FOREST AESTHETICS

Forest aesthetics—an esoteric term to many foresters as well as to the general public. It is not an entry in the third edition of Forestry Terminology (1958). It is not in the Random House unabridged dictionary, or in the American Heritage dictionary. Some artists are loath to accept the term, since it refers to the natural beauty of the forest. It is often used as a synonym for forest beauty.

Heinrich von Salisch (1846–1920) wrote a book with that title in 1885, with revisions in 1902 and 1911. He was a nobleman, a member of the Prussian Reichstag (the national parliament), a landowner and landlord in then-German Silesia, and a maverick forester. Calling him a maverick forester may seem a little harsh, but in his time—the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century—he strongly criticized the prevailing forest policy of maximizing forest profits to the exclusion of other benefits, especially the visual attractiveness of the forest. He had studied forestry in the university but did not take the professional exam. His interests were in the forest landscape, and he had read widely on landscape art. During the nineteenth century, the interest in landscape that had developed in England with William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and others had spread to Germany. In his book, he frequently quoted Gilpin and Prince Hermann von Pueckler of Muskau, who had visited England and studied the English landscape movement.

In 1992, before I retired from the University of Georgia’s Warnell School of Forest Resources, I collaborated with Doris Wehlau to translate the 1902 edition of Forest Aesthetics. Doris was a Fulbright scholar from Germany, studying for a master of landscape architecture degree; she did the primary translation, and I (who could not read German) helped with the technical forestry language and the “smoothing” into English. Having thus read the book, I became aware of many similarities between the thoughts, taste, and problems of late-nineteenth-century Germany and those of late-twentieth-century America. Having been a ‘maverick forester’ myself (my graduate major was forest aesthetics), I recognized a kindred relationship with von Salisch.

VISITING VON SALISCH’S HOME

In the summer of 1993, I visited the former home and forest of von Salisch, which since 1945 has been in Poland. Three scenes from that visit will remain in my memory forever. With two local foresters as guides, we toured the park surrounding the ruins of the manor house (the Russian army had demolished it in 1945), the former hunting tower, built in 1849, and the author’s forest and adjacent state forest.

The 5.2-hectare park was an amazing collection of 150-year-old trees, mostly exotic to that site and many from the United States. Ewald Ranoscek, the forester in charge of managing the...
park, had identified all the trees and listed them on a map board at the entrance to the park. He pointed out the tallest tree, a Douglas-fir, and the tree with the largest diameter, a European alder (more than forty-eight inches in diameter at breast height). The greatest surprise was a bald cypress, thriving in the cold interior of the continent, far from its home in the warm bottomlands of the American South. Much of the ground was carpeted with English ivy, a favorite of von Salisch; he would have been pleased to see a four-inch-diameter specimen climbing an English oak. Even so, many broadleaf species had reproduced, including linden, black locust, black cherry, sycamore maple and its red-leaved variety, and European beech and its blood beech variety.

The hunting tower, called Johanna’s Height, after Heinrich’s mother, was originally more than twenty meters tall. It had somehow escaped destruction by the Russians and the retreating Germans (it would have been useful for spotting artillery), but a fire had gutted the interior in 1949. The Polish foresters restored it as a hostel, added five meters to the top, and installed a rotating television camera; a receiver in their office in Milicz is used to monitor for wildfires. The road leading to the tower passes by a stand of European beech that von Salisch used to demonstrate his Postel thinning system, described in the book.

A driving tour of the former Katholisch-Hammer (Prussian) state forest, now Polish, was given by forester Marek Grobelny. In the book, von Salisch has a photo of a harvest of 100-year-old Scots pine, taken from a marked compartment corner. When we got to the photo point, Surprise! The same compartment was being harvested. The ring count on the Scots pine stumps indicated they had been planted about 1887. The trees we saw being cut were those that had been planted following the harvest shown in the photo in the book.

**THE BEAUTIFUL, THE GOOD, AND THE USEFUL**

In the first part of his text, von Salisch gets into serious detail in discussing and describing the philosophical and physical aspects of beauty. Especially in philosophy, he seems to contradict himself. He equates The Beautiful with The Good and The Useful. Striving for beauty leads to perfection and achieves the good and the useful. He quotes contemporary forester and author G. Koenig from his book, *Forest Care*: “A forest in its highest forestry perfection is also in its most beautiful state.” This seems to match well with the objectives of pine plantation management. Certainly order, neatness, and cleanliness are associated with attractiveness, especially when expressed in the negative. But he also states that aesthetic pleasure is pure, without any interests, that beauty is a quality intrinsic to things that is totally independent from the existence of humans as viewers. This is partially true; the “golden mean” often contributes to the beauty of an object.

