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## UNIT 2    THEORY OF AESTHETICS - MEDIEVAL

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### 2.0    OBJECTIVES

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The main objective of this Unit is to present the gradual change with regard to the concept of beauty under the influence of Scholastic Thought. It is in the work *Confessions* of St. Augustine that we find a different approach from that of the Greeks. Though influenced by Platonism and Neoplatonism, St. Augustine played a dominant role in defining the nature of art, a human creation differentiating from the creation of God. He influenced the later thinkers of the middle age. In *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius refers to God as Beautiful. He greatly influenced later St. Thomas Aquinas who in his *Summa Theologica* takes up the study of the sense of beauty. A kind of divinity in the aesthetic approach felt in this Christian era was put to rest by the Renaissance Movement. The debates revolved around the nature of art and end of artistic productions. This paved a new path bridging the ancient and medieval into modernity. The shaping of the philosophy of art could be found in the work of Rene Descartes who employed his metaphysical position in determining his intellectual aesthetics. The contribution of Descartes with regard to artistic productions and experience is seen the transition from the medieval age to the modern period.

Thus by the end of this Unit you should be able:

- to understand the background of the emergence of medieval aesthetic thought
- to know the contribution of St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius
- to see the study of beauty of St. Thomas Aquinas
- to appreciate the thought developed in the Renaissance Movement
- to understand the theory of Descartes on art and art experience

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### 2.1    INTRODUCTION

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Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus have considerably influenced the thought of the middle age thinkers with regard to the aesthetic thought. Even though the word ‘aesthetic’ have not yet been associated with the art or art experience, we use it

in the sense derived from the writers of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century. The middle age is found to be predominantly in the analysis of the notion of beauty. The Socratic nature of the soul has given way in the Scholastic school of thought that places God as the absolute beauty and creation of God as the beautiful. Interestingly, we find followed by the Greek thought, the early writers of the middle age with its theological perspective carefully takes up the study of the concept of beauty. The aesthetic currents are found in the medieval period covering the early Christian era and the Renaissance. Setting aside the historical development, we shall deal with the original works of some of the important influential thinkers of the medieval period beginning from St. Augustine highlighting the concept of beauty included as a vital term in the study of Aesthetics.

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## 2.2 ST. AUGUSTINE AND PSEUDO DIONYSIUS

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### St. Augustine

The medieval age is marked by the beginning of St. Augustine. Highly influenced by the Platonist and Neo-Platonist thought, we find his views related to philosophy of art in his autobiographical work *The Confessions*. The study on art from the writings of St. Augustine is tedious since the ideas are strewn variedly, however, the crux of it is presented here.

By using the words *ex nihilo* and *ex material*, he distinguishes the creation of God and the human creation, that of the artists. He did not opine the imitation of nature of Forms as held by Plato. Augustine held nature superior, as creation of God that forms the material for the artists. Unlike Plato, he found a kind of truth in the poetic compositions. He considered False as that which tends to be what it is not. In this connection, he divides falsehood into two, one as the deception brought about by nature and two, the deception carried by the living beings. The deception by the living beings he further classifies as practical and deliberate illusions and deceptions only to amuse. He distinguishes the poetic or the artistic falsity as the deceptions for amusement. Hence, he does not favour the idea of Plato that poets are liars or flatterers. The intention of the artists, says Augustine is not to deceive.

He mirrors the view of Plotinus when he says God's beauty emanates to nature in the act of creation. Initially, he says, matter was formless 'without any beauty' and describes a hierarchy of beautiful things. He recognizes the evil in the line of beauty. Thus, ugly finds a place in the description of art by Augustine. For him, that which is ugly serves as the medium to bring beauty prominently and contrasts thereby contributing to the effectiveness of beauty. This can be achieved, according to Augustine, if the ugly is placed in right and proper relation to the beauty.

