



## The Meaning of the Notion of Beauty from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century

Tonkao Panin \*

Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University, Thailand

Received 5 November 2016; Received in revised form 16 May 2017

Accepted 18 May 2017; Available online 13 December 2017

### Abstract

This paper is a study of the concept of Beauty, or Venustas from Antiquity to the eighteenth century. The concept of Venustas is one of three important principles that Roman architect and theorist Marcus Vitruvius Pollio introduced in *The Ten Books of Architecture* during the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. The triad – Firmitas, Utilitas and Venustas, known today as strength, utility and beauty, had been a guiding principle in both architectural theory and practice since antiquity. This paper demonstrates that the concept of Venustas does not signify beauty, but is a paradoxical concept that represents the many facets of human life. It is a concept that is best viewed through an understanding of different modes of opposition in the philosophy and myths of antiquity, both good and bad, love and hate, admiration and fear. The paper is thus a study of the concept of beauty within the framework of polarity and unity through the myths of Venus, the goddess. Starting from early Greek philosophy, the paper will continue its investigation in the Renaissance notion of beauty in relation to the myths of antiquity, as well as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century's vision of beauty through the work of Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and will conclude with the notion of Concinnitas, which according to Leon Battista Alberti, is the matter that springs from the rule of beauty. Through these studies, the paper hopes to introduce different visions towards the notion of beauty, unfolding the complex nature of beauty, how the ideas originated, how the various visions of beauty have come into being and how they have been transformed.

### Keywords

Beauty, Venustas, Concinnitas, Leon Battista Alberti, Edmund Burke

## **Venustas**

An inquiry into the meaning of the concept of beauty from Antiquity to the eighteenth century is the focus of this paper. Originally the concept of Venustas was translated as beauty, it is a principle in which Marcus Vitruvius Pollio referred to as one of the three characteristics of architecture that should always be addressed. Thus this paper aims to unfold the paradoxical nature of beauty, how the ideas originated in Antiquity and how the various visions of beauty have come into being during the Renaissance and the eighteenth century.

Focusing on the various visions of Venustas, this paper will first aim find the origin of the imagery Venus carried with her by looking through the myths and beliefs around her. But as far as the West is concerned, it is still arguable whether natural science, cosmology and formal logic originate in Greek Philosophy. Though Greek philosophy has been seen as a definite historical beginning of these disciplines, in each case, those who primarily initiated the new inquiry must have had the influence of previous thought. The first systematic attempts to give rational explanations of natural phenomena and of the universe, all as a whole, were made by the Presocratic philosophers in both their scientific and their cosmological theories. But they certainly owed a great debt to the pre-philosophical Greek beliefs and Myths (Lloyd, 1966, p. 1). Myths are traditional tales that can be indicated by the etymology of the word. A mythos for the early Greeks was a “word” or “story”, synonymous with logos and epos; a mythologos was a storyteller (Graf, 1992, p. 2). The meaning of the word begins to be restricted only when the traditional tales are called into question. A myth, therefore is the subject matter that transcends the text for it is not a specific poetic text but a plot fixed in broad outline. It is the structure of the myth that matters and its cultural relevance is the reason for the continuous mutation of myth (Graf, 1992, p. 3). There existed the pre-philosophical uses of gods and images in their cosmologies and also in describing the relations between the gods. In the myths of the gods, they were conceived anthropomorphically, the cosmological notions were applied not to abstract cosmological factors, but to gods conceived in the form of men. And because they were conceived in the form of men, those cosmological, psychological or even social and political images were applied to them (Lloyd, 1966, p. 210).

Greek and Roman mythology can be seen as a statement about the origins of society and of its institutions, about the gods and their relationship with mortals, about everything on which human existence depended (Lloyd, 1966, p. 210). Thus myths about Venus might make a valid statement about the various visions of beauty, and how we come to understand the notion of beauty. Most of the myths about Venus have attributes towards her imagery, or in other words, they have attributes towards the visions of beauty, beginning from her birth to her offspring. Strikingly, most of those myths contained pairs of opposite

principles, each of them had two opposite or contrary ends which might be the key to the understanding of the different visions of beauty. Some pairs of opposites produced the third from their union, some did not. They signify that beauty has contained in itself the opposites and contrary principles. This leads to the concept of polarity which existed in a large number of theories and explanations in early Greek speculative thought in which the objects were classified or explained by being related to one or other of a pair of opposite principles (Lloyd, 1966 p. 7). While some pairs of opposites allow the state of intermediate, some do not. The third may arise from both the intermediate state and from the union between the pair of opposites. When the third occurs, the three of them - the pair of opposites and the third may no longer be three separate things, they can be seen as a whole, as one unified entity.

