

Scruton assails ugliness passed as art

Modern works reflect sentiment and self-satisfaction, not beauty

By Elizabeth Krump
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We all have a desire to understand the role of beauty in our lives, distinguished philosopher Roger Scruton suggested in a lecture at Regent College in Vancouver on May 5.

Scruton, considered by many to be one of the foremost conservative minds of our time, was visiting from England for the weekend to attend Civitas, an annual Canadian gathering of conservative thinkers. He offered a lecture in Vancouver on “The Need for Beauty” after Civitas, at the invitation of his friends at Redeemer Pacific College and Regent College.

The enormity of his topic was not overlooked by Scruton.

The short lecture was relatively informal, but packed with ideas about society’s relationship with beauty. Scruton delighted his audience with characteristic dry British humour and a provocative, honest discussion of some of the most “unbeautiful” art of the last 100 years.

Before he spoke, Scruton had stated to *The B.C. Catholic* that one of the peculiar things about Canadians is that it is hard to know where they stand on many issues. He was, therefore, intensely interested in the audience’s reaction to his ideas.

He spent as much time fielding questions after his talk as he did delivering the lecture, and engaging discussions among attendees continued well into the book-signing period after the Q & A.

Scruton began the lecture by acknowledging that beauty has been given considerable attention in philosophy over the course of history, then proceeded to make a valiant effort to discuss the modern predicament.

According to Scruton, “There has arisen, in our society, a distrust of beauty. We view it as an invitation into realms that have been undermined.”

He said we have lost a sense of true beauty, and it is now seen as sentimental



Malin Jordan / The B.C. Catholic

English philosopher Roger Scruton (right) signs books after his lecture titled “The Need for Beauty” at Regent College May 5. Scruton was invited to speak by *B.C. Catholic* columnist C.S. Morrissey (left).

and self-satisfying. As a result, modern artists have produced what he calls ugly and “a rather un-grownup kind of art.”

Just as teenagers defy their parents’ rules, artists

the past by seeing it as a standard for beauty. “People choose to desecrate things to remind themselves that they were once sacred,” he said, referring to the Chapman Brothers who use art to completely twist our concept of the human body into something revolting.

Scruton called this attempt to use desecration to find consolation the “consolation of ugliness.” That is, if beauty is unattainable, ugliness is seen by today’s artists as a more tolerable option.

However, Scruton said, the new culture of transgression reflects a disappointment in the world, in ourselves, in not being able to find a place within society, which he called redemption. By contrast, our universal search for beauty expresses the fact that “we have a need to take part in something greater.”

We have a desire to discover that we matter and have a place in society.

Scruton joked that he

managed to avoid a definition of beauty throughout his lecture, but that ultimately we shouldn’t give up on beauty because it does have a defining purpose in our lives.

“It’s part of a process of home-building, of reconciliation, of being with others and achieving our identity in the world.”

Attendee Josie Wichrowska, an undergrad at SFU, was attracted to the topic of beauty because of her involvement with “Trends: Teens Reacting Effectively & Discovering Style,” a local fashion show project which teaches young women about their beauty and dignity in the eyes of God.

Lisa Dwan, a young Vancouver professional, said the lecture provided a great deal of interesting material, but that she had settled on just two or three points “to think about and apply to life.”

Chris Morrissey of Redeemer Pacific College praised Scruton’s “ability to communicate complex ideas in an accessible way.”

In summarizing later, he said if our pursuit of beauty leads us to see our role within the greater fabric of society, then we become “indebted to previous generations for what we have inherited, and responsible to the next generation to give them a good future.”

Beauty thereby makes us more responsible and fills us with “grace and gratitude.”

More on this topic can be viewed on Roger Scruton’s *BBC* documentary, “Why Beauty Matters.”

See bccatholic.ca for more coverage. □

“We have a need to take part in something greater.”
– Roger Scruton

have defied standards of beauty with “transgressive art” which attempts to pollute or negate our sense of beauty.

Scruton lamented that some believe “we have asked too much of art” in