

The Evolution of Beauty Trends Through Portraits

Portrait beautification has been around since as long as there have been portraits. At the time they are made, portraits tend to showcase and embellish the beauty standards that were common at that time. This paper will explore self portraits over time with an emphasis on women, how they depict the beauty standards of the time, how they are edited to conform to those beauty standards, and the social impact this editing has. This paper will also look at standards across a few different cultures, but will have an emphasis on European countries.

BEAUTY STANDARDS OVER TIME

Through history, the idea of the “beautiful woman” has changed over time. Venus of Willendorf is an artifact that is dated between 24,000 and 25,000 BC., making it one of the oldest surviving works of art [1]. Due to its age, it is unknown for certain what the meaning behind this figurine is, but scholars have been able to form some theories. The most prominent aspects of the woman’s anatomy are elements that deal with the process of reproduction and child rearing [1]. Both the breasts and pubic region are emphasized, especially when being compared to the figure’s non-rearing body parts. We can vaguely see the arms resting on top of the breasts. Due to the lack of facial features as well, it can be guessed that this figurine was a general representation of fertility and eroticism. Due to this meaning of fertility, we can speculate that women with these features were perceived as more beautiful. It is however unknown whether or not there were actually women that had these features back then. If not, this might be the first case of depicting women to a standard of beauty that was not realistic for the time being.



The ancient Greek, on the other hand, had a lot more documentation about beauty standards during the time. Beauty was an extremely important feature during this time (the Hellenistic era), for both men and women [2]. In fact, a beautiful body was considered to be direct evidence of having a beautiful mind, and being considered beautiful meant that you were automatically a good person [3]. For men, the aesthetic ideal was muscular and masculine. The idea of power for men could be conveyed via their outward appearance. Aristophanes, an Ancient Greek playwright, wrote that the ideal traits of a man were “a gleaming chest, bright skin, broad shoulders, tiny



tongue, strong buttocks, and a little prick.” [3]. Big penises were seen as vulgar and a sign of stupidity, whereas a small, flaccid penis represented self-control and good morals. This is the reason that so many male statues at the time depict them in the nude, with a small penis, to show character. This “editing” of their portrait - or statue in this case - to fit beauty norms at the time shows that one’s desire to present themselves in the best way they can is not a new phenomenon. Dorphoros, depicted above, is a good example of these trends.

The women during this time also had body ideals to follow. Having a bit of extra fat on their body at the time meant they had wealth and could afford to eat to their satisfaction. Venus de Milo, an ancient Greek statue carved in 100 BC., is believed to have been modeled after Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty [4]. As can be seen in the statue photo, she was often depicted with a round face, large breasts, and a pear-shaped body.

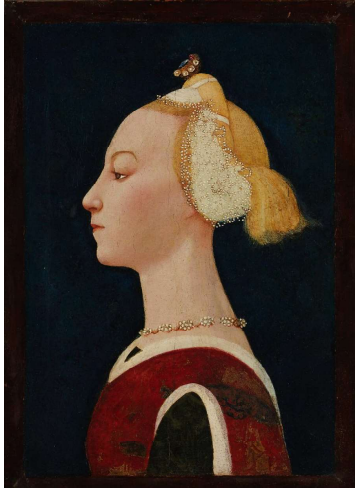


The topic of beauty in Ancient Greece was actually such a hot topic that mathematicians explored the topic in depth. During this time, Pythagoreas developed the Golden Ratio, linking balance and symmetry to beauty [2][5]. An example of this can be seen in the statue *Discobolus* by Myron on the right. According to an Ancient Greek, this statue is beautiful because it is proportional. All of the various body parts are on the right side relative to each other. The statue is also symmetrical, because the length of the arms and legs are the same across the right and left sides [6].

After the Hellenistic Era, came Medieval times. The Christian faith was dominant during this time, which led to the linking of femininity with danger and sin. This resulted in women being portrayed as plain, unattractive figures [7]. There is still evidence of the beauty standards that were present at the time through paintings like these though. Women typically covered the areas of their bodies that could arouse desires in the minds of men. This led to them covering their hair and bodies. Women would sometimes shave their eyebrows, or the tops of their heads to make their foreheads look higher, which was considered pretty, and is evident in the portrayal of women in these paintings.

