

What is Beauty? *Figure of a Seated Beauty* Versus *Long-Necked Bottle*

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The concept of beauty is very biased. There are many factors that can affect the way an individual perceives beauty, such as time periods, culture, or personal interpretations. *The Figure of a Seated Beauty* and *the Long-Necked Bottle* depict different forms of beauty. Both artworks are made of porcelain. *The Figure of a Seated Beauty* represents a human figure, while the *Long-Necked Bottle* is a vessel which is highly minimal and abstract. The two pieces present a strong comparison of how beauty is viewed.

The *Figure of a Seated Beauty* was created by a Japanese artist during the Edo period. She is an intimate “porcelain figure with an overglaze polychrome enamel” created for decorative purposes.¹ She is most likely depicting a female geisha. She is seated in an upright position and painted in vibrant colors with intricate designs.

The *Long-Necked Bottle* was created in 2008 by Lee In-chin at Alfred University, New York. It is stoneware with celadon glaze. It is a bottle of intimate size, created for decoration but can also have utilitarian purposes. Lee In-chin developed this piece as a “modern interpretation of a traditional Korean art form of the Goryeo period.”² It has a long neck leading down to a voluptuous body using fine curves. The white-bodied surface has hints of greenish-grey waves and speckles along the top of the lips and the body.

The *Seated Beauty* embodies white as the main undertone color, which is a natural color created by the clay used. The natural color gives her a flawless white complexion, along with her neck, chest, and hands. The white skin is maybe a portrayal of what Japanese might think as the perfect skin during that time period. It is also contrasted by the smooth jet black hair gathered high at the top of her crown and above her ears. She wears a kimono with four visible layers of complex design and color.

Each layer of the kimono is outlined by a red border. The innermost layer is in a solid off-white, and then covered by a full black layer. The two outermost layers have very intricate designs. Using very fine lines, the most visible layer of the kimono has a honeycomb design made up of small hexagons perfectly outlined in red with blue dots in the center. It is also decorated with large flower patterns spread out through the

¹ Museum label, *Figure of a Seated Beauty*, New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 26, 2014

² Museum label, *Long-Necked Bottle*, New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 26, 2014

garment painted in red, green and blue. The outermost layer features a design with large green and blue leaves. It is accompanied by smaller golden maple leaves and hand fans with a red structure covered in blue, green, and red cloud-like arrangements. The viewer is drawn in by the multifaceted, abstract and stylized garment.

The *Long-Necked Bottle*, however, is very simple with no decorations or images and uses its mellow tones of almost transparent green and white. The bottle also has a very striking silhouette. A slightly wider mouth of the bottle leads to a slim neck that is about half the height of the artwork. The illusion of a long neck is very commonly associated with beauty. For instance, in Burma, women of the Kayan tribe wear long coils to push their collar bone lower, creating the illusion of a longer neck. The soft curvature of the larger body also gives the viewer a sense of sensual beauty. It embodies the same idea of an hourglass figure or an S-shaped curve in women. These voluptuous curves and the speckles of color draw the viewer's attention towards where the neck and body meet. The simple colors along with its curves give the viewer a memorable image.

Even with its astonishing figure, the *Long-Necked Bottle* has many imperfections. The color is very uneven, causing a striated appearance and the speckled dots do not seem as if they were intentionally done. Upon noticing this, other flaws start to emerge. It becomes very obvious that the neck of the bottle is not completely smooth. It has an uneven surface that makes it look slightly lumpy with a wavy texture. The neck is also not perfectly centered on the body, as it tilts slightly to one side. Although probably not intentional by the artist, the imperfections are purposely left on the bottle. There is a small protrusion of uneven glaze on the middle of the body. When the light hits the surface of the bottle, the shadow makes this imperfection very noticeable. It is deliberately shown to the viewer as it is faced forward in showcase. Although there are imperfections, the outline of the shape overshadows it. It goes to show that natural beauty can be with imperfections.

The *Seated Beauty* is a representation of the perfect beauty. Alongside her flawless skin, her features and her garments are produced perfectly. Her hair is symmetrical. Hair is gathered high at the top of her crown with a defined point exactly in the center line of her face. There are also two other sections on either side of her head with points right above ears. Her petite eyes, crescent moon-shaped, make her look like she is smiling. Her eyebrows are finely defined as elegant curved brushstrokes: they frame her eyes perfectly. She has vibrant small red lips that also show a hint of a smile. Her kimono is perfectly outlined and the designs are intricately done using fine lines with no signs of mistakes. The folds in the garments are perfectly portrayed in the surface. The lighting also gives the folds in more defined look.

She is seated in an upright position with her right leg folded in and left leg folded with her knee pointing upwards and slightly to the right. Her right forearm is rested on a stool. Her right hand, arched slightly upwards, looks as if she is playfully touching the edge of her kimono. Her left arm extended slightly outward to the side, with her hand arched as if her fingertips are put under

extreme weight. The slight discomfort depicted by this is still outshined by the perfect composure. Her poise tells the viewer how a perfect woman should be composed and elegant at all times.

The *Seated Beauty* is also shown alongside another porcelain figure, a standing counterpart of herself. The faces and hair look identical to each other. The only difference that differentiates them is the designs in the kimonos. The colors used in both figures are the same. The designs on the kimono still use the same concept of flowers and leaves. This demonstrates the beauty that they embody is meant to be uniform. It is implied that this is the true meaning to beauty.

The *Long-Necked Bottle* on the other hand is placed alongside another long-necked bottle that is black and slightly mattified. The color and surface is completely opposite. It also uses more straight lines in the silhouette, reducing the soft curves. The two different bottles show that beauty comes in all forms. Beauty is not only defined by a uniform standard; it is unique to itself.

Overall, the idea of beauty is purely conceptual. It is different to the eyes of any individual and subjective. In some cases, even small imperfection is what gives uniqueness to an individual or an object and constitutes beauty. Whether a person tries to conform to a standard that is viewed as “the normal” or believes that individualism is the key, beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder.

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