BEAUTY
ANCIENT GREEK

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The ancient Greek concept of beauty differed to the modern one in a number of ways, but there were also some similarities. Of course in ancient Greece people who were physically attractive were described as beautiful, as were aesthetically pleasing places, scenes and pieces of art such as statues. However, beauty spanned a much wider area as well, often being synonymous with an object performing its function well. Beauty was also a common theme in Greek mythology and literature, especially when exploring the idea that it could be a curse as well as a blessing.

The word from the ancient Greek language that is most commonly translated as 'beauty' is *kalos*. However, it has a number of different applications in contexts that would be less common today, as in modern English we would use a different word. There is another word in the ancient Greek language, *kallos,* which is very subtly different but almost exclusively refers to people and their physical attractiveness. David Konstan discusses this distinction in his book *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea.* In terms of the aesthetic sense, *kalos* could be applied to people, but also to many other things such as horses, weapons and armour. When being used to describe things other than people, it would often mean something other than simply beautiful in the sense that it is aesthetically pleasing. When describing armour or weapons, *kalos* would take on the meaning of 'well-made' or 'well crafted' and with horses it would mean 'fine' or that the horse had a good temperament. The specific meaning of *kalos* can often be inferred from the context as well, and in English we would then replace 'beautiful' with something more specific or appropriate. It is also interesting to note that the ancient Greeks made no distinction between men and women when they were describing their appearance in this positive way. Whereas nowadays 'beautiful' is more commonly used to describe women, while men are 'handsome' in ancient Greece everyone was simply '*kalos*'.

The word *kallos* is very similar in meaning to *kalos* but is exclusively used when describing physical attractiveness, and is also closely linked to '*eros*' meaning desire (Konstan, 2014). People that were described as '*kallos*' were almost invariably described in this way because they induced desire. This is very different to *kalos*, which could be applied to children, who of course do not inspire sexual desire. One way that we can see the difference in the uses of these two very similar words is through looking at how people described different goddesses. The goddess Aphrodite, who is often depicted wearing very few clothes, was often described as *kallos*. This is in contrast to other goddesses such as Hera, who was more motherly, and Athena, who was more virginal: both of them were described as *kalos* (Konstan, 2014). Another difference between *kalos* and *kallos* is that *kallos* is purely aesthetic, while *kalos* can also mean virtuous or noble. *Kalos* can give a physical description as well, as shown in the Iliad when Achilles is about to kill Lycaon, who is begging for his life, and he replies "Don't you see how *kalos* and big I am?" (Konstan, 2014) His use of the verb to see makes it clear that he is referring to his physical appearance. However, *kallos* is purely an indicator of physical attractiveness and desire, and is often contrasted with ideas of virtue and goodness (*agathos*).

Beauty was also a very prominent theme in ancient Greek literature and mythology, particularly when examining the idea of beauty being a burden rather than a gift. One of the most famous events of Greek mythology and the inspiration for some of the oldest and most well known works of literature, the Trojan War, started because of beauty. In Homer's Iliad, which describes some time towards the end of the war, both Helen and Paris are described as beautiful. Menelaus and Paris are fighting over Helen's beauty, and it is Paris' beauty that led Helen to run away with him in the first place, although she probably did not think that her decision would cause a war that would last for ten years. Homer also employs the multiple uses of the word '*kalos*' in the Iliad, as he describes many of the characters in this way including Achilles, Ajax, Hector, (Homer, 2014)Odysseus and Agamemnon, and uses it to describe them both in terms of their physical forms and their actions.

Overall, it is difficult to discuss the ancient Greek conception of beauty without comparing it to the modern one, because of the linguistic differences. The ancient Greeks did not have a word for beauty or beautiful that was used in the same way that we use the word now. However, this does not mean that they did not have a similar concept of beauty. There is no doubt that they still placed value on aesthetic appearance of both people and objects, which they definitely have in common with the population of the modern world.

Bibliography

Konstan, D., 2014. Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Home, 2014. The Iliad. London: Penguin Books Ltd.