

THE SEARCH FOR BEAUTY

Why are we so consumed by beauty?

Is this something our visual culture (TV, Magazines, billboards, the web) has created?

Or is this something innate, biological? Are we “hardwired for beauty?”

Regardless of whether we are male or female, our favouring of beauty is pervasive. We want to argue against this, but the evidence seems to be very strong.

Studies have long shown that society values those who are attractive and beautiful; from infancy onwards, attractive children and, later, handsome adults will be given credit for intelligence disproportionate to their less attractive equals.

They will also be viewed as more desirable as friends and are felt to be more honest, trustworthy and romantic than their more common-looking peers. This may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example ‘cuter’ babies and children are given more attention, and because of this, they often grow up with greater confidence. Clearly, beauty, which means *pleasing to the senses*, has social as well as psychological effects and strongly contributes to our self-esteem and sense of well-being. Not only do standards of beauty determine the relationship an individual will have to her or his body but beauty is often a critical element of romance. As the philosopher Bertrand Russell observed, “on the whole, women tend to love men for their character while men tend to love women for their appearance.” This may have changed. It seems that women are now favouring men perceived as physically attractive too, or perhaps the research has simply caught up to reality.

Psychologists have studied the role of attractiveness in human evolution, looking for traits said to be associated with the so called “evolutionary success”. Not long after I published the first edition, of this book, Nancy Etcoff, a Harvard faculty member and practicing psychologist, published “**Survival of the Prettiest**” . I strongly recommend it for anyone interested in the possible relationship of the biologic drives for evolutionary success with our perception of beauty.

Certain traits in women, such as smooth skin, smaller noses and ears, and fuller lips, as well as the facial proportions of youth (unlined face, higher cheekbones, narrower cheeks, a slim neck) are associated with vitality, and therefore fertility. These qualities are then perceived as sexually desirable and beautiful. Highly set eyebrows, large smiles, and large pupils, all expressive features, convey *sociability*. Raised eyebrows often signal interest, and greeting. Individuals whose eyebrows are set relatively high may convey a positive attitude and receive more positive ratings than their low-browed peers. Beautiful traits are felt to be conducive to successful mating and may be more successful, from an evolutionary standpoint.

Etcoff's book was featured in a BBC series, and you may find viewing some aspects on Youtube to be a fascinating time:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVupnnudKkQ> for part Three, the Human face

“What is beauty?

Is it just a matter of personal taste? Apparently not; we discover that the same things attract lovers all round the world. Anthropologists tell us a pretty face is a fertile face and ugliness suggests poor health. Big eyes, smooth skin and symmetrical features will win fans everywhere. They're also the ticket to a better job, more money, and better sex!

Is this why we spend so much energy in the search for beauty? Perhaps. The art critic John Berger wrote “soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen.” The eye is the fundamental tool of the artist, as the poet William Carlos Williams noted: “Eyes have always stood first in the poet's equipment.” This “need to be seen” is ingrained and implies a desire to be seen at our best, to be recognized and admired. The philosopher Santayana felt “that, for man all nature is a secondary object of sexual passion, and that to this fact the beauty of nature is due.” What he means is that regardless of whether you are looking at a rose in full bloom, the intricate patterns of plumage of birds, or the often stunningly beautiful colours of fishes, the underlying theme driving the production of beauty is sexual attractiveness...

In the 20th Century, the women of my grandmothers' generation fought for the beginnings of women's rights, and the advancement of women to able to work, to have their own identity and to vote, brought changes in the way women saw each other and what *they* considered attractive. As succeeding generations of women brought greater equality and a greater sense of self and purpose to women, their gathering strength again changed the manner in which they could feel empowered. In the last twenty-five years, greater emphasis on figures of strength, athleticism, and power became the models for female views of their ideals. What the men found desirable was intermixed, as the ideal of strength took over from softness and Rubenesque femininity.

Books such as *The Power of Beauty*, by Nancy Friday, *The Beauty Myth*, by Naomi Wolf or *Beauty Bound*, by Rita Freedman are still discussed. Have a look at this, for example, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jennifer-armstrong/revisiting-the-beauty-myth_b_3063414.html, which is a fairly recent, extensive, and thought provoking blog written after a re-read of *The Beauty Myth* 20 years later.

As a plastic surgeon, the reasons *why* attractiveness is important are less important than *the fact of it being important*.