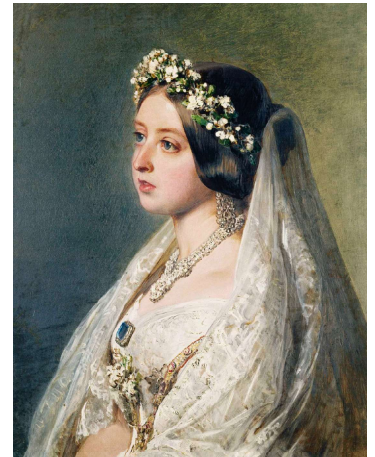


It wasn’t until the Renaissance that art was at an all time high. This, coupled with the fact that beauty standards during this time were no less, made it so these standards continued to show in the art of its time. The ‘perfect woman’ at this time was expected to have long, wavy, golden blonde hair, a high forehead, pale, hairless skin, white teeth, and small breasts [8][9]. *Portrait of a Woman* (left) and *Venus with a Mirror* (right) on the next page are two examples showing these standards at the time.



With women no longer being seen as a means to 'sin', which was the case during the Medieval times, the representation of women in art again took off. The naked bodies of women during the Medieval ages warned the viewers to abstain from sin and sexual misbehavior, but during the Renaissance, artists once again started to depict naked bodies for the beauty and aesthetic [10]. The increase in the aesthetic representation of women during this time sheds more light on how these beauty standards impacted women.

After the Renaissance came the Victorian era, which carried a lot of the same beauty trends into it. The Victorian era is defined by the life of Queen Victoria, and spans from her taking the throne at age 18 in 1838 to her death in 1901. Her personal style affected beauty and fashion trends throughout the world [13]. It is also important to note that the camera was invented right before this era in 1816. It didn't become widespread until a few decades later so this era is defined by a mix of paintings and photographs.



Similar trends as during the Renaissance also were considered beautiful during this time. Clear, pale skin was thought to represent youth, purity, and virtue [13]. Queen Victoria herself (depicted on the right) was renowned for her smooth, wrinkle-free complexion [13]. This made it so bathing daily started to grow in popularity as well as applying moisturizers and essential oils to soften the skin. Skin products made from herbs and beeswax were common, and Victorian women practiced what is considered to be the earliest form of a chemical peel, consisting of diluted sulfuric acid applied directly to the skin [13].

One of the last trends I will touch on from this era is probably one of the most well known one. Corsets were an extremely popular piece of undergarment that helped to shape the waists and busts of the women who wore them. This gave the look of an extremely small waist and large bust, which was 'in' at

the time. It was common, in addition to wearing the corset, for women to pad their busts and hips to give the illusion of an even smaller waist. An example of this can be seen in the image up to the left of Grace La Rue.

This brings us up to more modern day beauty standards. Photography had worked itself more and more into everyday life. Magazines now often included photos of people instead of just drawings, and were able to broadcast to a wider audience. This paved the way for constantly evolving beauty trends, as can be seen when looking at trends over the decades [15].

The 1910s were inspired by the Gibson Girl look, as illustrated by Charles Dana Gibson. The left image depicts a 'Gibson Girl', drawn by Charles Gibson, and the right image depicts one of the most famous Gibson Girls at the time, Camille Clifford. This was defined by a large bust and small waist, similar to that of wearing corsets from the Victorian era.



It wasn't until the 1920s that being 'skinny' and 'non-curve' was in style. This was due to the popularity of flapper girls at the time. The 1930s through the 50s reintroduced curves into popularity as a more 'feminine' look was popular.

