagination*, as opposed to an image as the product of our empirical faculty. The pure (productive) synthesis of the imagination is “*prior to apperception ... thus the ground of the possibility of all cognition, especially that of experience*” (ibid; original emphases). The purpose of imagination is to “bring the manifold intuition into an image; it must therefore *antecedently* take up the impressions into its activity, i.e. apprehend them” (ibid.).

However, if the schema is prior to apperception, it cannot itself be an object of apperception. The very faculty that makes cognition possible cannot be cognised by that cognition. The ground cannot stand on itself; the example put forward is (ibid.):

I imagine my body ... by means of the body *schema* but only realize that it is so in-complete ... this is because I cannot see the eyes that see me – mine. Of course, I can cheat and use a mirror. But still, I cannot see my back. I see what lies before me literally, in front of me ... I see the other, others and not my face ... therefore, I cannot know my body.

Put simply, the instrument of perception is structurally excluded from what it perceives. By extension, Kant's schema, as the pure productive synthesis that makes experience possible, is itself unavailable to experience. Thus, the schema is not, as Kant wishes, a pure a priori form that the subject deploys upon the manifold of intuition. It is, rather, constituted through the body's engagement with the world, always incomplete, always in correction, never available as an object of transparent self-knowledge. This is precisely Gombrich's empirical rediscovery of Kant's schema: artists do not deploy a pre-given schema upon reality; they discover, through the resistance of the medium and the response of the beholder, where their schema fails to hold, and they correct it. The schema is known only through its failures, through the gap it cannot close.

This structural necessity — the gap the schema cannot close — is not peculiar to pictorial representation. It is the condition of all representation, including linguistic representation. As Zamaros (2004) argues, the sign is constitutively short of what it names: not because language is imprecise but because the gap between signifier and signified is what keeps signification in motion. The *mise-en-commun*, the attempted matching of the sensed image with the constructed image, is permanently incomplete; it is “a lack that we strive to occupy by altering our conceptual maps and actual experiences in our surrounding” (Zamaros, 2004, p. 204). By

extension, what Gombrich rediscovers empirically in the history of pictorial representation, Zamoros establishes structurally in the theory of the sign: *representation works not despite its shortfall from reality but through it; illusion is not the fruit of the representational process; it is its indispensable tool.*

The founding legend of the Buddhist image makes this point at the origin of the tradition. The *pratimā* (the likeness), that is the shadow raised because the artists could not grasp the Blessed One's full form (*Divya Avadana*, as cited in Zamoros, 2025, pp. 5–6), joins the act of image-making to the structural condition of all representation: the schema cannot capture its object in full, and it is this *incompleteness* that makes the representation dynamically operative in search of completeness faced with its own predicament, its own instability. The shadow was not a deficient substitute for the *Tathāgata*'s presence; it was the form through which his presence could reach the beholder. By the Blessed One's grace — that is, by the beholder's projective completion of what the artefact could not fully specify (Gombrich, 1960) — the image was perceived as though the *Tathāgata* were present himself (Zamoros, 2025, p. 6).

The consequence for the beholder of the Buddhist artefact is precise in that the aesthetic encounter is always also a cognitive and therefore linguistic event where the *limits* of the beholder's own representational apparatus surface, while generating the false image of illimitation. This is the moment of *un-decision* (Zamoros, 2004, p. 31), that is the moment of hesitation before an artefact, where meaning is contested while any decision to be taken seems fruitless; it is the moment of the realisation of the inadequacies of language to provide the sought-after stability.

A case in point is *Pang Chonkrom Kaeo* (ปางจกกรมแก้ว – Walking Meditation Posture), which figures as a still posture in one context and a walking Buddha in another — is the moment at which the schema becomes visible through its failure to hold. This is not a deficiency of the beholder's knowledge; it is knowledge's productive edge — the point at which the gap between schema and artefact opens the possibility of correction and of a deeper encounter with the artefact. In this manner, the beholder's share is never simply given; it is always in correction, driven by the same incompleteness that drives the tradition of image-making itself.

3.5 Psychoanalytic Dimensions: Winnicott, and Jung

The task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (Winnicott, 1971, p. 9).

The intermediate area is a permanent structure of human experience. It is characterised by the absence of a boundary between inner and outer reality: what is encountered there is neither purely created by the subject nor purely given from without. The question of which it is does not arise — not because it is suppressed, but because within this area it has no purchase. “Throughout life”, Winnicott adds, this area “is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living” (ibid., p. 10).

