

A Walk in the Park

In 2010 Rev Phil Silk added on to the NUF Internet Fellowship, a copy of a service he had given on the theme of 'Beauty', which has been visited by almost 9,000 people.

He asks, "How important is beauty to you?" and "could you easily define it?".

Beauty is meaningful to us all and yet difficult to pin down, part of our spiritual life yet beyond rationality. I then went on to ask what role art played in our concept of beauty and our spirituality.

On our recent visit to Broomhill Sculpture Park, in N Devon, Phil's words got me thinking. Some sculptures, such as the 'Arboreal Armour' – a dying tree which had been bandaged, made me question. Was this a message about the importance of looking after nature and the damage modern day living is doing to our woodlands and environment. Yes, this was art but one with a message that in itself wasn't beautiful, in its dire warnings about the earth's future, if we don't care for the natural world which is our home. Yes, real trees are beautiful, roots, trunk and leaves, even dying trees are beautiful, but did the artist improve or detract from art as beauty in adding the bandages? I wondered whether if I had watched the artist working, whether I would have seen beauty in his actions as he bound the wounded tree.

Nestled amongst the trees was a sculpture of 'The Rape of Europa', art telling a story. This surely can be seen as a story with beauty at its core. In Greek mythology and geography, lands or rivers were identified with the female figure. Zeus in the form of a white bull is in love with the beautiful Europa and seeing Europa gathering flowers, descends and woos her and she falls in love with the bull, caressing his flanks and eventually getting onto his back. Zeus swam across the sea to Crete, revealing his identity and making Europa the first queen of Crete. The story has been adapted and told many times. But what about the beauty and art of this sculpture and did it sit well in this woodland setting with the river runner through? I couldn't separate the story from this portrayal and yet in the freedom and passionate depiction of love of person and love of nature, I was captured. I wanted to stroke the sculpture, the massive bull and the fragile Europa. However, I wasn't captured purely by its beauty but by the power of the story telling.

The many coloured, straight geometric shapes of The Celebration of Colour, seemed to demonstrate that art needs to be in the right place to be able to judge whether it is pleasing to the eye. Set in this woodland clearing it spoke to me only of intrusion of the brashness of modernity intruding into the natural world. There are no straight lines in nature.

Then I came upon a sculpture which for me depicted beauty in art form. For me there was no story-telling, no message, nothing out of place. This light grey sculpture, of the torso and head of a man and a woman, conveyed both a physical and spiritual ecstasy through the natural curved lines of the human body set in its natural surroundings. Nothing jarred on the eye.

What this walk in the park has perhaps taught me, is that the question of art, beauty and spirituality is complex. Just because art is not pleasing on the eye doesn't negate the profound message it may convey. In the end our assessment of art and beauty is a personal and spiritual response to that which compels us to engage with it, in a particular place and at a particular time.