Moreover, the pair of opposites itself can also produce a sense of unity, without having to produce the third from the union between them. For when they are considered as a pair, they carry one significant meaning that would not exist if we take them apart and consider each one at the time; without an act of comparing, their meaning would no longer be the same. Even though they are opposite or contrast, once they stay together to convey the meaning, they become one. So the sense of unity comes with the significant meaning the pair of opposites holds. Thus the paper will be a study of beauty within the framework of polarity, trinity and unity through the myths of Venus. Beginning with early Greek philosophy, the paper will move further to the Renaissance notion of beauty connected to Venus' myths. Moving to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the paper will investigate another vision of beauty through the work of Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (1757), and will end with the rule of *Concinnitas*, which according to Alberti, is the matter that springs from every rule of beauty. With these alternative views, this paper aims to construct a new understanding, introduce different visions, and open possible views towards the concept of beauty.

## 1. The Opposites

The term 'opposite' and 'opposition' are used to refer to many different types of relationships. Opposition is a term that is not only used to refer to certain relationships between pairs of prepositions. Both 'opposite' and 'opposition' are more regularly used in connection with pairs of terms. Some pairs of opposites admit the state of intermediates but some do not. Such as the pairs black and white, and odd and even; the first pair admit intermediates which are gray and other colors but the second pair does not. It was Aristotle who had the first thorough analysis of the logical implications of different modes of opposition. There is a significant difference between the opposite and the contrary for what that is opposite may not be contrary. The term 'opposite' is used to described the relationship between a pair that we apprehend or imagine a contrast or antithesis though there are no

contraries in the category of substance for two substances may be opposite in virtue of possessing opposite properties. From the point of view of a man standing on the earth, the sky and earth may be considered opposites for the sky is above and the earth is beneath; they are opposites but not contraries (Lloyd, 1966, p. 90).

Both 'opposite' and 'contrary' are polar expressions used to explain the logical relationship between pairs of opposed terms commonly used in Cosmological theories since the Greeks. Also, the polar expressions were used in early Greek literature from Homer onwards. The couplets such as mortals and immortals, men and women, young and old were used. Not only were the contrary or opposite couplets used, but also the pairs of complementary terms. There were two more interesting uses of the couplets. The first is that the couplets were used in a place or instead of a single inclusive term to express a general notion such as the whole earth was referred to in the form of a pair of both 'land and sea' or the pair 'mortals and immortals' was common for 'all living persons'. The second interesting use of the couplets is that they were sometimes used to express an alternative or to put an alternative question (Lloyd, 1966, p. 91).

So, the polar expressions or the coupling terms were used in these ways; they were used as points of reference to indicate a class as a whole, they were used to mark distinctions, and sometimes both opposite terms were mentioned when only one was strictly relevant, and more importantly, references were sometimes made to intermediate terms.

The way that the third, or intermediate was added to a pair suggests the flexibility of the divisions which were used to refer to certain classes. There are certainly different modes of oppositions. Heraclitus showed his apprehension of the analogy between different examples of oppositions in his philosophy. Recognizing an analogy between extensively differing instances of opposition, Heraclitus' appeared to be a different conception of the relationship between opposites. There existed many examples that he stated firmly that a pair of opposites was "one" or "one and the same" or "common;" night and day were one, the way up and down was one and the same, the beginning and end on the circumference of a circle were to be common. All of those examples could be taken as example of the sameness or unity of opposites. Each pair of opposites has its own meaning which would be significant as long as the pair is considered together and that meaning would change as soon as they are taken apart. Furthermore, Heraclitus referred to both interdependence and independence of opposites. He asserted that the same object seen from one point of view is one thing, but seen from another point of view could be quite opposite. And also for some pairs of opposites, they belong to a single continuous process within reciprocal interactions such as life and death, youth and old age. There also existed the pairs that referred to opposite values which one opposite cannot exist without the other such as pure and impure, just and unjust. All of the theories of the unity of opposites in Heraclitus' thought helped indicate an unnoticed

connection between a pair of opposites which could be suggested more boldly that two opposites are the same thing or one and there existed the unity between them (Lloyd, 1966, p. 97).