The Buddhist artefact occupies precisely this area in that it is neither a mere manufactured object nor the Buddha himself; it is the intermediate form between the two. This is not a theological approximation; it is the condition the tradition deliberately produces. Through consecration (พิธีเปิดตา, the eye-opening ceremony), the manufactured object is transformed to acquire a presence that is neither reducible to its material properties nor identical with the Buddha's living person. The beholder who stands before the consecrated image is therefore in an intermediate area where one is drawn into an encounter whose terms cannot be resolved into either object or projection. The question — does the Buddha's presence inhere in the image, or is it constituted in the beholder's encounter with it? — does not arise, because the intermediate area is the condition under which such a question loses its purchase. The *pratimā* enacts this at the origin of the tradition: once installed, it was perceived as though the *Tathāgata* were present himself (Zamaros, 2025, p. 6), not because the question was answered, but because it was not asked. In this manner, the intermediate area is not a theological ambiguity to be resolved; it is the operative condition of the artefact's function as a medium between the Dhamma and the beholder.

By extension, the beauty of the artefact belongs to this same intermediate area. It is neither a property of the object alone nor a projection of the beholder alone. To force a decision — to insist that beauty is either in the object or in the mind — is to destroy the encounter. The artisan makes the image beautiful so that the beholder will not ask; the beholder does not ask because the beauty holds them in the space where the question has no purchase.

Beauty, in this context, is what sustains the intermediate area. It marks the artefact as an object that rewards the suspension of the inner/outer question — that makes the suspension not only possible but continuous. The beholder does not ask because the beauty gives them no reason to stop and ask; it keeps them in the encounter.

What keeps them there cannot be accounted for by formal properties alone — Arnheim (1954) accounts for those — nor by projection alone — Kris (1952) accounts for that. Something precedes both. Jung (1964, p. 67) names it “archetype” or “primordial image” which is “a tendency to form ... representations of a motif — representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern”. They are not learned; they are activated. Certain visual configurations trigger them: the radiant central figure, the axis of the world, the luminous face.

The Buddha image belongs to a specific class of archetypal forms. The radiant central figure — symmetrically organised around a vertical axis, luminous nimbus marking the boundary between the figure and the space around it, gaze directed neither toward nor away from the beholder — is a configuration that recurs across traditions and millennia. The *Pang Samathi's* closed circuit of energy, the *Pang Leela's* forward-directed dynamic, the *Pang Mara Wichai's* downward earth-touching gesture (ปางมารวิชัย, Victory over Mara posture): each is a distinct motif, yet each activates the same underlying archetype of the awakened being, the axis of the world, the radiant centre. The beholder who stands before any of these images and is arrested — held, moved, unable to say why — is experiencing the activation of a structure that precedes their individual biography. It follows that the beauty of the Buddhist artefact draws on a resonance that is, in Jung's sense, transpersonal: older than any individual schema, older than any particular tradition.

As Andrijauskas (2022, p. 3) notes, Jung assessed Western psychoanalysis as “only an elementary textbook” compared with the methods mastered in traditional Eastern psychological systems — a recognition that the present article takes seriously in bringing depth psychology into dialogue with Buddhist phenomenology.

3.6 Empathy, Abstraction, and the Buddhist Image: Worringer

Buddhist sculpture is designed to move the beholder toward transcendental beauty beyond the organic form that the object of veneration is, be it a body, a face, by recruiting the beholders' empathic response, that is the projection of their feeling onto the organic form. Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907) seem to provide us with the theoretical framework to tackle artefact and art empathy.

Worringer defines the empathic impulse as “aesthetic enjoyment” seen as “objectified self-enjoyment” whereby one enjoys oneself in a sensuous object that is diverse from oneself; it is “to empathise myself into it” (ibid., p. 4). A form holds its beauty “only through our own vital feeling, which, in some mysterious manner, we project into it” (ibid., p. 13).

At the same time, he notes a counter-impulse, *abstraction*:

Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions (ibid., p. 15).

What abstraction seeks, formally, is the suppression of space — “it is precisely space which links things to one another, which imparts to them their relativity in the world-picture” (Worringer, 1907, p. 21). The single form, set free from space, is rendered closed, necessary, purified of the arbitrary. It is approximated, in Worringer's terms, to its absolute value.

Through empathy the beholder projects one's own vital feeling into the organic form and finds it returned. The self does not transcend; it circulates back to itself through the object. In Buddhist terms, this is clinging (*upādāna*): the self seeks attachment to what reflects its own vitality and is bound to it, not freed by it. Abstraction breaks this circuit by removing its occasion. The form that has been set free from space, purified of the arbitrary, rendered necessary and irrefragable, has no organic properties to reach toward and no vitality to find returned. The self that seeks to cling finds nothing to cling to: not because clinging is suppressed, but because the form withholds what clinging requires. It does not feed *taṇhā* (craving). It is the Dhamma itself as form.

