The Classical period of Greek art is usually closely associated with the city of Athens, but one sculptor from the city-state of Argos was recognized in antiquity as one of the greatest sculptors that ever lived. That artist was Polykleitos. Unfortunately none of the original works by the hand of Polykleitos survive, and we have to be content to study his masterpieces through Roman copies. Polykleitos was also known as the author of a manifesto on the ideal proportions of a standing male figure called the Canon. This too has not survived, and we know of his theories only through the writings of others. Nonetheless, we can still glimpse the spirit of the Classical period and the ideas of beauty inherent in the copies that have survived to this day.

Polykleitos, The Doryphoros (Spear Bearer), 450-440 BCE. Images from http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/Doryphoros.htm
If Man is the Measure of All Things, the pinnacle of creation, then Polykleitos set out to measure man using a mathematical formula. In addition to writing the rules of the perfect proportions of the perfect man, he created a statue to illustrate his concepts called the Doryphoros, or the Spear Bearer. We will also use this statue to illustrate the art historical term contrapposto, a pose in which the human body naturally stands with the weight of the body on one foot, which sets off a series of adjustments to the hips and shoulders that produce a subtle curve to the body. Let us now turn our attention to the form of the Spear Bearer to see how visual interest and physical tension has been united to engage the mind of the viewer.

In looking at the Doryphoros, you may notice how much more realistic this figure looks when compared to, say, the New York Kouros. Rather than being confronted by rigid frontality and symmetry, we see a harmony of opposite features that, when brought together, balance the composition as a whole. Notice how the head is turned slightly to the right, and the hips sway slightly to the figure’s left. Notice how one foot is flat on the ground, the other is raised. Notice how one arm is at the side, the other is bent at the elbow, holding the now missing spear. Notice how the figure’s left leg is bent at the knee; the other is straight.

There is also a harmony of opposing forces. The flexed, tense arm muscle is on the opposite side of the body from the tense leg that holds the weight of the body. The resting arm is on the opposite side of the body from the resting, slightly bent leg. Is the Spear Bearer taking a step, or is he standing still? He seems to embody both motion and stillness at once in this contrapposto pose. The harmonies of opposing features and forces, when combined with physical features that can only be described as idealized beauty, are brought together to create an exemplary statue of an exceptional man. Is he a Greek mortal, a hero, or one of the gods? It is hard to tell. There is a timelessness beauty inherent in this statue, which makes the Doryphoros accessible to both the ancient Greek viewer and the modern-day art student.

Although the New York Kouros, the Metopes on the Parthenon, and the Doryphoros were made in different areas of Greece by different artists, we see that the heart and soul of these pieces are very similar. Quite simply, they represent the human figure as an object of beauty. All three sculptures represent youthful, muscular, Greek men, Greek warriors, in the prime of their life. They are so perfect, in fact, that they could be mistaken for gods. Both the Archaic artist and the Classical artist were not interested in portraying emotions or particular historical moments; rather, we see an emphasis on form, an emphasis on myth, two themes that are timeless. And while such works are timeless, we should not mistake them as static or boring. Indeed, in the works of the Classical period, we see the exact opposite is true. Once Greek artists had succeeded in their ability to mimic the appearance of the human form, they then perfected representing the movement of human form, and drawing the human audience in to interact with those forms. Even today we are drawn in, marveling at the artistry and beauty of these marbles. While we engage these works as the Greeks over two millennia ago did, the words spoken by Protagoras still ring true. Man is the Measure of All Things.
The Birth of Venus

More than 500 years after its creation, THE BIRTH OF VENUS by Sandro Botticelli is one of the most iconic paintings ever produced, and remains among the most renowned and priceless masterpieces in the world.

Painted in 1486, THE BIRTH OF VENUS has been the subject of endless intellectual speculation and interpretations of meaning.

The painting depicts a voluptuous nude female standing gracefully upon a large seashell which appears to emerge onto shore from the ocean. To her left is a male angel floating in the air and clutching a woman in a tight embrace. To the right of the Venus is another woman in flowing garments, appearing to hail the arrival of the “goddess.”

THE MEANING BEHIND THE PAINTING

It’s a gorgeous vision, certainly, and stunning to behold. But art critics and historians can’t help but ponder the greater meaning behind THE BIRTH OF VENUS. Perhaps the most dominant
view is that the painting was inspired by Neoplatonic thought. This latter body of philosophy was a revival and slight reinterpretation of the works of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato.