In early Greek speculative thought, a large number of the theories and explanations may be said to belong to either one of two simple logical types. The first type is characterized by ways that the objects are classified or explained by being related to one or another pair of opposite principles, and the second type is characterized by the objects being explained by being linked or assimilated to something else (Lloyd, 1966, p. 8).

There existed in early Greek thought, theories based on types of opposites. The general doctrine in the major Presocratic cosmological theories was based on the theory that "most human things go in pairs" and is attributed by Aristotle to the philosopher Alcmaeon in which he compares the theory with the Table of Opposites of the Pythagoreans (Lloyd, 1966, p. 16). There are ten definite pairs of opposite principles that one group of Pythagoreans referred to: limit and unlimited, odd and even, one and plurality, right and left, male and female, at rest and moving, straight and curved, light and darkness, good and evil, square and oblong. On the other hand, Alcmaeon's theory was less definite, for he referred to 'any chance contrarieties' such as white and black, sweet and bitter, good and bad, great and small (Lloyd, 1966, p. 16).

In the surviving fragment of another philosopher Anaximander, in his theory of the formation of the world from the Boundless, the first things that appear seem to have been a pair of opposed substances which affirms the fact that opposites are among the principles or elements that are the basis for the cosmological theories of other Presocratic philosophers. In Anaximander's theory, pairs of opposed substances were 'hot' and 'cold' of 'flames' and 'air' or 'mist'. For other philosophers, in Empedocles' system, love and strife were opposites which brought out opposite effects on the four roots, earth, air, fire, water (Verhoeven, 1972, p. 53). And, whereas Anaxagoras described an original mixture of all things which contain pairs of opposites among other things, Heraclitus was exceptional for he particularly emphasized the independence or unity of the opposites and also described the opposites in psychological terms. For examples, he attributed various states of soul such as waking and sleeping, wisdom and drunkenness (Lloyd, 1966, p. 7).

Pairs of opposites relating to physical, physiological or psychological phenomena, which appeared in different roles, in different types of theory were not the only elements or principles used by the Presocratic philosophers. But most major philosophers from Anaximander on, have referred to opposites in one context or another, in either their explanations of natural phenomena or their general cosmological doctrines.

Considering the various visions of Venustas in the myths of Venus, begin with her birth, most of the story represents contrarious principles in which each of them contains pairs

of opposites in some way or another. This falls into one of the simple logical types mentioned above which a pair of opposites is used as a means for classification and explanation.

## 2. **Venustas as Variety and Diversity**

From Greek and Roman mythology, Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, sprang out of a white foam floating on the sea that came from the castration of Uranus by his son Saturn. Beauty, in this legend was born out of the sublime body that was the sea and out of a violent and shameful act. Venus signifies beauty, she represents a composite principle which started from the legend of her birth. According to Pico della Mirandola, “*whenever several things concur in constituting a third, which is born from their just mixture and temperation, the bloom which results from their proportionate composition is called beauty*” (Wind, 1969, p. 114). Composition requires multiplicity, and in the realm of pure being this multiplicity can certainly not be found, it can be found only in the chaotic realm of change (Wind, 1969, p. 114). The water of the sea signifies “the formless nature of which we have said that every creature is composed” and also “water is in a continuous flux and easily receptive to any form.” In this sense, variety and diversity came from the sea – the formless nature, but the mutability also required transfiguration by a divine principle of form. Uranus, the god of heaven, conveyed to formless matter the seed of ideal forms; “and because ideas would not have in themselves variety and diversity if they were not mixed with formless nature, and because without variety there cannot be beauty, so it justly follows that Venus could not have been born if the testicles of Uranus did not fall into the waters of the sea” (Wind, 1969, p. 115).

The unpleasantness of this act of creation, the castration of Uranus, was a sacrificial agony for when the supreme One was cut into pieces and dispersed to create many other things, the creation was conceived as a cosmogonic death. This is the same type with the dismemberment of Osiris, Attis and Dionysus that the unified power of one deity was divided and distributed. But the resurrection then followed the descent and diffusion of the divine power. It was when the Many were recollected into the One (Wind, 1969, p. 115). Plutarch had his comment on this matter that:

We hear from the theologians, both prose writers and poets, that the god is by nature indestructible and eternal, but yet, under the impulsion of some predestined plan and purpose, he undergoes transformation in his being...When the god is changed and distributed into winds, water, earth, stars, plants, and animals, they describe this experience and transformation allegorically by the terms rending and dismemberment. They apply to him the names Dionysus, Zagreus, Nyctelius, Isodates, and they construct allegorical myths in which the transformations that have been described are represented as death and destruction followed by restoration to life and rebirth.