3.7 Cognitive and Pragmatist Approaches: Goodman, Dewey, and Processing Fluency

Goodman's *Languages of Art* (1968) provides a complementary framework from the philosophy of symbols. Seeking to answer the question “when is art?” (Cohnitz & Rossberg, 2006, p. 187), he proposes that aesthetic experience is characterised not by a single criterion but by “aspects or symptoms” (Goodman, 1968, p. 252), understood in the usual and medical sense of the term, as indicator (Cohnitz & Rossberg, 2006, p. 44).

A symptom “is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for, but merely tends in conjunction with other such symptoms to be present in, aesthetic experience” (Goodman, 1968, p. 252). The symptoms he identifies are syntactic density, semantic density, syntactic repleteness, and exemplification (ibid., pp. 252–254). Together they “call for maximum sensitivity of discrimination” (ibid., p. 252): an artefact that exhibits them cannot be consumed at a glance; it demands sustained, renewed attention.

Of these symptoms, exemplification seems to be the most directly relevant to the Buddhist artefact. Goodman defines it precisely as that “concerned with properties exemplified or expressed — i.e., properties possessed and shown forth — by a symbol, not merely things the symbol denotes” (ibid., p. 253). The Buddhist artefact exemplifies the qualities it represents: a serene face does not merely denote serenity — it possesses and shows it forth. The beholder does not merely learn about serenity; they encounter it. As Goodman observes, what appears to be the immediacy of aesthetic experience “becomes a matter of exemplification rather than of intimacy — a function of direction rather than of distance” (ibid.). The encounter is not intimate because it is close; it is direct because exemplification runs in the opposite direction from denotation.

Density, syntactic and semantic, explains why the encounter demands return. Goodman (ibid., p. 253) argues that density “arises out of, and sustains, the unsatisfiable demand for absolute precision”. The artefact cannot be exhausted by a single encounter with the beholder because density results from an “impossibility of finite determination” (ibid.): every mark of the system demands attention, and the system has no finite number of marks. We must, as Goodman puts it (in Cohnitz & Rossberg, 2006, p. 189), “attend constantly to the symbol itself”. This is the theoretical ground of what Zamaros (2004, p. 204) calls the permanently incomplete *mise-en-*

commun: the aesthetic inquiry is permanently open not because the beholder lacks knowledge but because the symbol is inexhaustible.

The processing fluency account (Reber, Schwarz & Winkielman, 2004, p. 364) points to “aesthetic pleasure” which “is a function of the perceiver's processing dynamics”: the more fluently a stimulus is processed, the more positive the aesthetic response. High fluency — arising from symmetry, regularity, and clear figure-ground relationships — generates a hedonic signal attributed to the aesthetic quality of the object. Critically, the mediating variable is not the fluency experience itself but the affect it produces: “it is the fluency-based affective reaction...that serves as a basis of judgment” (ibid., p. 369), a signal discounted only when its source is made salient. The formal conventions of Buddhist sculpture generate high processing fluency on both perceptual and conceptual registers simultaneously. This converges with Arnheim's (1954) account of perceptual forces and Dissanayake's (1992) making-special: the tradition's formal conventions enact what Reber et al. call “simplicity in complexity” (2004, p. 376), producing objects that are both easy to process and charged with significance. Beauty, on this account, lies neither in the object nor in the subject but in “the interaction between the stimulus and the beholder's cognitive and affective processes” (ibid., p. 381).

Briesen (2014, pp. 18, 24) notes that the symbolic system of artwork is “syntactically and semantically dense” and “replete”, using “complex chains of reference” that can only be navigated through language. To understand an artefact is to build from the naive immediate response toward an informed perception. Yet Carroll (2001, p. 26) correctly notes that “knowledge is not a condition of beauty”. The distinction between experiencing and understanding is therefore not a hierarchy of value but a distinction of mode. Dewey (1934) frames this as the difference between the aesthetic experience achieved and the aesthetic experience merely undergone: both are genuine, but only the achieved form — the consummatory, unified encounter — fully realises the artefact's communicative potential.

3.8 Social Mediation and Institutional Context: Vygotsky and Danto

Vygotsky's *Psychology of Art* (1925) draws the methodological boundary that grounds his framework from Plekhanov (in Vygotsky, 1925):

psychology studies the effect of these mechanisms, while sociology studies their causality. 'Man's nature is such that he can have aesthetic tastes and concepts. His environmental conditions make this possibility a reality; the environment accounts for the fact that a given social individual has certain aesthetic tastes and concepts rather than others.

In other words, the psychology of art perception is informed and in ways determined by the social conditions wherein both artists and beholders evolve.

