

Book Review

DAVIES, STEPHEN. *Adornment: What Self-Decoration Tells Us About Who We Are*. London, Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2020, 280 pp., 20 color + 20 b&w illus., \$26.95 paper.

In the afterword to *Adornment* Stephen Davies writes something of a confession: “As a male of the baby-boomer generation, I’m a poor advertisement for this book. I don’t wear jewelry or makeup. I’m bereft of tattoos and piercings. I’ve been accused of dressing like a homeless person. I never wear suits, and if I did, I wouldn’t put a flower in the lapel. So why did I choose to write on adornment?” (p 207)

Why does Davies end the book by commenting on his personal relationship to adornment? *Ad hominem* criticisms are taken to be a fallacy in philosophy; arguments should stand or fall on their own merit. With a topic like adornment, however, philosophy moves from the realm of the abstract into the very personal. Surely there can be universal truths about adornment, but adornment is also inherently interpersonal, contextual—contingent on one’s place in the world and one’s position in a social framework. What one chooses to wear on any given day, and in the sum total of one’s lifetime of adorning acts, is shaped by these forces.

This is true not just for Davies but for us all. As you read these words you are wearing some form of adornment. Looking down at your hands they may be adorned by nail polish, rings, or tattoos. They may have nothing on them at all. You will or will not have trimmed your facial hair today. Perhaps your facial hair is very minimal. You will or will not be wearing shoes, pants, a top as you read this. Why did you choose those items of adornment that currently touch your body? Did you dress today with an intention to wear something beautiful? Does your adornment say anything about you? As Davies argues in the book adornment says something about who we all are, as individuals. It also—crucially for Davies—says something about who we all are, as a species.

As Davies continues to explain in the afterword to *Adornment* he became interested in the subject matter through his previous work on the topic of beauty, construed more broadly. Davies has long worked at the intersection of philosophy, aesthetics, anthropology, and archaeology and this orientation is evident in the thesis and subject matter of *Adornment*. As Davies makes clear, one of his motivations for the book was to follow a line of thought that emerged from his previous work on beauty. In his 2012 book *The Artful Species* Davies considers questions such as “Is art also universal in the sense of being something every individual participates in?” (Oxford University Press, p. 50) He answers this rhetorical question by noting that “How we answer depends crucially on two things: how high we set the bar for something qualifying as art; and whether we count art’s appreciators or only its makers in the story” (ibid., p. 50).

Adornment seems to provide a more definitive answer to questions that began in his 2012 book. Where in *The Artful Species* Davies does not attempt to give a definition of art (ibid., p. 25), and says that the matter of art’s universality depends on our theory of art, in *Adornment* Davies states his claims more boldly (p. 50). For in this 2020 work Davies writes that adornment is “not merely apparent in every culture, but that it is nearer to being universal—something every person does—than any other human behavior” (p. 3). Davies argues that adornment is “more typical and extensive than

the high-minded activities we prefer to think of as marking our species—morality, art and religion” (p. 208). According to this latest of Davies’s monographs, we are understood best not as “the artful species” but as “the adorning species.”

Adornment is undoubtedly a worthy subject for philosophical analysis, despite having been ignored or derided by most philosophers. Being interested in fashion—understood as “mere” appearances—has historically been seen as antithetical to the true aims of the philosopher: arriving at eternal truths (see Nicholas Pappas, *The Philosopher’s New Clothes: The Theaetetus, the Academy, and Philosophy’s Turn Against Fashion*. Routledge, 2017).

As Davies’s book deftly illustrates, adornment has more than enough complexity to make it a fruitful subject of philosophical inquiry. We have entire branches of the discipline devoted to the philosophical study of art, language, metaphysics, the relationship between the mind and the body, personal identity, gender, and race. The topic of adornment raises many of the same questions as these other disciplines. Can adornment be art? Is adornment a language? What makes something adornment?

It is to these metaphysical questions that Davies devotes the second chapter of the book (after providing something of an overview of his thesis in the first chapter). In true analytic style Davies presents us with a definition of adornment. Adornment according to Davies is the result of an action of *adorning*—an act characterized by a very specific intention. As he writes, “To adorn something is:

- (1) (a) to intend to make it aesthetically special (b) by making it (more) beautiful or sublime, (c) to succeed in this to some degree, and (d) to receive audience uptake of the attempt and of the success; or is
- (2) (e) to follow a conventionalized, socially accepted practice (f) that originated in (1)-type adornment” (p. 21).