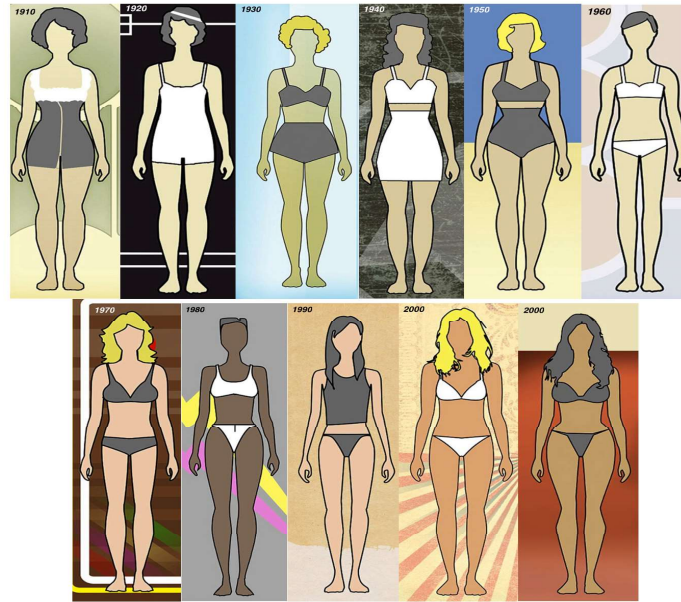
During the 1960s, a much slimmer figure became popular again. Twiggy, a supermodel at the time, depicted to the left on top, was one of the pioneers of this aesthetic.



The 70s through the 90s saw a slight shift in beauty trends. A small waist, thin hips, and long legs became the characteristic traits of supermodels. Elle MacPherson (bottom, Q right), a supermodel in the 1980s, and Kate Moss (bottom, left), a supermodel in the 1990s, can be seen depicting these characteristics.

The 2000s introduced a kind of "skinny-curve" beauty trend, where being fit but still with shape was in. From 2010 on, very curvy frames, with big breasts and hips, but a small waist are once again in. Which leads us to where we currently are today. An overview of all the different body types across the decades can be seen below [15].





As I mentioned before, this paper has primarily focused on European history and the beauty standards that resulted directly from European history. There are so many other cultures out there, that trying to touch on all of the beauty standards across the world over time would be doing them all a disservice, as they each could fill a report. European history has also been dominant for a few reasons, notably because Europeans at one point had colonized over 80% of the world. But, we can look a little into how modern day beauty standards have changed for people of color within the United States.

The reason that mainly white women have been shown as examples throughout this report is because white women have been the example for beauty standards over time. A lot of current beauty standards celebrate white women and focus on traits that usually are evolutionarily that of white women. It was described earlier that desired traits were fair skin, and blonde hair, both characteristics of white women. This has made it so, and quite unfairly, natural characteristics of people of color are seen to be not as “beautiful.” In a later section, I will talk about how women of color struggle to conform to these beauty standards and the impact it has on them.

PHOTOGRAPH MANIPULATION AND THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Before photography came around, the main means of representation of people during those times was via paintings or sculptures. These mediums, unlike photography, do not capture items exactly as they are. This leaves a lot of room for artistic representation, and without true images to compare, we can only speculate about how these artworks were conformed to fit the ideas of the artist at that time.

We saw a brief example of this when we looked at the representation of statues during the Ancient Greek era. Although we can't know for sure, representations of men in their statues were likely depicted with smaller genitalia because that showed a better character.



There are, however, a few examples that show how older portraits were edited to fit the beauty ideals of the time. A portrait of Isabelle de' Medici was recently restored and showed that the original portrait was painted over with a 'beautified' version [21]. The restoration revealed that the portrait we believed to be Isabella de' Medici (left) was actually painted over the original portrait of her (right).

The image above says 'before' and 'after' to signify before and after restoration. We can see here how portraits were edited to 'beautify' the subject and conform to the beauty standards at that time.

It wasn't until photography came around that there we had 'proof', by means of an original image, that people edited themselves to conform to the beauty standards at that time. We can trace photo manipulation back to the start of photography itself. In 1841, William Henry Fox Talbot patented the calotype, which is the photographic process that created a negative that could generate multiple copies [16]. In 1846, Calvert Richard Jones manipulated the negatives from the calotype to produce the first famous example of photo manipulation [16].