Art, on Vygotsky's own formulation, "systematizes a very special sphere in the psyche of social man — his emotions" (Ibid.). By extension, what the Buddhist beholder perceives in the *Pang Leela* — grace, spiritual authority, the quality of walking akin to dancing — is not constituted individually; it is perceived through a perceptual and emotional competence formed within a social and cultural tradition, the experiential sedimentation of a social and historical formation. Catharsis, "the transformation of these feelings into opposite ones and their subsequent resolution" (Ibid.) involves the transformation of the emotional content one has in the encounter with artefacts along the path of social transformation. Characteristic of the artistic domain is the "contradiction" between "artistic form and material" (Ibid.) whereby form imposes a structure that the material resists, and the aesthetic event consists in holding both simultaneously: "Art is this interaction, this struggle. Without this subordination, without the deformation of factors by the one factor playing the constructive role, there can be no art" (Ibid.).

In the Buddhist artefact, the contradiction is between the organic material — a body, mortal and contingent — and the formal conventions imposed upon it including the canonical proportions, the smooth surface, the idealised features that deny the body's organicism and render it necessary, irrefragable, approximated to its absolute value. The material invites empathic projection; the form withdraws from it. The cathartic resolution is the movement the beholder makes from the first register to the second — which is, in Buddhist terms, the movement from clinging to release, from worldly to transcendental beauty. This resolution is not individual; it is the work the tradition has encoded into the form.

Danto's (1981) account sharpens this point decisively. The artworld is not a sociological description but an ontological condition: "nothing is an artwork without an interpretation that constitutes it as such" (p. 135). The object and its meaning are not separable; the object *is* its

meaning as constituted by the interpretive framework within which it is received. To encounter the canonical image as art — or as a devotional object, which is a distinct but structurally analogous operation — requires "an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art" (*ibid.*); without this atmosphere, the image is merely a material configuration. Danto's formula is precise: the artworld is "logically dependant upon theory", and theory is powerful enough "to detach objects from the real world and make them part of a different world, an art world, a world of interpreted things" (*ibid.*). Works, on this account, "are constituted as different works through identifications that themselves are justified by an interpretation of their subjects" (*ibid.*, p. 122).

This is not, for the Buddhist image, a merely aesthetic situation. Danto, glossing a Zen passage from Ch'ing Yuan, observes that "the contrast between a mountain and a religious object has disappeared through making the mountain into a religious object" (*ibid.*, p. 134). The same logic governs the canonical image: the organic body — mortal, contingent, particular — is made into something necessary and irrefragable not by transcending its materiality but by interpreting it otherwise. The material does not change; the interpretive atmosphere does, and with it, the ontological status of the object. A Buddha image exists simultaneously as a religious object, a ritual implement, a devotional focus, and an aesthetic object. These statuses are not mutually exclusive but theoretically distinct: the same physical object is constituted differently by different framings. It follows that beauty in the context of the Buddhist artefact is never merely aesthetic: it is always also religious, epistemic, and oriented toward liberation.

4. Judging Beauty: Panofsky's Three Levels and the Modes of Aesthetic Decision

As individuals, Zamaros (2004, p. 49) notes, "we are able to take decisions with and without criteria". Thus, to qualify an artefact as beautiful is to take a decision, either with or without explicit criteria. Indeed, one does not always need explicit criteria to take a decision; it is maybe the norm not to have criteria that are known, or still have the impression to have criteria, which are not fully formulated and precise. Zamaros (*Ibid.*, pp. 31–32) formulates this as the distinction between "moments of signification", moments in which one is focally and interactively linked with the artefact whereby a decision (on beauty) result from that encounter,

and moments of ordinary unfocused perception where the mind meanders in other domains with other ideas, only to come afresh on what it was focusing on.

Panofsky's (1955) three-level schema of meaning provides a structural framework for mapping these modes of decision onto the artefact's successive layers of significance.

At the first level, Panofsky (1955, pp. 26–28) identifies the *pre-iconographical* or primary stratum of meaning: the “world of artistic motifs”, apprehended by identifying pure forms and by perceiving “such expressional qualities as the mournful character of a pose or gesture”. This level divides further into *factual* meaning (simple identification of forms and events) and *expressional* meaning (the emotional and atmospheric quality perceived through empathy). For the beholder of the *Pang Leela*, the pre-iconographical level is the perception of the figure as a walking form, the forward lean as suggesting forward movement, the flowing robe as encoding grace. No iconographic knowledge is required. This is the level at which Arnheim's (1954) perceptual forces operate, and at which Dissanayake's (1992) making-special first registers its claim on the beholder's attention.

