EDITORIAL

Dear Readers,

How often do you leave an exhibition or a performance and say that it was “beautiful”? How often do you dislike something because it isn’t to your taste? What we perceive to be beautiful is extremely individual, but only at first glance is it purely subjective.

Our longing for beautiful things can definitely be explained. According to Plato, there is something deeply human in this. Our soul seems to want to find no less than the divine – and looks for this in the aesthetic. But there is little that can be argued about as successfully as the criteria for beauty.

In our current issue, researchers from different disciplines find astonishingly objective answers to the question “What is beautiful?”. For example, research from the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics and the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics explains when music moves us and what part our genetic disposition plays in this.

Findings from the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz demonstrate the extent to which our concept of beauty is historically, culturally, and politically shaped. In every era there are ideals of beauty that societies form and that are also often harnessed politically.

In the animal realm, on the other hand, our ideas of beauty rarely apply. Splendid feathers, bright colors, and a magnificent stature do not guarantee success when it comes to being chosen as a partner, as ornithologists at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Intelligence show using zebra finches and ruffs. With respect to the latter, it is the cleverest males in particular that succeed. Some use an aesthetic trick: they look so unprepossessing that they arouse no suspicion among the good-looking males in the midst of their courtship displays.

We wish you a “beautiful” read.

Your Max Planck editorial team