



Greek History and Cultural Seminars-2014

“Explorations of Beauty and Desire in Ancient Greece”

A lecture by Professor Alastair Blanshard

Ithacan Philanthropic Society, Melbourne

27 March 2014

The Greek definition of beauty was a by-product of the tremendous spirit of competition that emerged in the Archaic Period in Greece. Intellectuals and artists used differing definitions of beauty as a way of increasing the cultural capital of their patrons and sponsors.

The high degree of social stratification in Greece also contributed to entrenching beauty as one of the key desirable qualities in men and women. Integral to any claim of elite status was the quality of beauty. This situation was further buttressed by a theological view that saw beauty as a sign of divine favour so that internal virtue could be read from external appearance.

The key element to the long lasting success of Greek notions of beauty was that beauty was not something that existed outside of discourse. The Greeks didn't just produce beautiful objects, they also talked about them – describing with excessive detail the qualities that made them beautiful and the criteria by which they should be judged. The Greeks told you not just what beauty was, but also how to achieve it. It was this move towards theory that accounts for the importance of Greek notions of beauty within western aesthetics.

Some further reading:

Jenkins, I. (2009) *The Greek Body*. London.

Spivey, N. (1996) *Understanding Greek Sculpture: Ancient meanings, modern readings*. Cambridge

Squire, M. (2011) *The Art of the Body: Antiquity and its legacy*. Oxford

Professor Alastair Blanshard holds the Paul Eliadis Chair of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Queensland. He is the author of *Hercules: A heroic life* and *Sex: Vice and Love from Antiquity to Modernity*. He also co-wrote *Classics on Screen: The representation of Greece and Rome in cinema*. He has taught at Merton College, Oxford, The University of Reading, and Sydney University and has held fellowships at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, Cincinnati University, and Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.