In the Middle Ages, intellectuals across Europe were rediscovering the works of the ancient Greeks with great enthusiasm after the long oppression of the Dark Ages. They were also applying their own meanings to what the Greek masters were talking about. Artists such as Botticelli were inspired by this and also Greek mythology. This was a break from the long dominance of art based on Christian themes and the dogma of the Catholic Church.

**PHYSICAL BEAUTY AND INTELLECTUAL LOVE**

According to Neoplatonism, great physical beauty was a direct springboard to spiritual beauty and intellectual love. The stunning Venus perched on a half-shell is a ravishing beauty with lengthy locks of luxurious reddish-blond hair. Her skin is pale and her stance is rather demure. Her head is tilted coquettishly. She shyly covers her genitals with a flourish of her tresses. Her right hand is poised at her breasts.

Those who viewed the painting in the 15th Century may have had their minds lifted to the ideal of Plato’s higher forms of love, as prompted by the physical beauty of the female body.

**INSPIRED BY LORENZO DE MEDICI**

Over the years, many have offered other views, and some have even questioned the predominance of Neoplatonic thought as being influential on the scene of late 1400s Italy. Thus, others have suggested that the painting is about Lorenzo de’ Medici, the man who commissioned the painting. The images of the painting are purported to be a symbolic reflection of de Medici’s virtues.

Lorenzo de’ Medici was a powerful and extremely wealthy Italian statesman. In effect, he was the ruler of the Florentine Republic. The Medici family itself had gained great wealth in their era as bankers and captains of industry. They controlled just about every aspect of local society through their monopoly on the monetary system.

Lorenzo de’ Medici was an extreme lover of the arts, and contributed huge portions of his great wealth toward commissioning paintings by the greatest artistic masters of the day, one of whom was Botticelli.
BOTTICELLI’S BIOGRAPHY

Botticelli’s full name was Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, but he was commonly known as Sandro. His work is assigned to the “Florentine school” and he is known for the “linear grace” of his work. He was born around 1445 and achieved his peak in the decade of 1480s when he produced THE BIRTH OF VENUS, and another masterpiece, PRIMAVERA.

By 1502, Botticelli’s skill, career and talent was considered to have faded, his best years well behind him. However, with works such as THE BIRTH OF VENUS under his name, Botticelli had gained an enduring reputation as one of the great masters of the “Golden Age” of Renaissance painting. Although his works fell out of favor among art experts in the 19th Century, Botticelli has never really lost his position as a timeless genius.

It should be noted that the interpretation of THE BIRTH OF VENUS as extolling the virtues of Lorenzo de’ Medici is not widely accepted. That the painting was inspired by Plato simply makes more sense. The images in the painting lend themselves much more readily to a Neoplatonic view.

As we all know, the meaning of art is ultimately in the eye of the beholder, and the greatest works invite multiple interpretations – with none of them necessarily being completely right or wrong.

Today, THE BIRTH OF VENUS is held in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.

This article was taken from http://totallyhistory.com/the-birth-of-venus/
What is wabi sabi? Ask a Japanese this question and there will likely be a long silence. Pose the same question to an American, however, the answer will often be quick and sure: "It’s beauty of things imperfect!" Why do the Japanese struggle for an answer to the meaning of wabi sabi that seems to come easily to Westerners? Could they be searching for a different answer altogether?

"Translation," wrote Kakuzo Okakura, author of the classic The Book of Tea, "can at best be only the reverse side of a brocade, - all the threads are there, but not the subtlety of color or design." Few examples illustrate this better than the Japanese concept of wabi sabi. Westerners tend to associate wabi sabi with physical characteristics - imperfection, crudeness, an aged and weathered look, etc. Although wabi sabi may encompass these qualities, these characteristics are neither sufficient nor adequate to convey the essence of the concept. Wabi sabi is not rigidly attached to a list of physical traits. Rather, it is a profound aesthetic consciousness that transcends appearance. It can be felt but rarely verbalized, much less defined. Defining wabi sabi in physical terms is like explaining the taste of a piece of chocolate by its shape and color to someone who has never tasted it. As long as one focuses on the physical, one is doomed to see only the back side of the brocade, while its real beauty remains hidden. In order to see its true essence, one must look beyond the apparent, one must look within.