This may, at first glance, seem to be an improbably demanding notion of adornment. But Davies’s argument is not that we need to have the first type of intention often—or indeed ever. The first, more complicated clause, describes what adornment must have had to, as it were, get off the ground, and the second simpler clause describes what most of us do on an everyday basis, when we simply follow adorning conventions that have been established by others. The commendable clarity seen in this definition of adornment is a hallmark of successful work in analytic philosophy of art and is found throughout the book.

If you have a beautiful diamond wedding ring on your left hand right now, this seems to be a result of you fulfilling the second of Davies’s clauses: you are following “a conventionalized, socially accepted practice” of adorning (p. 21). Any given wedding-ring wearer is far from the first to don such a band. But it’s not entirely clear that such an item of adornment meets the second rather than the first condition. How are we to tell? Does it depend on the specifics of that wearer’s prior intentions?

Seeming to anticipate such questions, Davies notes that his account of adornment will lead to “gray areas,” and that in some instances “we should think of the aesthetic intention as implicit in the habit if not explicit in the moment” (pp. 18–21). Still, some might remain skeptical that we do have such intentions, and wonder to what extent must they be conscious—or must aim at the beautiful or the sublime in particular. Do ordinary dressers really have such complex intentions? It’s also important to note that, as he clearly states in this second chapter, it follows from Davies’s account that much of what we wear does not rise to the metaphysical realm of adornment (which is something special).

After setting up the metaphysical framework, Davies goes on in the remainder of the book to provide something of an anthropological survey of different types of adornment that satisfy his conditions. This is at its strongest when Davies is discussing prehistory. And it is here that most readers will have much to learn from his discussion. Davies discusses prehistoric beads from 135,000–90,000 years ago, cranial shape alteration in Neanderthals 80,000–60,000 years ago, beards in ancient Greece, and numerous other cases (pp. 33, 43, 49).

His Chapter 4 is devoted entirely to the topic of “Aesthetics and Adornment in Prehistory.” In this chapter he notes that although he sees *Homo sapiens* as the only living “adorning species,” archaeological evidence suggests that *Homo neanderthalensis* also likely adorned. This hypothesis is further supported by recent anthropological work on Neanderthals, also published by Bloomsbury in 2020 (Wragg Sykes, R. *Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art*. Bloomsbury Press, 2020). (As Davies

notes, *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis* interbred and there is continuing debate about if we should be considered distinct species or part of the same species) (p. 76).

In Chapter 5 Davies moves from the topic of prehistory to “Differences between Men and Women.” In discussions of prehistory there is a natural ordering provided by chronology that is lost when Davies shifts his focus to contemporary adornment. At times in this chapter, and in the four that follow—on “Body Painting and Makeup,” “Scarification and Tattoos,” “Piercings, Plugs and Jewelry,” and “Clothing”—some more structure to the types of adornment that is discussed could have served to ground the discussion. At times it wasn’t clear what, if anything, was essential to these types of adornment being grouped together.

Davies has expertise as a scholar in the topic of prehistoric adornment, the focus of roughly the first third of the book. However, in his discussions of “the differences between men and women” he reveals his “outsider” status to much of the discussions. In these chapters Davies reveals his orientation as someone who is interested in adornment not because of any personal experience, but as something of an outside “ethnographic” observer. This orientation makes sense when the topic is prehistoric adornment—there are no living Neanderthals Davies could have asked about their use of shell beads. But discussion of what “women do” is couched in some of the same mystery. It feels a bit overly simplistic when the topic is something many readers will be very familiar with and perhaps use every day. For instance, in his discussion of makeup Davies writes, “Cosmetics include skin-care products, balms, medications, and the like. The term makeup is normally reserved for beauty products. These can be put on by third parties but are more often self-applied with the use of a mirror or reflecting surface” (p. 103)

This reads to me like a list that would be constructed by someone who has never purchased cosmetics or been inside a beauty store. Further discussing makeup Davies writes, “We tend to associate makeup with women, for it’s they who more often apply it in modern, Western societies to beautify their appearance” (p. 104). Davies briefly mentions the embrace of makeup by “glam pop as well as some cross-dressers” but leaves the impression that these uses of makeup deviate from the “norm” of what men and women do, with these behaviors understood in terms of a strict gender binary. (On this topic see Wesley Cray’s forthcoming article in a symposium on *Adornment*, to be published later this year in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.)