Jones took a photo of five Capuchin monks on the roof of a building in Malta. Jones did not like how the fifth monk, placed a few feet behind the four others gathered in a group, "destroyed the integrity of the photo," so he painted over the fifth monk in the negative, erasing him from the positive image [16].

The wet plate collodion process was then invented in 1878, which initially used glass negatives. This was great for photo manipulation as glass provided a transparent, solid, and easily modified base for the images [17]. An example using this type of retouching is shown on the right. Since the editing was done on negatives, the most common means of manipulation would be to apply graphite on the areas that were needing to be retouched. The darker application of the pencil would be inverted in the positive, which meant that this type of editing could highlight areas or edit out problem areas, such as wrinkles, or stray hairs, which



we can see somewhat in the example above.



Eventually, more “detailed” work, called etching, could be done by using a blade, similar to that of a surgeon’s scalpel [18]. Since this was highly delicate work, only

experienced retouchers would perform extensive etching.



Once digital images came around, editing became much easier, and thus, more widely used. Photoshop was developed in 1987 by Thomas and John Knoll [19]. Depicted on the right is a picture of Jennifer, John Knoll’s wife, which became the first photoshopped image, as John would use it for photoshop demos. With photoshop, and digital editing tools that came in the subsequent years, there is no bounds as to the editing that can be done on photos.



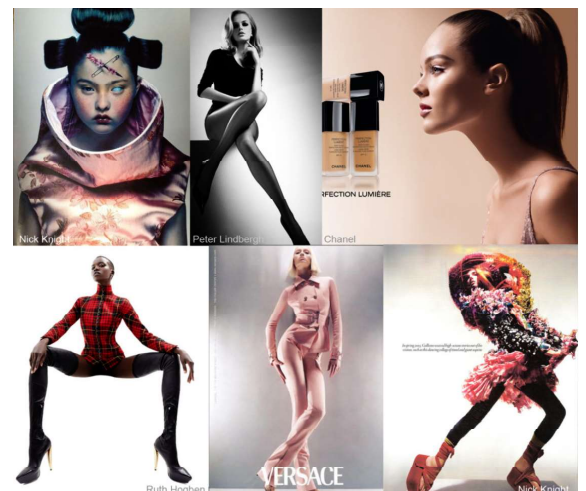
Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin pioneered blending digital technology with photography in the early 1990s [22]. Digital retouching could now be done with ease. Everything could be made to look perfect, even if the scene we were looking at was far from being real. It started out with ads having a “collage-like” quality, being able to have various different elements that were once independent, now making up one image [22]. Then, as time progressed, ads began to shift to being more artistic, and made no attempt to represent reality, typically having an air of “surrealism” to them. The Revlon and Armani ads below show examples of this.



By the mid-2000s, photographers started to move towards a more realistic approach, with slight modifications to perspective and proportions in pictures [22]. Models would be represented with impossibly long legs and necks, glowing skin, and enormous eyes.

The trends that started then have carried on into recent times, as we now see, for the most part, advertisements trying to depict reality, even if that reality is edited.

REPRESENTATION CONFORMATION



Makeup has been around since ancient times. Ancient Egyptians would use makeup to both enhance their beauty and to protect their faces [11]. But women during the Renaissance would not just use makeup to achieve the beauty standards expected of them. Like mentioned above, pale skin and rosy cheeks were one of the sought beauty traits. As one mechanism to achieve this, women would often put leeches on their ears or cheeks to drain the blood from their faces [12]. Being blonde was another sought after trait during this time. This meant that women with darker hair had to come up with means to lighten their hair to fit the



standards. Commonly used products for this included saffron, onion skin, alum, sulfur, and soda [12]. But, to achieve significant lightening, women would also have to sit in the sun for hours on end. Sitting in the sun, as you might know, darkens the skin, which is a contradiction to the pale skin that was also a beauty standard at the time. This means that women who wanted to lighten their hair would sit in the sun for hours on end, with chemicals in their hair, in heavy clothing.

