

**Bunn, Stephanie (ed.). *Anthropology and Beauty: From Aesthetic to Creativity*. New York: Routledge, 2018, 483 pages**

**Amélie Keyser-Verreault**

Volume 63, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078613ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021333>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)

2292-3586 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Keyser-Verreault, A. (2021). Review of [Bunn, Stephanie (ed.). *Anthropology and Beauty: From Aesthetic to Creativity*. New York: Routledge, 2018, 483 pages]. *Anthropologica*, 63(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021333>

© Amélie Keyser-Verreault, 2021



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# Book Review

---

**Bunn, Stephanie (ed.). *Anthropology and Beauty: From Aesthetic to Creativity*. New York: Routledge, 2018, 483 pages.**

Amélie Keyser-Verreault  
*Simone de Beauvoir Institute,*  
*Concordia University*

This imposing volume explores varied perspectives on the experience and production of what the contributors of the twenty-eight chapters of the book take to be ‘beauty.’ Bunn’s edited volume offers an understanding of the recent trend of the anthropological thinking of art, aesthetics, and creativity, and aims to see the value of an anthropological approach to beauty which illuminates some of the shared preoccupations of scholars of aesthetics. The book does not so much analyze beauty or reflect on the philosophical trends that theorize it, but instead, in an anthropological gesture, each chapter explores beauty as something non-static, as a form of action, as the result of actions, as something both universal and relative, and as something that is lived by people through their senses. In so doing, this volume gives voice to the everyday experience of beauty. This bridges the divide between an evaluative aesthetic approach in which beauty is lodged in the object under consideration, and a relativistic approach, which is key to anthropology and takes such judgment to be solely subjective. The approach of this book is to consider beauty as dynamic and living processes experienced through relationships, whether between person and thing; makers and the made; person and process or action; person and environment; or person and person.

These experiential and relational approaches are explored in the eight parts of the book. These chapters are preceded by an introduction, which sets the table for some of the complex philosophical ideas developed in the book.

Part I shows how beauty as it relates to patterning and mathematical cognition can be grasped and experienced as affective through actions of the body and the social. This breaks with the analytical tendency to assume that patterns

articulate meanings that are produced elsewhere. Küchler's Chapter 2 shows how graphic gesture encapsulated in the patterns of Oceanian art forms express sociocultural knowledge, such as navigational information, and social relationship. We here have a great illustration of how ethnography can contribute to our understanding of how beauty is lived as the author writes: "Anthropology has a lot to offer to our understanding of how beauty works, what it does and why it matters to the human propensity to intuit how to be in relation with persons and objects via objects that were produced with beauty in mind" (32).

Part 2 explores beauty as grace in works of art. In Chapter 4, D'Alessandro shows how, among the Navajo, the beauty of the process of creating, in this case weaving, is encapsulated in the object that is made so other people can experience beauty. In the beauty of a piece of art there is a moment where the viewer may experience how the artist sees the world. In this precise moment, the viewer and the producer can experience a symbiosis. Here, it is the power of the work through its creation which radiates beauty that is relevant. Presenting an account of beauty in dialogue with the notion of grace in the work of sculptor Douglas White and anthropologist Gregory Bateson, Chapter 5 suggests the experience of beauty is an unexplained gift that we can encounter in everyday moments that constitutes "small tears of fabric of ordinary life" (67).

Part 3 addresses how beauty is perceived, in chapters that explore the experience of beauty through the senses. Different cultures have placed attention on different senses, including verbal communication in Chapter 8, sound in Chapter 9, vision and color in Chapter 10, and light in Chapter 11.

Part 4 considers skillfulness. While most of the anthropological research about skills mostly focuses on the hand-made and the craft, these chapters argue for a broader approach of skill which should embrace any status of work. Chapter 12 addresses skillfulness through the ability of the hands in Lulesami weaving. Chapter 13 turns to the eye of the cinematographer. Chapter 14 depicts beauty as a learned, embodied and socialized capacity.

Part 5 dwells on beauty, the body, and performance, which consider how bodies may themselves be perceived and evaluated as beautiful and how they may respond or act upon themselves to modify how they are perceived. We explore how bodily beauty emerges in the doing as much as in the being through an examination of plastic surgery and race in Brazil in Chapter 15, contemporary dance as a collective experience of beauty in Chapter 16, and an autistic approach to beauty in Chapter 17.

Part 6 turns to the architectural approach to beauty, the artist's intuition of time, and the co-existing experience of beauty that arises when First Nations people meet their material heritage in museums. Chapter 21 shows how the co-existence of beauty occurs since the artefacts are themselves beautiful, but beauty is also present because the object was preciously passed down through generations, and also since the ancestors who made them have skills that are now almost lost.

Part 7 address different topics in order to explore the links between beauty, work and design. They explain how ideas of beauty in design and making have become closely tied to economy in our recent economic and industrial history. Beauty as materialized in goods become ephemeral as fashions changed. Gudeman's Chapter 22 highlights the ways in which, in capitalist economic theory, beauty is associated with the end result of production—the product—, while in a community-based economy, where handmade is central, the process of making also evokes beauty.

Part 8 explores the beauty that arises in working together in a synthesis. Each chapter shows the ways communities value work that is done collectively even more than the final product. What emerges is a synthesis of affective experience in creativity.

*Anthropology and Beauty* shows diverse ways to appreciate beauty in anthropology: beauty is lived and relational, involves the body and the senses, and is part of what makes us human. The contributions are poetic, and render intelligibly complex ideas, with nuanced insight on how beauty is experienced. Several chapters include high-quality images. Anyone interested in the diverse approaches to beauty in anthropology, will find in this an exciting resource. Anthropologists of beauty, aesthetics, and art interested in phenomenological approaches will find this book full of insight.