Ultimately, what comes across most clearly with discussions like this is how Davies is or positions himself as removed from the practice of adornment. As he notes in the afterword, Davies “as a male of the baby-boomer generation” doesn’t himself wear what would be considered to be adornment (p. 207). Of course, Davies qua researcher can learn about adornment through reading scholarly sources about the lives of others. But I couldn’t help but think that Davies’s discussion of adornment could have benefitted from his having spent an hour in a chair at Sephora. Perhaps by engaging with adornment as an experiential, bodily practice himself, the discussion could have been strengthened with specific, accurate details in these chapters.

In Chapter 10—the final chapter before his conclusion, and following the discussion of clothing, piercings, plugs, jewelry, scarification, tattoos, body painting and makeup—Davies makes a pivot of sorts from discussing adornment grouped by type to devote an entire chapter to the topic of adorning practices of Bali. At the end of Chapter 9 he prepares us for this transition by writing that “in the next chapter we’ll take the culture of the Indonesian island of Bali as a case study” (p. 176). He continues to explain that his focus will be on “the Balinese concern with creating beauty for the sake of pleasing their gods” (p. 176).

Although the discussion in this Chapter is an enjoyable read it also raised some questions. I was left wondering if the previous few chapters would have been stronger if they had been structured, as this one is, around a particular region and their beliefs. Further, I was left wondering “Why Bali?”. Davies writes that the residents of Bali display “an extraordinary obsession with decoration” (p. 177). I don’t doubt that this is the case but perhaps Davies would have been equally justified in making this claim about many other places, such as Miami or Southern California. Further discussion of this choice and explanation of why in this final chapter before the conclusion we transition to discussion of a particular region would have helped the book to cohere.

Bali has close geographic proximity to Davies’s home university in Auckland, New Zealand, and he comes across in the chapter as having the sort of personal experiential relationship with this region

that was missing in his discussion of makeup. Indeed, Davies notes in the afterword that he has “been interested in the culture and art of Bali for many years” and has spent time there as a “cultural tourist” being “charmed by the beauty of the religious offerings presented by the Balinese to their gods” (p. 209). The chapter includes a number of intriguing details and cases from the Balinese culture.

Davies’s discussion in Chapter 10 also helps bring into focus another facet of his account of adornment that I have not yet discussed. Although the majority of the chapters in the book focus on instances of *bodily* adornment, Davies’s account of adornment is broader than this. As he explains in Chapter 2, his definition of adornment also includes decoration of the home. In the second chapter, Davies gives the case of “Doug” who “places a vase of fresh flowers on his desk and hangs paintings on the wall of his new office” with the “intended goal” “to make an aesthetic improvement” (p. 16). Davies makes it clear at the start of the book that home decoration counts as adornment on his view; it is in the 10th chapter that this part of his theory comes together and is discussed.

In the Bali chapter Davies discusses temple offerings called *gebongan* that are “three-to-five feet (1–1.5 meters) tall” and are “made up of fruit, columns of rice, rice cakes (*jaja*), and flowers” (p. 182). He also discusses Balinese funeral processions, music, bodily adornment, and the relation of these practices to the Balinese religion. At the end of the chapter Davies helpfully connects the dots and considers what his discussion of Bali means for his previous arguments. In particular, Davies clarifies that on his view some art can be adornment and some adornment can be art. Davies also reminds us that adornment can also sometimes be functional as well as beautiful, which is how the Balinese view their temple offerings and some of their other practices. The Bali discussion serves to answer some questions that arise in Chapter 2.

Overall Davies’s book is well served by the theoretical framework he presents at the start. A reader may finish the book wondering about some aspect or another of the metaphysical framing of adornment—or quibbling with Davies’s characterization of a particular type of adornment—but ultimately this is a testament to the success of the book. Davies provides a clear account of a subject matter that has been far too long neglected or derided by philosophers. The book succeeds in definitively establishing that we ought not view adornment as something trivial but as a subject matter worthy of philosophical inquiry.

As Davies illustrates again and again with his engaging book, we can find beauty and the sublime on a body or in a temple—not just in an art gallery. Philosophers who are interested in art, beauty, or the sublime should also be interested in adornment, and the Davies book is a great place to start one’s contemplation of the subject matter.

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