

COGS 111: Beauty and the Brain

UC San Diego Global Seminar | Florence, Italy

Summer Session I, 2027 | June 28 – July 31

Instructor	Drew E. Walker, PhD — Associate Teaching Professor, Cognitive Science
Email	dehoffma@ucsd.edu
Location	Florence, Italy
Class Schedule	Monday – Thursday, 11-12:30 PM
Units	4 units
Prerequisites	Upper Division Standing
Office Hours	Monday 12:30- 1 MTh

Course Overview

A setting sun, a smiling child, and Stairway to Heaven have one striking feature in common: they are beautiful. But what is beauty? This course examines the philosophy, psychology, and cognitive neuroscience of aesthetic appreciation. We will ask: Why is beauty so important? Why might it have evolved? How is it represented in the brain? Is it in the eye of the beholder? We will explore theories and empirical research on how we perceive and value faces, bodies, art and architecture, music, touch, and the delights of the chemical senses.

Italy is not simply a backdrop for this course, but the curriculum. Western ideas about beauty were forged here. From the mathematical perspective of Brunelleschi to the saturated color of Titian to the acoustic perfection of La Scala, every site visit in this seminar is a direct encounter with the questions at the heart of COGS 111. Students will be asked to bring a scientist's curiosity to everything they see, hear, smell, and taste.

Global Seminar Format

Weekly schedule:

- Monday – Thursday: 9:00 AM – 1:00 PM
- Fridays: excursions, site visits, or project work time

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Describe key philosophical, psychological, and neuroscientific theories of aesthetic appreciation
- Evaluate empirical research on beauty, pleasure, and hedonic experience
- Apply course concepts to real aesthetic encounters: art, architecture, music, food, and fragrance

- Construct and present a well-reasoned aesthetic analysis using interdisciplinary frameworks
- Engage critically with questions about cultural universality vs. learned aesthetic preferences

Grading

Assignment	Percentage
Weekly Reading Responses (5 total, one per week)	20%
In-Class Participation & Discussion Activities	25%
Weekly Quizzes (4; lowest dropped)	20%
Aesthetic Encounter Journal (4 entries)	15%
Final Group Presentation: Object of Beauty Analysis	20%

Note: There are no TAs on this Global Seminar. The instructor grades all work directly. The on-campus Perusall platform has been replaced with short weekly reading responses submitted on Canvas. Weekly quizzes will be administered on paper at the start of class each Thursday.

Grade Scale: A+ 98–100 | A 93–97 | A– 90–92 | B+ 87–89 | B 83–86 | B– 80–82 | C+ 77–79 | C 73–76 | C– 70–72 | D 60–69 | F below 60

Weekly Reading Responses

Each week, students will submit a short *hand written* reading response (1 page, ~400 words) due by Sunday night before the new week begins. Responses should briefly summarize the key argument of the assigned reading and then connect it to something observed during that week's excursion or class discussion. These responses replace the Perusall social reading platform used in the on-campus version of the course and serve a similar purpose: to ensure you engage with the readings before coming to class ready to discuss.

Aesthetic Encounter Journal

Four short journal entries (1–2 pages each), submitted within 48 hours of each excursion. Each entry asks you to write as a scientist-aesthetician: describe an aesthetic experience you had during the site visit, identify which theoretical frameworks from class it engages, and reflect on whether the experience supports or complicates those theories. Prompts will be provided before each excursion. This is the capstone informal writing assignment and should be honest and exploratory rather than polished or formal.

Weekly Quizzes

Short in-class quizzes (10–15 minutes) at the start of class each Thursday, covering that week's assigned reading and lecture content. Quizzes are designed to be straightforward for students who have done the reading and attended class. The lowest quiz score will be dropped to account for illness or other disruptions during the program.

Final Presentation: Object of Beauty Analysis

Students will select an object, place, food, piece of music, or other stimulus encountered during the seminar and present it as an object of aesthetic study. The presentation should synthesize philosophical, psychological, evolutionary, and neuroscientific perspectives from the course to explain why this stimulus elicits aesthetic pleasure. Presentations will be 10–12 minutes, delivered in class during Week 5. Detailed guidelines and a rubric will be distributed in Week 2.

- Topic selection due end of Week 3
- Presentations: Thursday and Friday of Week 5 (July 29–31)

Assigned Readings

All readings will be provided as PDFs via Canvas before departure. Download everything before departure as reliable internet may not be guaranteed. Readings are drawn from philosophy, psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and cultural studies and average approximately 10–30 pages per week.

