The Changing Face of Beauty

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Abstract. Beautiful faces, like clothing and body conformation, go in and out of fashion. Yet, certain women in every era are considered truly beautiful. Who, then, sets standards of facial beauty and how are women chosen as representative of an ideal? Identifying great beauties is easier than explaining why they are chosen, but answers to these elusive questions are suggested in art, literature, and a review of past events.

Key words: Facial beauty

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The ideal of classical beauty, although recognized for centuries, is not always in vogue. The ancient Greeks believed perfect proportion was the key to a beautiful face and would not have prized the quirky beauty of modern movie stars; the double chins on women painted by Peter Paul Rubens would offend the lenses of present day photographers; and Victorians who thought tiny "rosebud" lips were quintessential, condemned the full, sensuous mouths admired today.

To the Greeks of classical antiquity, facial beauty was prized for its social significance as well as its visual appeal. Beauty was considered an excellence akin to honesty which, when coupled with goodness of spirit, led to public recognition. Voicing society's values, Plato, in an ode, says that the goal of every Greek was to be healthy, rich by honest means, and beautiful. Greeks held contests to support the belief that children of great beauty could be produced if prizes were offered and Greek parents, concerned about producing attractive offspring, placed statues of Aphrodite, deity of physical appearance, in their bedroom to aid in conception of beautiful children.

Beauty, by Greek standards, was defined in terms of harmonious proportion of facial features. To explain the nature of harmony, Greeks looked to mathematics. They felt that all things, including faces, are determined by the especially significant number three [29]. Greek theoreticians envisioned the "perfect" face based on Plato's concept of the human face as a system of triads [29]. The ideal face is, they presumed, divided into three equal vertical sections: from hairline to eyes to upper lip to chin. The number three also relates to the face's horizontal dimension, so the ideal face is two-thirds as wide as it is high.

Johann Winckelmann (1717–1768) was an early historian who examined classical notions of beauty. He sought perfection in Greek statuary and concluded that it was difficult to find, if indeed it actually existed. He said, "If it was absolutely clear what true beauty is then men wouldn't differ so much in their opinions. Ugliness, on the other hand, is easy to define [29]. Winckelmann did identify certain characteristics Greeks defined as beautiful. The nose must be straight or fall in a slightly depressed line from its root to the tip. The forehead has to be...
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Fig. 1. Praxiteles’ Head of Aphrodite c.340 B.C. Phyrne, the sculptor’s mistress and model is depicted as the goddess of love and embodiment of beauty (Staatliche Museum, Berlin)

particularly admired. Perfect brows, delicately arched, were called “eyebrows of grace.” An appealing variation was eyebrows that grew together over the nose, a feature hardly considered attractive today.

Winckelmann noted other desirable features. The mouth should be naturally red, and the lower lip slightly more plump than the upper. The chin, round and smooth, should be unmarked by a dimple. Preferably, hair should be blond, the color of flax; it is not coincidental that Greek gods are often portrayed as golden-haired. Finally, the eyes, according to Homer, are most appealing when large and black [29].

To achieve the desired look, Greek women used makeup, including powder and rouge made from a Syrian root, and outlined their eyes with black and red pencils, all applied before a shiny metal disk that reflected their faces. To hide unwanted signs of aging, Greek women camouflaged wrinkles with white lead and tinted their hair to cover grey. The use of makeup, though, was limited to hetaira, or courtesans, because beauty was supposed to be of little importance to the Greek housewife whose function, as explained by the orator Demosthenes, was “to . . . be . . . a faithful watchdog in the house. Beauty and gratification of the senses come from the mistress” [30].

Classical Greek beauty is exemplified by Phyrne, mistress and model of 4th century Athenian sculptor Praxiteles (Fig. 1). Her face, with its symmetrical, regular features, is recorded in clay as the head of Aphrodite, goddess of love. The space between the eyes is precisely an eye’s width; the mouth has a perfect cupid’s bow; the cheeks are high and molded. The chin is on the same vertical plane as the forehead, and in profile the nose descends in a straight line from its root.

Phyrne used her beauty to benefit her country. When the walls of Thebes were destroyed by Alexander in 336 B.C., she generously pledged money to restore them [20]. On the other hand, her public altruism was belied by her behavior in private. During a game of follow-the-leader at a courtesans’ feast, she requested a bowl of water and washed the makeup from her face. Because Phyrne’s beauty was attributed, in part, to her youth, an unadorned face didn’t detract from her looks; yet she was well aware that her companions who, by the game’s rules, had to wash their faces too, were older and not as fortunate for they looked far less attractive without benefit of cosmetics [26].

Centuries later, observers examined the mathematical prescription the Greeks used to define beauty. Eighteenth century art teacher Antoine Mengs (1728–1799) scrutinized Greek statues and devised a complicated, exacting formula to duplicate a face beautiful by Greek standards. He determined the size of the eyes, the prescribed space between them, where the hairline should start on the brow, and the precise distance from the tip of the nose to the lips [29].

Beautiful women of the Middle Ages—from the 13th to the 15th centuries—were found in the legends of King Arthur and the poems of Chaucer. It is not surprising that qualities most prized by Anglo-Saxon poets were those characteristic of their own race. Eyes should sparkle and be light blue or grey, the forehead broad and free of wrinkles, the cheeks white or red, and the teeth evenly set. Hair should be blond and fine like gold wire and, if nature didn’t provide the exact color, it could be produced by dyes imported from the East. But grey hair, ignored as an object of beauty for centuries, was not then considered ugly and only associated with old age. The white hair of the young mother of Merlin, the sorcerer—who brought King Arthur to the medieval Celtic court—was described as particularly beautiful [6].

As in classical antiquity, women of the Middle Ages also resorted to artificial means. Herbal lotions carried home by crusaders served as face creams to bleach freckles, and skin could be turned fashionably pale with flour powder. To make a smooth browline, eyebrows were plucked as was