(Wind, 1969, p. 114)

The white foam on the sea shows how the divine spirit was changed and distributed and when Venus sprang out of that white foam, the restoration to life and rebirth occurred. This is when the One was dispersed and mixed with the formless nature to produce variety and diversity and those varieties were recollected into the One again, this time with the just mixture and proportionate composition, and there arose beauty (Friedrich, 1978, p. 42).

### 3. Two Faces of Venustas: Vulcan and Mars

In the myth about Venus, Vulcan and Mars, they represent a triad that contains two pairs of opposite and contrary principles which play an important part in the theory of beauty. The first pair of opposite contains the meanings of Vulcan and Mars; the second represents the contrary principles between Venus and Mars. In the cosmological theories in early Greek thought, a pair of opposed substances was often used as a basis for various explanations. One pair of opposed principles in the myth of Venus has Vulcan and Mars at each pole. The opposite and contrary qualities of them signify the contrariety in beauty herself.

In her early youth, Venus fell in love with Vulcan, the god of fire, the fire of the creative or constructive kind or in a plain word he was a black smith on a large scale. Later, she left him for Mars, the god of war. Vulcan and Mars were brothers, born from Jupiter and Juno but with opposite qualities. While Vulcan was lame and misshapen, Mars was nimble in a military style. But Vulcan was a notable worker, he got things done and carried with him a sense of creativity while Mars carried around with him an atmosphere of disintegration and ruin (Erskine, 1949, p. 11). The story of how Vulcan dealt with the two lovers when he caught them together shows clearly his cunning intelligence. Both opposite qualities of Vulcan and Mars, with the cunning intelligence and creativity on one side and the destruction and disintegration on the other side might represent the picture of Venus herself. She was never worshipped as the goddess of consistency and here images of beauty have two faces; Venustas might be beautiful and destructive at the same time. Whether Venustas would be positive or negative depends on the balance of factors in its composition, with the proportionate mixture the result would be beautiful, with the unjust mixture the result might be harmful, similar to medicine that can cure or kill depending on the proportions of its mixture (Erskine, 1949, p. 8).

As far as the concept of opposites is concerned, they were theories based on the balance of factors that produce both health and disease. In On Ancient Medicine, the body was described as consisting of many components, in which the pairs of opposites were includes such as sweet and bitter, the astringent and the insipid (Lloyd, 1966, p. 20). In ancient medical theory, it was common that the balance of certain opposed factors in the body was a factor to health. Examples for those "powers" were wet, dry, cold, hot, bitter and

sweet (Lloyd, 1966, p. 20). In On Ancient Medicine and On the Nature of Man of the Hippocratic Corpus, appeared the similar doctrines of health and disease. The effect of the unbalance between opposites such as hot, cold, wet, dry, caused some diseases such as the condition described as erysipelas in the lung which was said to be caused by dryness (Lloyd, 1966, p. 20). The doctrine that disease is caused by one of a pair of opposites could be taken conversely that by counterbalancing the opposites, the diseases could be cured. Such doctrine of the counterbalanced was extremely widespread in the Hippocratic writers. In On Ancient Medicine:

For it that which causes a man pain is something hot, or cold, or dry, or wet, then he who would carry out the cure correctly must counteract cold with hot, hot with cold, wet with dry and dry with wet (Lloyd, 1966, p. 21). Again, depletion causes repletion, and repletion causes depletion...And, in a word opposites are cures for opposites

(Lloyd, 1966, p. 20).

There existed in the Hippocratic corpus more obscure pathological theories of the opposites. The “odd” and “even” days which could be calculated from the first day of the disease were thought to be significant in the course of the diseases. Such theories were that, it was on odd days than a man was cured or died and “*the diseases which had exacerbation on odd days, had cries on odd day, while those with exacerbation on even days, has cries on even days*” (Lloyd, 1966, p. 22).

In the Presocratic philosophers and in the Hippocratic writers, cosmological, physiological and pathological theories based on opposites had further used in both Plato and Aristotle. The general antithesis between the world of Being and the world of Becoming, between Forms and Particulars in Plato’s philosophy was subtle and complex. Plato’s Forms and Particulars belonged to quite different orders compared to the pairs of opposites used by the Presocratic philosophers and Hippocratic writers in their theories and explanations. The latter two belonged to the same order of reality as a general rule (Lloyd, 1966, p. 23) while Plato’s was a different type of opposition, one between two distant worlds, not between members of a single world of reality (Aquinas, 1945, p. 250). Besides the general antithesis between Forms and Particulars, Plato also had the use of opposites that could be compared more closely with other earlier philosophers such as the doctrine of “Two Venuses” in *the Symposium*. The opposition between the “Two Venuses”, the *unadorned*, and the *adorned* was developed by Pico della Mirandola and it was meant to illustrate the distinction between an earthly and celestial vision of beauty (Wind, 1969, p. 118).