But beauty is also dependent to a degree on cultural values and tastes. The author offers a list of examples of beautiful objects; included are the Cologne Cathedral, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, a sunrise, an oak, the Prince Bismarck. The last of these is probably not on anyone’s present-day list. His comparison of a potato (a useful object) with a rose (a useless object) tends to destroy his argument that beauty and utility are to be equated. Perhaps he might have agreed with his contemporary Santayana, that an object need not be useful to be beautiful, but...
if it were supposed to be useful but was flawed in a way to be useless, it could not be beautiful.

In yet another passage, he states that aesthetics “has nothing to do with good and evil, with useful or useless, but is limited to what our senses transmit to us.” This is likely closer to the conventional meaning than his previous arguments. Likewise, his discussion of “idea-association” is backed by more recent research in the United States. A viewer’s judgment of what he or she sees is strongly influenced by what has been said or written about the object. If a forest has been described as owned by a timber company, it will be less admired than if it was called a wilderness area or a national park, even though the scenes are identical.

Von Salisch gets my approval in his defense of foresters’ opinion or taste. He quotes (but does not fully identify) Hermann from his book Aesthetics in its History and as a Scientific System (1876): “The thing in nature is, on the average, always less perfect in regard to its appearance than a work of art,” and then vehemently disagrees with him. Foresters work in beautiful forests, and many have chosen the profession because they appreciate the forest beauty.

The basic issue of the book is whether public forests should be managed solely to produce the greatest possible economic benefits, or should aesthetic values be an integral part of the management equation. Von Salisch repeatedly rails against the “theory
of highest net revenue.” The rotation is quite dependent on the management objective. Generally, the greatest financial return is related to a shorter rotation, hence the term “economic maturity,” but the aesthetic quality of trees (and forests) peaks at a much older age, long after economic maturity. To a lesser extent, the choice of species also affects aesthetic quality of forests; many “weed species” are among the most visually attractive.

The author provides some logical arguments in favor of allowing the inclusion of aesthetic values into the management decisions. Tourism, choice of locations for retirees, and the provision of attractive environments for the working class all are enhanced by a forest that is managed to protect its aesthetic quality. For example, the proprietor of a hotel that features a long porch where guests can sit and enjoy a grand view of the forest across

When the author visited the property in 1993, he found a logging operation underway to cut Scots Pine (Pinus sylvatica) planted more than a century before. They were likely the same pines planted after the clearcut shown in the image below. The two photos were taken from the same location.
the road would value the forest highly and would pay more to prevent it from being harvested than a lumberman would to cut and sell the wood. Another argument is that the government spends large sums of public money to design public buildings with decorative but nonfunctional adornments; therefore, the state should accept less revenue from its forests to allow the forests to retain their beauty. The people enjoy beautiful forests as well as beautiful public buildings.

Several chapters deal with traditional forestry issues in addition to rotation age: silvicultural techniques that tend to create more attractive forests (or less unattractive ones); road design (recall that this was before automobiles); compartment boundary design (he favored natural boundaries rather than the monotonous rectangles used by the state foresters); regeneration; and secondary forest utilization. Finally, he discusses intentional embellishment, especially of roadsides and water features. He recognizes a problem with how far to go with these mostly nonfunctional activities; he remains adamant that the forest must be profitable.

VON SALISCH, ROMANTICS, AND LEOPOLD

The similarities with contemporary American forestry issues are often obvious. What is not evident is the differences due to the modern mechanization of forestry practices. Productivity has increased exponentially—we can harvest, plant, and burn large areas faster and better than nineteenth-century foresters could with oxen and crosscut saws. On the other hand, a machine costing $200,000 creates a need to work fast, with less regard for damage to the residual stand. Another difference is the American ideal of nature—it must be untouched, or at least appear to be untouched. Our ideal is wilderness, but von Salisch was adamantly opposed to wilderness or unmanaged forests; he could not abide an unproductive forest.

Heinrich von Salisch was influenced by the Romantics and philosophers of his period, but there is another, unstated reason for his advocacy of aesthetic practices. His reasoning was based on a deep understanding of natural processes and a respect for natural forms and functions. He had an inner sense of nature, which comes from having a close association with the forest and the land. Many foresters and farmers have this sense; Aldo Leopold had it to a great degree, and he wrote it all down, just as von Salisch did before him. The difference is that Leopold dared to go further in denouncing the economic bias in natural resource management, and to formulate a new land ethic, based on his inner sense and bolstered by his ecological knowledge. Leopold, in 1948, was just as far out of step with the mainstream philosophy as von Salisch had been in 1885 and 1902; but note that Leopold remained nearly unknown to the public until the second conservation movement (1962–present) discovered and adopted his writings as its guiding principle. It would be interesting and possibly enlightening if we could determine whether Leopold had read von Salisch’s book. Regardless, it is time for the public to be exposed to von Salisch’s book, too.

Walter L. Cook, Jr., a retired professor from the University of Georgia’s Warnell School of Forest Resources, collaborated with Doris Wehlau to translate the 1902 edition of *Forest Aesthetics*, available now from the Forest History Society.