The term wabi sabi is derived from two characters shared by Japanese and Chinese. Originally, wabi 怖 means ‘despondence’, and sabi 寂 means ‘loneliness’ or ‘solitude’. These are words for feelings, not for physical appearance of objects. The term embodies a refined aesthetic sensibility that was very evident in ancient Chinese art and literature long before the concept was popularized in Japan through the introduction of Zen Buddhism and the Tea Ceremony. Asians are not born with this aesthetic sensibility. They develop it through long exposure to classical literature, brush painting, and especially to poetry. Consider this famous poem by the eighth-century Chinese poet Cheung Chi (張繼):

月落烏啼霜滿天
江楓漁火對愁眠
姑蘇城外寒山寺
夜半鐘聲到客船

The imagery of this bleak melancholic landscape seen by the traveler spending a lonely night on the river is also calm and tranquil. A similar atmosphere is written into the following haiku by the eighteenth-century Japanese poet Yosano Buson (与謝蕪村):

山寺や 撞きそこなひの 鐘霞む

FROM A MOUNTAIN TEMPLE THE SOUND OF A BELL STRUCK FUMBLINGLY VANISHES IN THE MIST

Poems like these evoke a deeply personal aesthetic consciousness, a bittersweet mix of loneliness and serenity, a sense of dejection buoyed by freedom from material hindrance. This is what wabi sabi feels like. And one can only experience it by turning the focus from outer appearance to look within. No wonder the Japanese struggle to explain wabi sabi; they try to tell how it feels, not just how it looks!

Of course, this aesthetic consciousness is not reserved for Asians. One only needs to look at Walker Evan’s photographs of the interior of an Alabama farm house, or Andre Kertesz’s images of shadows cast by empty chairs, or the central courtyard in Georgia O’keeffe’s home in Abiquiu to recognize a similar aesthetic awareness. These artists speak to the audience through mutual understanding of their private emotions. Such a connection cannot be faked. A common fallacy is to believe an artist can artificially create a resonance with the audience with certain visual cues. Unless the work is a genuine expression of the artist’s feeling, the effect will only appear hollow to the perceptive eyes.

Wabi sabi is not a style defined by superficial appearance. It is an aesthetic ideal, a quiet and sensitive state of mind, attainable by learning to see the invisible, paring away what is unnecessary, and knowing where to stop.

This article was originally found at http://www.touchingstone.com/Wabi_Sabi.html
Gustave Courbet (1819-1877)

Through his powerful realism, Courbet became a pioneering figure in the history of modernism.

The self-proclaimed "proudest and most arrogant man in France," Gustave Courbet created a sensation at the Paris Salon of 1850–51 when he exhibited a group of paintings set in his native Ornans, a village in the Franche-Comté in eastern France. These works, including The Stonebreakers (1849–50; now lost) and A Burial at Ornans (1849–50; Musée d'Orsay, Paris) challenged convention by rendering scenes from daily life on the large scale previously reserved for history painting and in an emphatically realistic style. Confronted with the unvarnished realism of Courbet's imagery, critics derided the ugliness of his figures and dismissed them as "peasants in their Sunday best."

Courbet's career was punctuated by scandal, often deliberately courted by the artist himself. Young Women from the Village (40.175), set in the outskirts of Ornans, generated further controversy at the Salon of 1852. Critics were nearly unanimous in reproaching Courbet for the "ugliness" of the three young women, for whom the artist's sisters modeled, and for the disproportionately small scale of the cattle. Moreover, Courbet's suggestive use of the term demoiselles (young ladies) to denote this trio of young village women further provoked his critics, who took issue with the blurring of class boundaries that the term implied. In the aftermath of the democratic uprisings in the countryside in 1848, Courbet's depictions of a rural middle-class in his Ornans subjects unsettled his Parisian audience at the Salons.
In 1855, Courbet's monumental canvas, *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up a Seven-Year Phase of My Artistic Life* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), was rejected by the jury of the Exposition Universelle. Courbet retaliated by mounting his own exhibition in his Pavilion of Realism, built within sight of the official venue, where he displayed, among more than forty other works, *The Painter's Studio*. The meaning of Courbet's unfinished painting remains enigmatic: the figures on the left suggest the various social types that appear in Courbet's canvases, while on the right Courbet portrays his friends and supporters. The artist painted himself at the center of this universe, paradoxically painting a landscape within the confines of his studio. The accompanying exhibition catalogue included Courbet's seminal "Realist Manifesto," in which he proclaimed his fidelity to subjects drawn from modern life.

During the 1850s, Courbet's embrace of modernity led him beyond the Ornans subjects that had established his reputation. He captured the café culture of bohemian Paris, painting portraits of its denizens and works inspired by popular café chansons (songs). An avid hunter, Courbet also enjoyed critical and popular success with his hunting scenes (29.100.61; 33.77), the first of which he exhibited at the Salon of 1857 alongside his portrait of the actor Louis Gueymard (19.84). Summering at the fashionable seaside resort of Trouville in 1865, he produced society portraits on commission as well as the more intimate *Jo, La Belle Irlandaise* (29.100.63), which fuses portraiture and genre painting. The following year, Courbet submitted *Woman with a Parrot* (29.100.57) to the Salon, having vowed to paint a nude that its conservative jury would accept. Like Manet's *Olympia* of 1865 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), Courbet's nude was unmistakably modern as opposed to the idealized nude "Venuses" and "Eves" by Academic artists that proliferated at the Salons. His supporters lauded him for painting "the real, living French woman."