Technology & Course Materials

Bring a laptop or tablet for in-class activities as well as notebook and pen. All essential course materials are provided in PDF format on the USB drive. Quizzes will be administered on paper. Students are encouraged to take notes by hand during excursions.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to uphold UC San Diego's academic integrity policies. Work submitted must be your own. Generative AI tools may not be used on quizzes, journal entries, or group presentations without explicit permission. See: <http://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu/>

Code of Conduct

All UC San Diego policies apply during this Global Seminar, including those regarding academic conduct, alcohol and drug use, and sexual harassment. Students are expected to represent UC San Diego respectfully in all interactions with local communities, museum and venue staff, and host-country residents.

Course Schedule

Readings for each week will be confirmed and distributed before departure. The schedule is subject to adjustment in consultation with the study abroad provider.

Week	Dates	Topics & Readings	Excursions / Activities
Week 1 June 28–July 3	Mon–Thu 9 AM–1 PM	Introduction: What is Beauty? Why Does It Matter? Philosophy of aesthetics (Kant, Hume); Is beauty in the eye of the beholder? Evolutionary theories of aesthetic preference	Friday: Orientation walk of Florence; first aesthetic encounter journal prompt introduced
Week 2 July 7–10	Mon–Thu 9 AM–1 PM	Visual Aesthetics I: Faces, Bodies & Art The cheerleader effect; symmetry and attractiveness; art and the visual brain; how cultural context shapes what we find beautiful Quiz: Thursday July 10	Friday July 11: Uffizi Gallery — How did Renaissance painters exploit visual perception? Discuss with “scientist’s eyes” Saturday: Florence Cathedral — the cathedral effect, awe, and architectural beauty
Week 3 July 14–17	Mon–Thu 9 AM–1 PM	Visual Aesthetics II & Aesthetic Evolution The mere exposure effect; fluency theory; how aesthetic norms evolve across time and culture; neuroaesthetics Quiz: Thursday July 17	Weekend: Venice excursion — Gallerie dell’Accademia (aesthetic norms across centuries); Perfume Museum (Can a smell be beautiful? Kant’s “disinterested interest” revisited)
Week 4 July 21–24	Mon–Thu 9 AM–1 PM	Auditory Aesthetics & Chemical Sense Aesthetics Musical beauty; consonance & dissonance; musical chills; neuroscience of groove; aesthetics of taste, smell, and food; crossmodal correspondences; craft and terroir Quiz: Thursday July 24	Weekend: Milan — Teatro alla Scala (musical beauty, acoustics, the neuroscience of chills; tour or performance)
Week 5 July 28–31	Mon–Thu 9 AM–1 PM	Touch, Pleasure & The Aesthetics of Everyday Life Haptic aesthetics; hedonic experience; wanting vs. liking; beauty across cultures: is it universal? Group Presentations: July 29–31 Final Reading Response due July 27	Friday July 25: Bologna & Parma — Gelato Museum (aesthetic of flavor, multisensory pleasure); Prosciutto & Salame museums (aesthetics of craft, connoisseurship, terroir)

Excursions Summary

All excursions connect directly to course readings and discussions. Counted toward contact hours at 2 excursion hours = 1 instruction hour.

- Uffizi Gallery, Florence — Week 2 (Visual aesthetics, cultural construction of beauty, neuroaesthetics)
- Florence Cathedral (Duomo) — Week 2 (Architectural beauty, awe, the cathedral effect)
- Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice — Week 3 (Aesthetic norms across time, Titian's color, cultural universality vs. learning)
- Museum of Palazzo Mocenigo (Perfume Museum), Venice — Week 3 (Olfactory aesthetics, Kantian beauty, scent and memory)
- Teatro alla Scala, Milan — Week 4 (Musical beauty, consonance/dissonance, musical chills, acoustics)
- Carpigiani Gelato Museum, Bologna — Week 5 (Aesthetic of flavor, crossmodal pleasure, multisensory experience)
- Museo del Prosciutto & Museo del Salame di Felino, Parma — Week 5 (Aesthetics of craft, terroir, connoisseurship as aesthetic expertise)

A Note to Students

The heart of this class is discussion and Italy will give us no shortage of things to discuss. You will be asked to bring a theorist's curiosity to everything you encounter: to walk into the Uffizi and ask not just "is this beautiful?" but "why does my brain say it is?" To bite into a piece of Parmigiano-Reggiano and think about what, exactly, makes that pleasurable. To sit in La Scala and notice the moment a piece of music gives you chills and wonder what is happening in your auditory cortex. This is a small, immersive seminar. Come ready to think out loud, to disagree respectfully, and to take the science of beauty as seriously as beauty itself.