From the Venus, Mars and Vulcan triad, another pair of opposites is that of Venus and Mars which is the opposite between Love and Strife. In Empedocles, whose six cosmological principles were earth, air, fire, water, love and strife, Strife causes disruption

among the roots or elements, although the activities of the opposite cosmic principle Love counterbalances it. He noted the quality of status of love and strife that they are equal, each of them holds a different prerogative with its own character and they gain the upper hand in turn when their time comes which means that there is no single supreme rules. But for love and strife, each takes turn to predominate in the world.

From the unlawful union of Venus and Mars, came a daughter named Harmony. She was born from the god of strife and the goddess of love and inherited the contrary characters of her parents. According to Plutarch: when harmony was born from the union of Mars and Venus, it was when the contraries, high and deep, were tempered by a certain proportion, and a marvelous consonance arose between them (Wind, 1969, p. 82). Also for Pico della Mirandola, beauty was a composite and contrarious principle and Harmony was the key to reach beauty. He wrote about the general nature of beauty that:

And for this reason no simple thing can be beautiful. From which it follows that there is no beauty in God because beauty includes in it a certain imperfection, that is, it must be composed in a certain manner: which in no way applies to the first cause...But below it, begins beauty because there begins contrariety, without which there would be no creation but only God. Nor do contrariety and discord between various elements suffice to constitute a creature, but by due temperation the contrariety must become united and the discord made concordant; and this may be offered as the true definition of Beauty, namely, that it is nothing else than an amicable enmity and a concordant discord...Only in God there is no discord because in him there is on union of diverse elements, but his unity is simple, without any composition. And since in the constitution of created things, it is necessary that the union overcomes the strife (otherwise the thing would perish because its elements would fall apart) – for this reason; Venus loves Mars, because Beauty, which we call her, cannot subsist without contrariety; and that Venus tames and mitigates Mars, because the tempering power restrains and overcomes the strife and hate which persist between the contrary elements. Similarly, according to the ancient astrologers, whose opinion Plato and Aristotle follow, Venus was placed in the center of heaven next to Mars, because she must tame his temperament which is by nature destructive and corrupting, just as Jupiter offsets the malice of Saturn.

(Wind, 1969, p. 83)

Out of the union of Venus and Mars, came an extraordinary nature of Harmony which became the core of Pico's theory of beauty. If a unity existed between the opposites, according to Heraclitus' theory, Harmony could be considered as a form of unity between the contrary elements. Here, Harmony is the third that arose from the union between the pair of opposites. In Pico's theory, beauty arose when various contrary elements became united with their due mixture, that is to say, with Harmony or when the third was constituted from the

mixture of several things, the result from their proportionate composition was called beauty. So, Harmony is the key element for parts to become a unified whole.

For the nature of the unified whole that is constituted from various diverse elements, Aristotle wrote:

Now, when anything has parts, not as an aggregation but as a unified whole, these is in the totality besides the parts something that is distinguished as the cause of unity; as in some bodies the cause of the unity of the beings is vitality; In others, the humors, or some other modification of being. But such a being is a substance of a unique nature, a city composed of parts, but a being of one existence. What it is, therefore, that makes a man one, in virtue of which he is unified and not multiple...for example, so that one part of him might be animal and the other biped. According to this view, man is not both these things, but they will be, by participation, men-not the attributes of one man, but of two: the one, animal; the other, biped.

(Aquinus, 1945, p. 246)

So only in the totality which is a unity in the action of a part and the action of the whole, and a unified, individual being is constituted of prime matter and form.