At the second level, Panofsky (1955, pp. 28–30) identifies the *iconographical* stratum: the apprehension of “secondary or conventional subject matter” — specific configurations of motifs carry culturally transmitted meanings. For the beholder of Buddhist sculpture, this is the level at which the hand position (mudra) of the *Pang Leela* is recognised as either *Abhaya mudrā* or the teaching of the Dhamma in *Vitarka mudrā*. This requires familiarity with “specific themes and concepts transmitted through literary sources”. This is the level of Gombrich's (1960) schema-and-correction and of Zamaros' (2025, p. 3) “descriptive signature” — the unique textual trademark by which each artefact's iconographic meaning is established and transmitted.

At the third and deepest level, Panofsky (1955, pp. 30–32) identifies the *iconological* stratum: the interpretation of “intrinsic meaning or content”, the discovery of “symbolical values” — what the work reveals about the civilisation, mentality, or spiritual attitude it embodies. Composition and iconographic features are here read as “symptoms of something else which expresses itself in a countless variety of other symptoms”. For the Buddhist artefact, the iconological level is the register at which the work ceases to be a representation of a historical event and becomes a manifestation of the Dhamma itself — where the form, as Yodkeaw

(2023) notes, is “a direct experience of the Dhamma embedded in the statue's form”. This corresponds to Worringer's (1907) abstractive impulse: the artefact as an image of what transcends the organic and the contingent entirely.

We quickly note that the three Panofsky levels map precisely onto the three connotative chains developed in Zamaros (2026): the pre-iconographical level corresponds to evocative connotation (Chain 1, icon); the iconographical level corresponds to vicarious connotation (Chain 3, symbol); the iconological level corresponds to Barthes' second-order system, whose cognitive outcome is the *εἰκόων* — the mental image of the Blessed One produced in the mind of the devotee as the completed semiological movement.

These three levels map onto the modes of aesthetic decision as follows. Deciding without criterion — immediate, intuitive apprehension, what Zamaros (2004, p. 31) calls being interactively linked with the other — operates primarily at Panofsky's pre-iconographical level: the beholder is moved by form, presence, and atmosphere before any iconographic knowledge is activated. Standing speechless in the *vihāra* (วิหาร, wihaan) of a temple such as Wat Si Don Mun (วัดศรีดอนมูล), the beholder is in a state of affective priority — the pre-iconographical stratum has claimed their attention fully. Deciding with criterion operates at the iconographical level: the beholder brings a formed schema (Gombrich, 1960) and measures the artefact against it. The deepest form of judgement — rare, requiring both knowledge and a particular quality of receptivity — reaches the iconological level, where the artefact is perceived not merely as depicting something but as manifesting something.

The moment of hesitation — “un-decision” (Zamaros, 2004, p. 31) — arises characteristically at the transition between levels: when the pre-iconographical response has been activated but iconographic identification fails, or when iconographic identification is achieved but the deeper iconological resonance remains inaccessible. The classificatory ambiguity of certain postures — such as the debated status of the *Pang Chonkrom Kaeo* as either a still or a walking Buddha in different contexts (Zamaros, 2004) — exemplifies un-decision at the iconographical level: the motif is perceived but its conventional meaning is contested, and the beholder is suspended between readings.

5. The Ascription of Beauty: Creator, Beholder, and the Medium

The legend of the first Buddha image, preserved in the *Divya Avadana* and analysed by Zamaros (2025, pp. 5–6), places the question of the artefact's beauty and presence at the very origin of the tradition. King *Bimbisāra* invited the Buddha so that artists could take his proportions directly. When the Blessed One stood before them, they could see him but “could not grasp his full form”. They raised a shadow of the Blessed One, draped it in a robe, and “by the Blessed One's grace, the image was then successfully painted”. Once installed, “it was perceived as though the Tathāgata were present himself”. The shadow — the *pratimā*, the likeness — is a distillation of the original that both falls short of it and mysteriously participates in it: by his grace it was completed; in beholding it, a child's inner brilliance (*pratibhā*) was awakened. This founding legend encodes the entire problematic of the artefact as threshold object: it is simultaneously a representation, a presence, and a threshold.

The creative process is communicative: the creator encodes into the artefact a set of formal and symbolic properties calculated to produce specific perceptual and affective effects. Yodkeaw (2023) notes that the creation of Buddha images is a refined art informed by the intense effort of artists to ensure their works reflect aesthetic beauty and canonical correctness, and that beauty lies not only in outward appearance but in how the artefact conveys the character of the Buddha (พระพุทธชริยา – Phra Phutthachariya). In Dissanayake's (1992) terms, the artisan is rendering the artefact special by marking it off from ordinary objects through the elaboration and heightening of formal properties in ways calculated to concentrate and sustain attention.

