AESTHETIC THEORY

What is beauty? What is belief? What is technique? The larger aim of the course is to consider these questions through the interlocking histories of western philosophy and art with a single historical hypothesis in mind: that beauty as a philosophical and artistic concern has routinely served to reconcile two broadly defined world views, one that is religious or transcendental or universalist in its primary aims and another that is secular, technical, analytical, and particular. Our overall historical narrative will focus on the secularization of religious longings but in a way that understands the category of beauty itself to be a residual religious challenge to the secular worldview. Our primary aim will be to consider the status of that challenge for the world we find ourselves in today.

Our method will be to trace this history through the work of fourteen philosophers from Plato to the present alongside leading examples of the art of their times. Classroom discussion will center on short excerpts from the philosophical texts at issue but we will also lean heavily on artworks to test and complement the philosophical claims and to inquire into our own experiences of beauty. Additionally, each text and its companion artwork will be introduced by considering it in the context of period debates about religiosity and secularism as well as within relevant developments in the history of science and technology.

Students will be asked to prepare and present several short presentations that consider artworks in light of the philosophical readings and write a term paper that takes up an aesthetic question for recent art or recent approaches to the study of older art.