#### **4. Pleasure and Pain values of Venustas: Eros and Thanatos**

Another pair of revealing opposites can be found in Eros, the son of Venus who is known as an image of love. In Parmenides' Way of Seeming, he referred to Eros as "the very first of the gods", for he brought together male and female. Parmenides might have used this principle for the uniting of other pairs of opposites which meant the uniting of the different elements in the world at large. The nature and role of love in Parmenides cosmological theory was certainly the role of bringing together and uniting pairs of opposites. But besides bringing the pairs of opposites together, Eros also carried a pair of opposite principle within himself for along with love, he can sometimes be identified with death in the painful no less than the joyous aspect. The Renaissance identified him with Death itself, which meant Thanatos and the funerary Eros were one. Since Beauty was the mother of Eros, it is reasonable to consider the connection of the meaning of Eros and Venustas, Here, Eros was conceived as a paradigm of love and death, pleasure and pain which will lead to other visions of beauty (Riviere, 1994, p. 37).

In the reading of the myth on Roman Sarcophagi, the connection of love and death is clear. It is noticeable that the images of the love of the gods appeared on sarcophagi with remarkable frequency. Examples of those images are Leda and the Swan, the love of Bacchus for Ariadne, of Mars for Rhea, of Diana for Endymion, of Psyche and Eros. All these

images are variations of the same theme, the love of god for a mortal (Wind, 1969, p. 130). Valeriano, a Renaissance humanist explained that “*As there are many kinds of death, this one is the most highly approved and commended both by the sages of antiquity and by the authority of the Bible: Those, yearning for God and desiring to be conjoined with him are carried away to heaven and freed from the body by a death which is the profoundest sleep*” (Wind, 1969, p. 130). This is how love and death came together and when they came together, Eros came to be identified also as a god of pain and sadness. How the doctrine was also accepted widely was shown in Lorenzo de’ Medici’s commentary on his own sonnet sequence which he explained why, in singing of love, he had started with a sonnet on death. He wrote that:

The beginning of the *Vita Amorosa* proceeds from death, because whoever lives for love, first dies to everything else. And if love has in it a certain perfection...it is impossible to arrive at that perfection without first dying with regard to the more imperfect things. This very rule was followed by *Homer*, *Virgil* and *Dante*: for *Homer* sent *Ulysses* into the underworld, *Virgil* sent *Aeneas*, and *Dante* made himself wander through the Inferno, to show that the way to perfection is by this road. And because *Orpheus* did not really die, he was debarred from the perfection of felicity and unable to regain *Eurydice*

(Wind, 1969, p. 132)

In *The Symposium* by Plato, from the story of *Alcestis* and *Orpheus*, we can also find a spiritual sense conforming to an explanation, by which the profundity; of this matter will become apparent. Pico commented on the story of Alcestis and Orpheus that was endowed by Plato in the Symposium that:

*Alcestis* did achieve the perfection of love because she wanted to go to the beloved through death; and dying through love, she was by the grace of the gods revived...And Plato could not have suggested this more subtly than by the example he gave of *Orpheus*, of whom he says that, desiring to go and see the beloved *Eurydice*, he did not want to go there through death but being satisfied, and refined by his music, sought a way of going there alive, and for this reason, says Plato, he could not reach the true *Eurydice*, but beheld only a shadow or spectre.

(Wind, 1969, p. 132)

In Ficino, the union of pain and pleasure as an attribute to Eros was also discussed as a Platonic-Orphic term to define the equation of love with Death (Wind, 1969, p. 135) “Love is called by Plato bitter (*res amara*), and not unjustly because death is inseparable from love. And *Orpheus* also called Love *dulceamarum* because love is a voluntary death. As

death, it is bitter, but being voluntary it is sweet" (Ficino, 1989, p. VII). In the Hypnerotomachia, the great Jupiter himself blesses Eros in these words: "You are sweet for me and bitter." Both the quality of being sweet and bitter and the images of pleasure and pain suggest the contrary principle in Eros himself. Venus is the mother of Eros, it is justly to say that Beauty is the mother of Love (Wind, 1969, p. 136).

### 5. Leon Battista Alberti: Venustas & Concinnitas

The possibility that beauty represents paradoxical opposite principles can be referred back to the concept of Venustas that Venus represented. From the myths of the birth of Venus, the opposite principles in Vulcan and Mars, to Harmony: the union between contrary elements and Eros: the equation of love and death, pleasure and pain, it implies that Venustas cannot subsist without contrariety. Venustas can suggest qualities of both pleasure and pain, creative and disruptive, both the Beautiful and the Sublime. Within the contrariety, the key to beauty is therefore to find the union between diverse elements within the just mixture and proportionate composition of those elements.