The nuance between *the artefact is beautiful* — decided as such by the beholder — and *the artefact is made to be beautiful* — intended as such by the creator — points to the *constitutive gap* between encoding and decoding.

The beholder's response is productively active, not merely receptive, if thus decided. In Gombrich's (1960) terms, the beholder use schemas for making sense of the artefact, which the artefact corrects by adding or subtracting to it in a continuous transformational process. In Kris's (1952) terms, the beholder must first suspend critical and analytical perception i.e. stop measuring and classifying, before the artefact can have an effect on them: it is this suspension that allows projection and an encounter that is affective rather than merely cognitive. In

Goodman's (1968) terms, the beholder activates the artefact's exemplificatory function: they do not merely learn about serenity from the serene face; they encounter it. But what the beholder makes of this encounter in their mind is not a copy of the artefact (it is not a mimetic process); it is a synthetic reconstruction shaped by attentional focus, memory, emotional state, and cultural formation (Klinke, 2014) where the beholder attends to what their schema leads them to focus on, remembers what prior encounters have deposited, and feels what their affective history makes available. Yet the attempted *mise-en-commun*, the matching of this sensed image with the constructed image, is permanently incomplete: “a lack that we strive to occupy by altering our conceptual maps and actual experiences in our surrounding” (Zamaros, 2004, p. 204).

The creator is not outside this encounter but its first instance: it is the privileged beholder, the first to apply the schema, the first to test the artefact's directed tensions against their own perceptual apparatus, the first to decide. In Arnheim's (1954) terms, the creator senses in the act of making whether the tensions are resolved or unresolved. In Gombrich's (1960) terms, they perform the first schema-and-correction. In Goodman's (1968) terms, they are the first to test whether the artefact exemplifies what it is intended to do, its decided-upon function. The creator's position differs from the subsequent beholder's in one decisive structural and primordial respect: they can withhold the artefact. Indeed, if the subsequent beholder encounters the artefact as a *fait accompli*, the creator's decision remains open throughout the making in that artists can postpone release, revise, or cancel the publication of the artefact entirely. In Zamaros' (2004) terms, this is the creator's *un-decision*: the hesitation before a form that has not yet achieved the rightness required for release. The difference is that the creator can act on this arrest; the beholder can only register it.

Panofsky's iconological analysis illuminates the depth of this constitutive gap. At the iconological level, the artefact functions not merely as an image of the Buddha but as what Panofsky (1955, p. 39) calls a “cultural symptom or ‘symbols’ in Ernst Cassirer's sense in general”. Consider the smooth, idealised surface of the Buddha image: it does not merely represent transcendence; it discloses a culture for which the body of the Blessed One is categorically distinct from mortal flesh, and for which that distinction must be visible in the form itself. The artefact's beauty is, at this level, not a formal property but a sign of its participation in a larger order of signification that is social thereby inscribing history.

Artefacts made to be beautiful serve in this manner a spiritual function, since by drawing the beholder in, sustain attention, and create the conditions under which the artefact's symbolic and doctrinal content can be encountered — what Safiyah (n.d.) describes as the capacity of beauty to function as an instrument for conveying knowledge. On the other hand, the medium may exercise such fascination that it eclipses its own purpose and becomes purpose itself — what Zamaros (2004) identifies as the central dilemma of artefactual agency. This is the risk that Cooper (2017, p. 126) precisely identifies: worldly beauty's capacity to distract from “the ubiquity of suffering in the world”. The shadow legend itself already anticipates this dilemma: the image was perceived as though the Tathāgata were present himself — which is both its highest function and its most potent risk.

6. Worldly and Transcendental Beauty: Worringer, Cooper and the Buddhist Distinction

The Buddhist distinction between “worldly” (*lokiya*) and “transcendental” (*lokuttara*) beauty, elaborated in detail by Katipromrat (2021, pp. 54–71), acquires new theoretical precision when read through Worringer's (1907) opposition between empathy and abstraction.

If worldly beauty arises from the interaction between the artefact's features and the beholder's defilements, in Worringer's terms it is the beauty of empathy: “Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. To enjoy aesthetically means to enjoy myself in a sensuous object diverse from myself, to empathise myself into it. What I empathise into it is quite generally life” (Lipps, in Worringer, 1907, p. 4). A form holds its beauty “only through our own vital feeling, which, in some mysterious manner, we project into it” (Worringer, 1907, p. 13). This is the beauty that Cooper (2017, p. 126) characterises as suspect — not because pleasure is wrong but because empathic identification with organic form reinforces precisely the modes of clinging that the Dhamma seeks to dissolve. “The sign of the beautiful”, explains one of The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, “is the nutriment for sensual desire” (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1568, in Cooper, 2017, p. 126); Bhikkhu Bodhi distinguishes beauty in this worldly sense from “inner beauty, the beauty of the mind” (Bodhi, 2001, p. 13, in Cooper, 2017, p. 127).