In his work *De Musica*, he maintains that rhythm originates with God. He explicates that rhythm is eternal which needs to be discovered. He emphasizes the need for enquiry into the nature to discover the eternal rhythm. Augustine claims that rhythm is like math; it can only be discovered by people. Rhythm is already determined in God, and human beings cannot invent it. In other words, rhythm can be discovered through an interrogation like in *Meno*, Socrates' questioning the servant boy. This is likened to the theory of recollection propounded by Plato. In the work *Of True Religion*, Augustine points out that the order is the key element of beauty and an orderly arranged is the beautiful.

Pseudo-Dionysius

Dionysius, the Pseudo-Areopagite, is also known as Pseudo-Dionysius or Denis. He is believed to be a mystical theologian. His main work is titled *The Divine Names* consisting of thirteen chapters. In chapter four, he deals with the question concerning Good, beauty, love, jealousy, and that the nature of evil. In fourteen sections in this fourth chapter, Dionysius begins to define Good and gradually builds upon the nature of Beauty. Good, he says is the supremely divine deity is essentially Good that extends its Goodness to all things. He presents the cosmic order as the Goodness of the Good. He says, “The Good is Cause of the celestial movements in their commencements and terminations”. He terms Good as the Spiritual Light on the ground that It fills every mind with spiritual light, and expels all ignorance and error. When ignorance is removed, he says, the presence of the spiritual light functions as both perfecting and further turning each towards the true Being.

This Good, says Dionysius, is celebrated by the sacred theologians, both as beautiful and as Beauty, and as Love. He does not divide the beautiful and Beauty. The cause is Beauty that embraces the whole in one. He shows that the entire creation is segregated as participations and participants. That which participates in Beauty is called beautiful. Then, Beauty is the participation of the beautifying Cause of all the beautiful things. But, the super essential Beautiful is called Beauty, on account of the beauty communicated from Itself to all beautiful things in an appropriate manner. He sees the Beauty as the cause of the harmony. From a supernatural nature of all beautiful things, he considers beautiful existed prior uniquely in the Cause. The Cause is beautiful from which emerged everything. So he finds every existent thing as beautiful in its order and reason. He identifies the Beautiful with the Good, because, according to him, all things aspire to the Beautiful and Good. There is no existing thing which does not participate in the Beautiful and the Good. Thus, Dionysius shows the undivided, unitary relation of the Beauty and the beautiful.

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2.3 ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

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In his voluminous work *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas analyses the Divine Names as reasoned out by Dionysius. In doing so, he brings out his views on the sense of beauty. In the question on whether goodness has the aspect of a final cause, Aquinas highlights that goodness is praised as beauty and beauty has the aspect of a formal cause and hence goodness has the aspect of a formal cause. In this argument, we derive that Aquinas does not differentiate the Good and Beauty. In establishing the efficient cause, he reveals that the basic principle of goodness is its perfection. He arrives that beauty belongs to the nature of formal cause in the following manner:

- 1) Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical as they are based on the same Form
- 2) Goodness is praised as beauty
- 3) Goodness is logically different from Beauty
- 4) Goodness has the aspect of an end; Beauty relates to the cognitive faculty and the beautiful things are those which please when perceived.

- 5) Hence, beauty consists in due proportion; for the senses delight in things duly proportioned like every cognitive faculty
- 6) since knowledge is assimilation and similarity relates to form,
- 7) beauty appropriately belongs to the nature of a formal cause.

In dealing with the question ‘whether god wills evils’, he describes the view of St. Augustine according to whom out of all things is built up the admirable beauty of the universe, wherein even that which is called evil, properly ordered and disposed, commends the good. For him, God wills that appertains to the perfection and beauty of the universe. While Augustine positions evil in the line of beauty, Aquinas argues that it refers to the intermediary cause.

Aquinas takes up the argument on ‘whether god can do better than what he does’. He resorts to the position of Augustine that each thing that God has created is good, and taken all together they are very good, because in them all consists the wondrous beauty of the universe. Beauty is the key element to substantiate that the creation of God is good.