The principle of Venustas is also addressed in Renaissance architectural theory. In *the Art of Building in Ten Books*, Leon Battista Alberti stated in Book 9.5 that since beauty in her very nature subsist with contrariety. The key to beauty in architecture is therefore to compose parts that are separate from each other so that they correspond to one another in appearance, or that is with harmony. He wrote that, "*Beauty is that reasoned harmony of all parts within a body, so that nothing may be added, taken away, or altered, but for the worse.*" Later he described that the three principal components of that whole theory of beauty into which we inquire are number (numeris), outline (finito), and position (collocation). But arising from the composition and connection of the three is a further quality in which beauty shines full face. His term for it is concinnitas. *Concinnitas* is nourished with every grace and splendor. The task and aim it is to compose parts that are separate from each other by their nature, according to some precise rule, so that they correspond to one another in appearance. Alberti wrote:

Neither in the whole body nor in its parts does concinnitas flourish as much as it does in Nature herself; thus I might call it the spouse of the soul and of reason...Everything that Nature produces is regulated by the law of concinnitas...If this is accepted, let us conclude as follows. Beauty is a form of sympathy and consonance of the parts within a body, according to definite number, outline, and position, as dictated by concinnitas, the absolute and fundamental rule in Nature. This is the main object of the art of building, and the source of her dignity charm, authority, and worth.

(Alberti, 1994, p. 156)

In relation to the three principles, Alberti explained that concinnitas is a further quality that arises from the composition and connection of these three, it is still an extremely difficult task to make judgments about what should be preferred over the other. Alberti himself gave an example that one man might prefer the tenderness of a slender girl but a character in a comedy might prefer one girl over all others because she was plumper, another man might prefer a wife neither so slender of figure as to appear sickly nor so huge as to resemble a village bully, “but whichever you prefer, you will not then consider the rest unattractive and worthless” (Alberti, 1994, p. 302). Alberti added that when we make judgments on beauty, we do not follow mere fancy but the working of reasoning faculty that is inborn in the mind for “within the form and figure, there resides some natural excellence and perfection that excites the mind and is immediately recognized by it” (Alberti, 1994, p. 302). He believed that form, dignity, grace and other such qualities depend on it and as soon as anything is removed or altered, these qualities are themselves weakened and perish.

Once we are convinced of this, it will not take long to discuss what may be removed, enlarged, or altered, in the form and figure. For every body consists entirely of parts that are fixed and individual; if these are removed, enlarge, reduced or transferred somewhere inappropriate, the very composition will be spoiled that gives the body its seemly appearance.

(Alberti, 1994, p. 302)

## 6. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century: Sublime and the Beautiful

During the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, beauty was defined by Edmund Burke as a quality which causes love or some passion similar to it. But love is not the same as desire or lust, beauty it addresses a more noble and intellectual feeling, or “Contemplate her with your mind, and do not sit gazing with your eyes.” Since beauty is quite clear when considering the work of Edmund Burke on the two opposite end of beauty, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

The major concern throughout the *Enquiry* is the responses of human mind to emotive objects and experiences (Burke, 1990, p. XI). It is a theory about the power of evocation, both the Beautiful and the Sublime, in Burke's view, had an immediacy about them. They were apparently irresistible in different ways and this is inevitably linked them with the human passions, with the notion of what was essential or irreducible in the human experience (Burke, 1990, p. XI). First, he explained the difference between pain and pleasure, he tried to separate them by suggesting that they are different rather than opposite. Burke's idea is that we are frequently wrong in the names we give them and in our reasoning about them. We always mistake that pain arises from the removal of some pleasure, and that

pleasure arises from the ceasing of diminution of some pain (Burke, 1990, p. 30). But Burke's idea is that pain and pleasure in their simple and natural manner of affecting, are each of a positive nature and are independent from each other. According to him, the human mind is often in the state of indifference, and when we are carried from this state of mind to the state of pleasure, it is not necessary that we will have to pass through the medium of any sort of pain and when we are carried from the state of indifference to the painful state, it is not necessary that we will have to feel any pleasure before. In the removal and modification of pain - he called that the state of Delight. For the removal of pleasure, it effects the mind in three ways: If it simply ceases, the effect is indifference; if it is abruptly broken, the effect is disappointment; if it's totally lost and there is no chance of enjoying it again, Burke called a passion that arises in mind grief. But grief is not the same as positive pain, and also Delight is not the same as positive pleasure. Reaching the state of Delight which arises from the modifications of pain is not the same and far from reaching the state of pleasure (Burke, 1990, p. 37). In grief, the pleasure is still uppermost such that we can feel pleasure in the state of melancholy, but this never happens in the case of actual pain.