Landscape played a central role in Courbet's imagery. From the beginning of his career, he identified himself with the topography of his native Ornans (1995.537). The distinctive limestone cliffs of the surrounding Jura Mountains provide the backdrop for one of his early self-portraits and recur in *Young Women from the Village* (40.175). He developed a repertoire of landscape motifs rooted in his native Franche-Comté, including the Puits-Noir, or Black Well, which inspired a series of paintings that span more than a decade, and the source of the Loue River, a geological curiosity and popular tourist site. In the summer of 1864, he painted at least four variations, on canvases of the same size, of the Loue River as it surges forth from the mouth of the cave in which it originates (29.100.122). He used both palette knife and brush to render the rock formations and foaming surface of the rushing water. Visiting the south of France in 1854, Courbet produced a group of luminous, seemingly infinite views of the Mediterranean. He did not immerse himself fully in painting "landscapes of the sea," as he preferred to call his seascapes, until subsequent trips to the Normandy coast, undertaken between 1859 and 1869, where he encountered Claude Monet and James McNeill Whistler in
In 1865, Courbet exhibited only seascapes at the Salon—a calculated assertion of his command of the genre.

That same year, Courbet flouted the authority of the state—not for the first time—by publicly refusing the award of the Legion of Honor, declaring his independence from any form of government. Since the time of its creation, Courbet's Realist imagery—from the downtrodden laborers of *The Stonebreakers* (1849–50) to the rural bourgeoisie of Ornans—had prompted political associations, but the artist's actual engagement with politics was complex. He called himself a "republican by birth" but did not take up arms during the 1848 Revolution, adhering to his pacifist beliefs. He entered the political arena on the eve of the Paris Commune of 1871 and played an active role in the political and artistic life of this short-lived socialist government. With the demise of the Commune, Courbet was arrested and sentenced to six months imprisonment for his involvement in the destruction of the Vendôme Column, a symbol of Napoleonic authority (1999.251). In 1873, fearing persecution by the newly installed government, Courbet voluntarily went into exile in Switzerland, where he died in 1877. Through his powerful realism, Courbet became a pioneering figure in the history of modernism.

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http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gust/hd_gust.htm
When Did Modern Art Become So Reluctant to Embrace Beauty?

The rejection of beauty as a creative ideal began not with modernism but when modern art started believing its own press.

Opponents of modern art saw works such as Picasso's portrait of William Uhde as attacking the beauty of the human form. Photograph: The Gallery Collection/Corbis

Beauty is the most dangerous idea in art. It's the most dangerous idea in life, too. It tantalises and confuses, inspires and crushes. Beauty has been worshipped as the highest artistic value and denigrated as a pagan temptation. Today, though, it is simply treated by the art world as a joke, a con, an idiotic, old-fashioned idea. This makes much art irrelevant, because beauty is everywhere and obsesses everyone (whatever your idea of beauty happens to be).

Maybe this is why photography, professional and amateur, is the true art of our time. Photography has no objection to beauty. Photographers feast on fashion, delight in the desirable. Why are other art forms today so reluctant to do so?

Clearly, this is the result of a long intellectual process that began with modernism. Or is it? Enemies of modern art complained 80 years ago that the new art was ugly. They
thought the distortions of Picasso were a hideous attack on the classical beauty of the human form as seen by the Greeks. They were wrong, of course: Picasso loved Greek art more than they did and his paintings and sculptures responded intensely to beauty. So, obviously, did Matisse. The Surrealists were obsessed with (strange) beauty. So when did official art stop being interested in beauty?

It must have been when modern art started believing its own critics. Told again and again that modernism was "ugly", the modernists defended themselves by arguing that beauty is a superficial, bourgeois value and true art is about ideas, politics, the sublime. At the same time, since the 1970s – since the silver jubilee, exactly 25 years ago, when the Sex Pistols were number one – the anti-art tradition of Dada has been mainstream. In the serious art world of today, all this comes together in a pretentious and totally inaccurate belief that radical modern art has always rejected the beautiful. So, galleries are full of serious art that shuns beauty. And we look at it earnestly, then go and look at gorgeous photos, films, magazines – the true art of our time.

The following article was originally available online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/may/02/modern-art-reluctant-embrace-beauty/print