Worldly beauty is also variably epistemic. An artefact's beauty can motivate inquiry, concentrate attention, and open the beholder to the reception of meaning — in which case it

performs epistemic work (Safiyah, n.d.). Or it can arrest attention at the level of sensory pleasure without catalysing further inquiry. Carroll (2001, p. 26) correctly notes that knowledge is not a condition of beauty. The distinction between experiencing and understanding is therefore not a hierarchy of value but a distinction of mode: the innocent beholder can be moved without knowing why, and this movement is no less genuine for its naivety. In Dissanayake's (1992) evolutionary account, this immediate affective response to making-special is the biological baseline from which deeper aesthetic and spiritual engagement can develop.

Transcendental beauty is described by Ploychum (as cited in Katipromrat, 2021, p. 63) as objective (วัตถุวิสัย, *vattuvissaya*) and universal (สากล, *sāa-gon*): accessible to anyone who experiences the Dhamma directly, unfettered by subjective clinging. Cooper (2017, p. 127), citing the *Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta*, locates this beauty in the virtuous mind or character — inner beauty that manifests outwardly in bodily comportment. In Worringer's terms (1907, p. 4), this is the beauty of abstraction: “the urge to abstraction finds its beauty in the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline or, in general terms, in all abstract law and necessity”, that is a form that has transcended the organic and the contingent, offering the beholder not a mirror of their own vital energy but an image of what lies beyond it entirely.

Between these two registers, viz. worldly beauty as empathic projection and transcendental beauty as abstractive release, Cooper (2017, pp. 130–131) identifies a third that is particularly relevant to the Buddhist artefact: the beauty of virtue expressed bodily in that “the virtuous mind or character is only beautiful because it finds beautiful expression in and through the body” (*ibid.*, p. 130). This is not the beauty of organic vitality that feeds clinging, nor the beauty of the inorganic absolute that withdraws from the organic entirely; it is the beauty that arises when inner virtue — compassion, equanimity, mindfulness — finds visible form in gesture, posture, and comportment. In canonical texts, the Buddha is found physically beautiful precisely “because of the 'gentle disposition' and other virtues that his 'fine countenance' and posture manifest” (Aśvaghōṣa, 1894, III.2, in Cooper, 2017, p. 131). This is the beauty the *Pang Leela* instantiates: the walking that is akin to dancing is not merely organic vitality, but purposeful virtue made visible in motion while the *Vitarka* gesture is not merely a conventional sign but the bodily expression of the resolve to teach. It is the point at which Worringer's two impulses meet: the organic form recruited by empathy is simultaneously the vehicle of an inner reality that draws the beholder toward abstraction.

This magnetic quality of virtue expressed bodily is not confined to the canonical texts. Cooper (2017, p. 133) cites Samuels's (2010, pp. xxiv, 78–79) ethnographic research in Sri Lankan monastic culture, where monks speak of trying to “go beautifully in order to attract the people's hearts” — through dignified gait, cleanliness, and calm — because a monk must be “beautiful to the eye” in order to make people “feel longing” for the holy life. The living tradition enacts what the artefact encodes formally: the magnetic beauty of virtue made visible in the body. *Teja* (a piercing flame), in this light, is not merely an inherited radiance transmitted to the image through consecration; it is the formal sediment of a living practice in which inner beauty and bodily beauty are inseparable, and in which the artefact functions as the tradition's most concentrated and durable expression of their unity.

The Buddhist artefact is designed to move the beholder between these two registers. It recruits *empathic response* — the perceptual forces that Arnheim (1954) analyses, the peak-shift activation that Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999) describe, the projective pleasure that Kris (1952) and Winnicott (1971) theorise — in order ultimately to transform it. Ehrenzweig's (1967) moment of dedifferentiation — the dissolution of the distinction between self and object in the depth of the aesthetic encounter — is, from a Buddhist perspective, a prefiguration of the meditative states in which the distinction between perceiver and perceived is progressively attenuated. The artefact does not produce enlightenment; but by holding the beholder in sustained aesthetic encounter, it creates the conditions for a shift from the empathic to the abstractive register — from worldly to transcendental beauty.

Jung's (1964) account of the archetype is relevant here: the Buddha image activates archaic perceptual and affective structures that carry transpersonal resonance independently of individual biography. Cooper (2017, p. 132) argues that “beauty must be magnetic and attractive, through exerting an energy or radiance that draws people to it”, which is why the tradition grounds the artefact's attractive power in the concept of *teja* (Griswold, 2558 BE), the inherited radiance of the Buddha that the artefact is believed to carry. Zeki (1999) would identify the psychological correlate as the visual system's recognition of an essentially organised, formally perfect object.