In the *Enquiry*, Burke stated clearly that a source of the Sublime is whatever can excite the ideas of pain, and danger, or terror, and it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. Because the ideas of pain always have more power than the ideas of pleasure, the effects on our bodies and minds of the torments we suffer are much greater than any pleasure we can enjoy. Most importantly, when danger and pain are at certain distances and with certain modifications, they may be delightful so it is fair to put that the experience of the sublime may be delightful. Or in other words Delight is the emotion that accompanies the experience of the sublime. For the Beautiful: pleasure is the emotion that is associated with it or in Beauty we feel pleasurable. Burke explain, "*By beauty I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love or some passion similar to it*" (Burke, 1990, p. 91). He adds that love is not the same thing as "desire or lust" and desire or lust is not a proper response to beauty, which addresses the more noble feelings.

For the Sublime: the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment and astonishment is the state of soul, in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror.

(Burke, 1990, p. 53)

According to Burke, astonishment is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect. The sublime is characterized by terror, obscurity, privation, greatness of dimension, darkness, magnificence and infinity which have tendencies to fill the mind with delightful horror. The beautiful, on the other hand, is characterized by the emotion of pleasure and its attributes are smoothness, smallness,

gradual variation in the direction of parts, delicacy, clean and fair color. In comparison of the Sublime with Beautiful, it appears a remarkable contrast. Burke wrote:

For the sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small, beauty should be smooth and polished; the great, rugged and negligent. Beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloom; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid; and even massive. In short, the ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful stand on foundations so different that it is hard to think of reconciling them in the same subject. But in the infinite variety of natural combinations, we must expect to find the qualities of things, the most remote imaginable from each other united in the same object. We must expect also to find combinations of the same kind in the work of art.

(Burke, 1990, p. 114)

Burke affirmed that in these instances there is always a predominance of one property over the other for the qualities of the sublime and beautiful are sometimes found united which means that things that stand on different, remote foundations are combined. But in suggesting the greater effects of pain over pleasure on our bodies and minds and that the Sublime is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling, a fascinating point is the apparent contradictions of our nature, revealed by involuntary sympathies. Sometimes, tragedy in the theater or our pleasure in the execution of criminals can be so compelling for us, it is because, "*We delight in seeing things, which so far from doing, our heartiest wishes would be to see redressed.*" The Sublime, which always includes something of the terrible nature is an important category because it is an odd mixture that reveals the overlap between pain and pleasure. And terror, which is the heart of the Sublime, is a passion which, "*always produces delight when it does not press too close*" (Burke, 1990, p. 122). It is this principle that makes artistic representations possible.

## Conclusion

From Antiquity to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the concept of beauty has been variously addressed in architectural theory. It is evident that Venustas does not signify beauty, but is a paradoxical concept that represents the many facets of human lives. It is a concept that is best viewed through an understanding of different modes of opposition in the philosophy and myths of antiquity, both good and bad, love and hate, admiration and fear.

Yet with an understanding of very nature and the various visions of beauty, the original purpose of the principle of Venustas was not to remain theoretical. Venustas, along with Firmitas and Utilitas were composed as ways to understand the complexity and contradiction in architectural practice, in relation to theoretical framework of each period of time. Originated from both practical and theoretical inquiry and imaginative speculation,

architectural theories come to being. These inquiries could be answered not only in theoretical endeavors but also through architectural practice. And further questions in theories concern different ways these thoughts could be transformed into the tangible, the abstract could become material, the ideal could become real.

## Acknowledgement

This paper is a part of the research *Polarities in Architectural Theory: Before Modern Architecture*. The author would like to thank Thailand Research Fund and Silpakorn University for its continual support in the research.

## References

Alberti, L.B. (1994). *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*. Translated by Rykwert, J., Leach, N., & Tavernor, R. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Aquinas, T. (1945). *The Trinity and the Unicity of the Intellect*. Translated by R. Brennan. St.Louis, MO: B. Harder Book.

Burke, E. (1990). *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Erskine, J. (1949). *Venus: the Lonely Goddess*. New York: William Morrow.

Ficino, M. (1989). *Three Books on Life*. New York: The Renaissance Society of America.

Friedich, P. (1978). *The Meaning of Aphrodite*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lloyd, G.E.R. (1966). *Polarity and Analogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Riviere, W. (1994). *Eros and Psyche*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Verhoeven, C. (1972). *The Philosophy of Wonder*. New York: Macmillan.

Wind, E. (1958). *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*. London: Faber and Faber Limited.