The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque

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The beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque are three key concepts in aesthetics and philosophy of art. Together, they help to map the variety of aesthetically significant experiences. The differentiation among the three concepts took place in seventeenth and eighteenth hundreds, and is still to these days of some significance, despite the difficulty in pinning down each of the three concepts.
pleasing, while to some extent transcending preferences and needs that are specific to an individual. That is, the experience of something beautiful will please a subject for reasons that reach beyond the subjective inclinations of the subject and that can be experienced also by many — some maintain *all* — other subjects. It is debated whether the appreciation of beauty rests primarily on a sensory experience of an object of an event, as [empiricists](https://www.thoughtco.com/empiricism-3073677) maintain, or rather on an appreciation of the object or event that requires understanding, as [rationalists](https://www.thoughtco.com/rationalism-3073743) maintain.

**The Sublime**

The sublime, on the other hand, is a transformative experience typically associated with some negative pleasure and elicited by the encounter of an object or situation whose quantity transcends the limits of our actual grasp. Imagine contemplating the sea, or the sky, an immense quantity of garbage, or a mesmerizing infinite series of numbers: all those experiences can, potentially, elicit the idea of the sublime. To aesthetic theorists of late seventeenth hundreds, the sublime was a crucial concept.

By means of it, they explained why it is possible to have aesthetic experiences that are associated with some degree of discomfort or, in the most remarkable cases, to awe. Beauty, they claimed, is nothing like this. In beauty, we do not experience negative feelings and our aesthetic appreciation is not mysteriously associated with that which is experienced. Indeed, the experience of the sublime gives rise to a paradox of the sublime: we find aesthetic reward in having an experience that, at once, we associate with some negative form of pleasure. It has been debated whether the sublime can be elicited by natural objects or by natural phenomena. In mathematics, we encounter the idea of infinity, which may elicit the idea of the sublime. In phantasy or mystery stories we may experience the sublime too, because of what deliberately remains untold. All of those experiences, however, depend on some human craft. But, can [nature](https://www.thoughtco.com/nature-3071587) elicit the idea of the sublime?

**The Picturesque**

To make room for a *sui generis* aesthetic experience of natural objects or phenomena, the category of picturesque was introduced. The picturesque is not indefinite, and yet it allows for some vagueness as to that which elicits the aesthetic response. The view of the Grand Canyon or the view of the ruins of ancient Rome can elicit a picturesque response. We can place some boundaries to that which we are experiencing, and yet the aesthetic worth of the scenery is not attributable to any specific element, which we may term as beautiful. In this three-partition of aesthetic experiences, then, the experience of beauty is the most
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