7. Beauty, Understanding, and the Limits of Inquiry

A further question structures the aesthetics of Buddhist artefacts: must we understand a work of art in order to appreciate it? The question draws a line between apprehension — the linguistic process for making sense of surrounding artefacts — and understanding, which requires interpretation and therefore a knowledge base.

Briesen (2014, pp. 18, 24) holds that the symbolic system of artwork is “syntactically and semantically dense” and “replete”, using “complex chains of reference” that can only be navigated through language and the systematic organisation of intricate representations.

Arnheim's (1969) concept of visual thinking complicates this picture. If perception is itself cognitive, if seeing the *Pang Leela's* gesture is a perceptual act, not merely a conceptual gloss applied after the fact, then the boundary between aesthetic experiencing and aesthetic understanding is less sharp than the innocent-gaze/expert-gaze distinction implies.

Gombrich's (1960) schema-correction account confirms this: the expert beholder does not merely see the gesture and then think about what it means; they see it as meaning something. The perception is the understanding.

Le Pichon (2022) raises the question of whether artwork should be explained at all, noting that explanations might “ruin” what one “felt in the first place”. The resolution she proposes, viz. that sensitivity, taste, personal experience, and imagination will dictate the need for explanation, since understanding ultimately lies with the appreciator's willingness to inquire, is practically sound. Dewey (1934) would add that the aesthetic experience is enriched, not harmed, by *active inquiry*, whereby the consummatory quality is distributed over a richer perceptual field, not diminished. Dutton (2009) confirms this: the art instinct includes intellectual challenge among its cluster features, implying that the fully realised aesthetic response to a complex artefact involves not only affective pleasure but cognitive engagement.

The inquiry has no terminus. Knowledge of artefacts is “always in production” (Zamaros, 2004, p. 204), because in the process of knowledge constitution we constantly interact cognitively, and therefore linguistically, with the artefacts we look at, amending our conceptual base with

each encounter. The aesthetic inquiry is permanently open: a movement swinging from felt appreciation to structured insight and back, driven by the lack that the artefact reveals in us. In the context of Buddhist artefacts, every source — every text, every parallel artefact, every encounter with the tradition — functions as what Dissanayake (1992) would call a further act of making special: a marker that orients and sustains the beholder's engagement with the extraordinary object before them.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that beauty, understood as a predicate of the artefact, arises in the encounter between the artefact and the beholder's perceptual, affective, and cognitive apparatus. It is irreducibly relational: it has no being independent of this encounter, yet within the encounter it is real, operative, and consequential. The ontological clarification — beauty has no being independent of the act of predication — does not diminish the reality of the beautiful but locates it in the encounter rather than in either pole alone.

The psychology of art illuminates the mechanisms through which this predicate is formed. From Dissanayake's (1992) making-special and Dutton's (2009) art instinct, through the neuroaesthetics of Zeki (1999) and Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999), the dynamic force-field of Arnheim (1954; 1969), the beholder's share of Gombrich (1960) and Kris (1952), the unconscious scanning of Ehrenzweig (1967), the transitional space of Winnicott (1971), the archetypal resonance of Jung (1964), the exemplification of Goodman (1968), the consummatory experience of Dewey (1934), and the social mediation of Vygotsky (1925) — each framework illuminates a different register of the encounter. Andrijauskas (2022) provides the disciplinary-historical perspective that situates these frameworks within the long arc of the psychology of art's development from German experimental aesthetics to its contemporary interdisciplinary form.

Worringer's (1907) opposition between empathy and abstraction provides the theoretical framework most precisely fitted to the aesthetic challenge of Buddhist sculpture: an art that recruits the beholder's empathic vitality in order to transform it toward the abstractive, toward a perception of what transcends the organic and the contingent. This movement from worldly to transcendental beauty — from the beauty of the *Pang Leela's* graceful dynamism to the

beauty of the perfectly serene face that transcends individuality — is the aesthetic enactment of the movement the tradition points toward: the progressive attenuation of clinging, from empathic projection into organic form toward the perception of what lies beyond the conditioned entirely.

The distinction between being and becoming with which this article concludes is this: an artefact is found beautiful or made to be so — that is a state of affairs. Our inner beauty is not; it must be worked toward. This distinction points to the ethical and liberatory horizon — the horizon of the path (*magga*) toward the cessation of clinging — within which the psychology of beauty is situated in the Buddhist context. Aesthetic experience, at its most complete, is not a resting in beauty but a movement through it: a movement that the artefact, at its best, both initiates and guides.

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