Thus, we find in the work *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas conducts a study of beauty drawn from the ideas revealed by his predecessors. To surmise, for Aquinas, the origin of beauty is sensuous that are capable of contemplation. He restricts this capacity to the sense of sight and sense of hearing. Hence, he defines beauty in Aristotelian terms as that which pleases solely in the contemplation of it. He identifies three prerequisites of beauty, viz., perfection, appropriate proportion, and clarity. The position of Aquinas typifies the approach to aesthetics adopted by the Scholastics.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Trace the medieval thought on Beauty according to St. Augustine and Psuedo-Dionysius

2) What is the contribution of St. Thomas Aquinas in understanding beauty?

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## 2.4 RENAISSANCE MOVEMENT

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The middle ages in the grip of biblical ideas gave out a highly ascetic form of aesthetic theory that they identified in the order, the Divine Order. The role of art and artists gets diverted in this approach thus not adding much to what the Greeks have to say. But this does not mark the end of aesthetic consciousness, the movement classified as ‘The Renaissance’ offered a fresh breath to the world of art. Since the domination of Greek thought in the theories of art has not been done away with, the Renaissance movement too following the Greeks raising against the Scholastic thought involved in its own problem of art. Some of the Renaissance Thinkers especially with regard to Aesthetic thought were Durer, Fracastoro, Ramus, Castelvetro and others.

Renaissance Thinkers were engaged in solving the problems like,

- 1) What is the objective of art?
- 2) Does art promote morality?
- 3) What are the primary features of art?
- 4) What is an end of art?
- 5) Is art in nature or is it deceptive?

and many other questions that were analysed in the Greek and Scholastic period.

The Renaissance movement basically re-looked into the theory of imitation in the background of the nature of mind. They emphasized the faculty of imagination of the mind as the means of artistic production. With an attempt to get rid of the religious implication of God and philosophical implication of Soul, the Renaissance thinkers brought in the concept of artistic and poetic implications. They argued that mind serves as the mirror that has the capacity to reflect the external nature which was termed as the artistic imagination. Durer points out that this power of imagination is a gift of God and hence he developed the concept of genius. Further, the artistic imagination itself was defined as confined with the power of choice and determination which selects the “beautiful” parts of the nature and reproduces. This concept echoes the ‘selective imitation’ of Socrates.

Art, according to the Renaissance Thinkers, is entrenched with the principle of unity that arouses the emotion of the spectator. The metaphorical usages are seen as the exercise of the mind of the well-informed to tackle the hidden truths. The artistic pleasure derived from various art forms was seen as the achievement of overcoming pain and since pain is lost, the spectator joyously appreciates the artist. Fracastoro identifies this experience as a divine harmony. Thus the theory of imitation was replaced with the theory of verisimilitude.

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## 2.5 TRANSITION – RENE DESCARTES

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Descartes, greatly influenced by the Scholastic thought took the inspiration from the Greeks too and brought out his theory of beauty. Based on the Aristotelian conception as found in the *Poetics*, Descartes sought to analyse the relation between pleasure and beauty. He unknowingly resorts to the prevalent idea of order and that the senses favour proportion. He followed the thought of Aristotle in his explication of passion and action. Descartes form as it were a transition

from the medieval to the modern period. His theory of intellectual aesthetics is on his first principles of philosophy with regard to the concept of soul. His theory in terms of aesthetics can be divided as (1) imagination (2) emotion (3) joy which he draws from his philosophical disposition.

### **Imagination**

Descartes advocates 'free imagination' for poetic and dramatic productions. In the context of sense-perception, memory, hallucination, dream he discusses the free imagination of a poet. He differentiates poetic imagination from sensual perception. In sense-perception, he says, impressions are received in the brain from common sense which are called images. Imagination, on the other hand receives the common sense and also has the capacity to retain it for sometime. Memory is that which traces the past impressions on imagination. Descartes identifies three causal factors that prompts the imagination to function (a) the physical body (b) animal spirits and (c) soul. His theory on the products of imagination prompted by soul through free will holds a special position in understanding the aesthetic principle formulated by him. He states that the free will that propels the imagination brings out new creations that do not exist in the natural world. Thus, he distinguishes the poetic imagination from the sensory perception.

