Objective and Theme: The aim of the course is first to understand what makes something beautiful or a work of art and second to be able to use this understanding to appreciate art. Consequently, we will not only read some important works of philosophy, but also use them to explore particular art works. Studying aesthetics is more than merely learning to be a good critic; it is being able to understand art. Many people would object vigorously to speaking of “understanding art.” Art is often thought to be based on feeling or an aesthetic experience that cannot be captured adequately by language or thought; to speak of understanding art seems to many to reduce art to something else. Perhaps this is so, though to argue for it could be thought a kind of contradiction. One issue for us is the extent to which art can be understood. Clearly, the forms and techniques of expression are also crucial for art. Still, there are, I suggest, ideas that are expressed in art, and there is a particular set of ideas that are especially prominent in art. Understanding them goes a long way toward helping us to appreciate art and, indeed, to be transformed by experiencing it.

Students are expected to understand the philosophical problems posed by the course readings and the particular ways that they address them. We are concerned not only with articulating conclusions, but also with understanding and evaluating arguments for these conclusions. You are invited to enter into ways of thinking that are, despite important similarities, radically different from each other and from our own. This can be expanding and liberating.

The focus of our attention will be on understanding and assessing the texts. As graduate students, you are expected to become familiar with at least some of the secondary literature.

Readings: *Plotinus, Enneads I.6, V.6, Armstrong translation.
*W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” “Byzantium”
Aristotle, Poetics, Focus Publishing,
I. Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgement, Cambridge University Press
Plato, Symposium, Hackett Publishing Co.
*R. W. Emerson “Art,” “The Poet”
*M. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”
J. Dewey, Art as Experience, Berkley Publishing
A River Runs Through It, 7:00PM, September 5, Peabody 115
American Beauty, 7:00PM, November 28, Peabody 115
* Available in a course packet at Pro Copies

Grading: Critiques Sept. 14, 28 20%
Mid-Term October 12 15%
Major Paper (8-10 pages) November 22 35%
Final Exam December 12 (3:30-6:30) 30%

Study: Most of your work for this course should lie in the preparation of the daily assignments. You are expected to come to class prepared to ask and answer questions about the readings. As you know, reading philosophy is not like reading other material. You will undoubtedly need to read the assignment more than once. As a minimum, I suggest three readings. Begin by reading a large portion of text quickly; then, carefully prepare the section that will be discussed in class; third, read the material again after class. Read the text critically. Ask yourself questions as you read; try to anticipate questions that I might ask.
Assignments: It is not easy to think about aesthetics or the arguments philosophers make about it. You will find it helpful to try to formulate these arguments in your own terms as you read. Accordingly, I shall ask you to turn in a two to four page textual explication and critique twice during the semester. While this assignment may seem formidable, it only makes formal what you should do anyway to keep up with the course. Each explication should express in your own words an argument that appears in the text, it should consider the argument with respect to a particular work of art showing the extent to which the art reflects the argument or the thought that it contains, but also to bring out problems or objections to the argument. If you can, defend the applicability of the argument to the work of art. This will be a challenging assignment, but it will help you both to understand the philosophy and to appreciate the art. In stating the argument, present the premises and conclusion in a way that shows how the conclusion follows from what is assumed. Do not tell me about the argument or summarize what is said; that would only show me that you have read the text. Rather, try to show that the conclusion must be true. Ordinarily, you would criticize an argument by finding a stated or unstated assumption and arguing that it is false or by showing that the conclusion does not follow from what is assumed. In this assignment, you should look to features of the work of art to illustrate and to undermine the argument. Though it is not required, you may find it useful to consult the secondary literature for arguments and criticisms. (All citations must be noted.)

You can use a critique as the starting point for your major paper; but the latter ought to address an issue rather than a single text. This course paper should be a substantial piece of work. It must make some significant use of the secondary literature. Whereas the course paper will allow you to pursue a particular problem deeply, the final exam will give you the opportunity to display your knowledge of all the issues covered in the course.

Selected Bibliography

General

Plotinus

Aristotle
Kant

Croce

Heidegger

Dewey