Form and the aesthetics of form are important, regardless of the time in history, the location in the world, or even the species of plant or animal: Birds have colourful and attractive plumage (although it is usually the male who wears the flamboyant plumage); deer and moose have elaborate antlers, flowers display extraordinary arrays of colour and form. It was specifically the dazzling variety, and individuality of form of the plants and animals of the Galapagos which made Darwin realize this was all linked to reproductive biology and evolution. That so much of nature's beauty seems to be inherently linked to function, relates directly to how human endeavor has copied this, from architecture and engineering, and even to reconstructive surgery. Historically, humans have adorned themselves with feathers and furs, created elaborate patterns of scars, tattooed their skin and used drugs to enlarge the pupil of the eye, in order to increase attractiveness.

Some anthropologists have attempted to determine universal measures of attractiveness, but it seems reasonable to view at least some of this to be culturally determined. Aboriginal practices such as lip and ear-lobe stretching, Chinese foot-binding, tattooing are examples of varying methods of beauty creating efforts. The changing ideal of beauty as seen in cinema stars through the twentieth century further shows how ideas of beauty shift.

Reconstructive surgery has become more aesthetic as it has become better at achieving function, and the line where reconstruction leaves off and cosmetic surgery begins has become blurred. A well reconstructed hand after a severe injury looks like a normal hand and has the beauty of form which is possessed by a normal hand. Reconstruction of the face for congenital deformity or after cancer surgery results in both near-normal looking and near-normal functioning features if a good result is achieved.

In recent years, cosmetic surgery has become a safe alternative for those who do not perceive themselves as attractive or beautiful – a satisfying means of achieving a greater measure of attractiveness and beauty. (safety, of course, is relative, and risks need to be covered extensively in any discussion of surgery)

There are still vocal critics of cosmetic surgery who argue that it is part of a recent, large-scale effort to control women through enslavement to the worship of unattainable ideals. This argument ignores the biologic forces of attractiveness and the signals which cause us to feel attractiveness and its opposite; it also ignores the cultural biases and indoctrination which each adult woman (and man) encounters. On the personal level, over the nearly thirty years of my practice I have seen a surprising number of patients come for surgical consultation in their forties, fifties and sixties, unable to reconcile their long held feminist ideology with the desire to beautify themselves and reduce the inevitable process of aging.

There are certainly a few surgeons who practice cosmetic surgery and worship “the almighty dollar” first, and with indifference their patient's health, and its true our patients are mostly women. My experience is most of my colleagues are devoted to their patients' well being, and are always striving to do their best. And there is a different, I am convinced, between certified

Plastic Surgeons (I have written separately about credentials) and other doctors who see “cosmetic medicine” as a “cash cow” to supplement their practices.

Because the primary role of a doctor in society is to relieve suffering, as a surgeon attempting to improve appearance for a patient and correct deformities when required, we are striving to help that person live more harmoniously in the familial, social, sexual, and even the business environment of everyday life. And the majority of my colleagues feel the same.

Although fashion magazine photographs often seem to promote an unrealistic ideal and one unhealthy to women, most of my patients are not trying to achieve anything like what is seen in magazines; *they only wish to look and feel normal*. And although the definition of normal is partly determined by the surrounding social environment, it is also shaped by the appearance of friends and family. I often see patients who want that most controversial of all cosmetic procedures, breast augmentation, partially because their siblings and mothers had larger breasts. Many studies have shown that patients wanting rhinoplasty (cosmetic nose surgery) simply want to “fit in.” They feel that their noses are very conspicuous.

The average cosmetic surgery patient is not wealthy, famous, or terribly vain. We avoid operating on patients who are going to become plastic surgery addicts. They often have deep underlying psychological troubles. “Body dysmorphic disorder” has become a well described issue and patients affected by it who undergo surgery become major problems for their surgeons. In making our pre-operative diagnosis of a patient, we assess not just the anatomy and what we may successfully re-shape to something more beautiful, but also that person’s psychological make-up, and whether what we work hard to achieve in a better form, also will result in greater self esteem. If the answer is yes, then surgery will be worthwhile; if the person is deeply troubled, regardless of the change in form, the surgery may fail its ultimate goal, *which is to help the patient*.

The average cosmetic surgery patient is normal in psychological makeup, income and family – and turns to esthetic surgery to enhance an already satisfying life.