Dark, “seductive” eyes were also desired during this time. To achieve this, women would put *Atropa belladonna* - also known as deadly nightshade - drops into their eyes [12]. The outcome of such would dilate their pupils, resulting in the dark, seductive eyes the women were trying to obtain. This, of course, resulted in a cost to the user’s vision, making items appear blurry and out of focus. While these effects would wear off over time, prolonged use of *Atropa belladonna* could lead to permanent vision loss or blindness.

A GRAND OFFER.
Madame Ruppert's Face Bleach
 Almost Free. Do Not Miss This Chance.
 Mme. Ruppert, the Eminent Complexion Specialist and famous lecturer, makes the following liberal offers for this month:

OFFER No. 1.
 To every purchaser of a \$2.00 bottle of her world-renowned FACE BLEACH she will give a bar of her exquisite Almond Oil Soap FREE. This offer applies to any one who lives at a distance and orders by mail, as well as resident patrons who purchase in person.

OFFER No. 2.
 To all who have not tried her world-renowned FACE BLEACH she offers to sell, during this month, a trial bottle for 25 cents. This offer also applies to any at a distance, who will receive a trial bottle in plain wrapper, addressed in paid, on receipt of 25 cents, either silver or stamps.

LIVING EXAMPLES.
 Mme. Ruppert has proven the effectiveness of her FACE BLEACH by having patients at her office with two or three sides of the face cleared up at a time, showing the remarkable difference between the side cleared and the side as it was before the application of Face Bleach. Miss Katie Taylor, whose likeness appears here, is a true example at her parlors 625 1/2 1st Street, New York City, with one side of face cleared from dark, densest skin freckles, leaving the other side as it originally was, showing actual results. Do not make any mistake. Write your friends (and see for you). NO OTHER PREPARATION HAS EVER GIVEN THIS ABSOLUTE PROOF.

Call or send for Mme. A. Ruppert's book, HOW TO BE BEAUTIFUL, which alone is worth its weight in gold to every woman, and should be read by every one given or sent FREE.

MME. A. RUPPERT, Leading Complexion Specialist.
 BRANCH OFFICES:
 155 STATE ST., CHICAGO, ILL. AND 6 EAST 14th STREET, NEW YORK CITY.
 37 AND 39 So. 13th St. PHILADELPHIA PA.

During the Victorian era, as pale skin was still in, the women during this time also had treatments to help make the skin more pale. Whitening products, like Madam Ruppert’s face bleach, were some of the most popular skincare products at the time. They would include paper leaves soaked in arsenic solution to be used all over the face, neck, and body [13]. This, along with a few other beauty trends at the time, often had fatal consequences [14].

Portrait retouching has been big since portraits have been around. Even back then, critics argued about the ethics and appropriateness of retouching. In an issue of Photographic Mosaics from 1891, a critic argued that “I do not like heads as photographers



retouch them... I have never known an artistic retoucher; I mean to say I have never known a retoucher who did not eliminate character from the head when he retouched it” [18].

Manipulation was commonly done to fit the beauty standards of the time, like I have mentioned before. Some common examples of editing, which we saw a little bit about above, included the smoothing of skin, softening the collarbones, shoulders, and faces, and removing blemishes. But we also saw how possible it was for photo editors to change the shape of the body completely. As this was the early 1900s, we know that a thin waist and large bust were in fashion. In fact, photo manipulation tactics confirm this trend, as Camera Magazine noted in 1904 that “the most frequent use of the knife by professional [retouchers] is to reduce the waist line on pictures of some of their female sitters” [18]. Another magazine, New Photo-Miniature, commented in 1913 that “the etching-knife is one of the most useful tools in the retouching department, and its uses are so many that it is almost impossible to count them all. There is the cross-eyed man or woman who wishes that fault be corrected... stray hairs must be removed, also wrinkles in dresses, hair darkened, moved figures sharpened, undesirable parts softened or removed” [18].