### **Emotion**

Descartes holds that emotions are the attributes that rise by the intimate union of the mind and body. He asserts that emotions are felt by the soul. He identifies six primary emotions. They are wonder, joy, hatred, desire, love, and sadness. Wonder, explains Descartes, is the sudden jolt of the soul. The attention is fixed on something that is rare and extraordinary. The reason for the arousal of wonder is said to be the non-classification of the external object as either 'good' or 'bad'. Thus, he proves that primarily there are six emotions. The main features of theory of emotions as given by Descartes are:

- 1) Emotions are not uniform in all. It causes different emotions based on the impressions of every individual.
- 2) Emotions are not a direct product of the will. It is aroused through art forms and hence is indirect.
- 3) Emotions last as long as the cause of impact is present. They cannot be immediately balanced.

Descartes, further divides emotions into two types, one is the six primary emotions that are independent and original. The other is the dependent emotions like esteem, hope, fear, jealousy, pride, generosity etc. He mentions the external indicators of emotions and further classifies them as voluntary and involuntary emotions. The principal indicators of emotions, he considers as the various parts of the physical body like movement of the eyes and face, change of colour, tremor, lethargy, swooning, laughter, tears, grumble and sighs.

### **Joy**

The end of artistic production is termed as joy or aesthetic delight. Descartes arrives at this by the study of the sensory delight. Here too, he differentiates the joy derived by sensory perception and the joy derived from artistic productions. He source of artistic joy is because of the imagination, and it is seen as imaginative



joy. The art forms like poetry or drama builds the imagination that arouses the emotion felt in the soul and hence there is imaginative joy. Descartes terms as this as intellectual joy that is achieved by arts. In his section on *Passions of the Soul*, he states the pleasure derived from art is intellectual joy. This pleasure is due to the fact that the emotions which are aroused by the artistic works do not harm anyone but excites the soul by affecting it. Thus, the aesthetic experience, according to Descartes, is the experience of intellectual joy along with emotion.

Descartes analyses the aesthetic experience in poetry and drama. He holds the importance of language as the tool to arouse joy by poetry. The visuals of the drama, according to him, lead to the interior emotion in stages. He explains the experience of tragedy in drama as that which gives rise to pity. The pity from tragic drama, he says, is absent of bitterness due to the artistic nature of presentation. Hence, he differentiates the pity experienced in life from that experienced in a tragic drama. Contrasting clear thought, he classifies aesthetic experience as confused thought. The aesthetic thought of Descartes had a great influence on the later poetic productions and aesthetic thought.

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Examine the change brought about by the Renaissance Movement in aesthetic thought

2) Assess the transition of Rene Descartes given out in his Intellectual Aesthetics

2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have analysed the growth of thought of art forms and art experience in the medieval age. Though not a complete departure from the Greek thought but influenced by Greeks, by the intervention of Christianity, the saints of the Church dominated the thought in the medieval age. Thus we find a theological approach to examine the philosophical disposition during this period. This has affected the thought on aesthetics too. It is hard to find specific contribution in the works of medieval philosophers to arrive at the growth of aesthetic thought.

Since the focus is on determining the order of creation and the nature of the creator. In such debates, we extract the idea on concepts like beauty, good, harmony, rhythm etc that are identified as key elements in the field of philosophy of art. From the angle of art, the medieval age can be almost marked as a lull period that has very less to contribute to art experience. However, the writings in this middle age carry the fragrance of the Greek thought into the modern period and hence we derive various salient features on aesthetics pertaining to the is age. The rise of Renaissance can be seen as sort of relief to the artistic understanding that lays the foundation for ontological discussion of art in the modern period. The movement taken forward is fully realized in the contribution of Rene Descartes in his intellectual aesthetics. Thus, the medieval age plays a vital role in positioning the thought on aesthetics. This we have traced from the writings of St. Augustine, followed by Pseudo-Dionysius. Both of them influenced St. Thomas Aquinas. Thus, the scholastic thought diverges into determining the divine order as beauty. The debates raised on the nature of beauty are what we saw percolated into the Renaissance Thinkers and later realized in Descartes.

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## 2.7 KEY WORDS

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*Ex nihilo* : creation of God  
*Ex material* : creation of human

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## 2.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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