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IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: EXPLORING BEAUTY IN WORLD CULTURES

As the famous saying goes, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." What is considered beautiful to some may not be universally acceptable as attractive to others. Such differences between cultural conceptualizations of beauty are potentially intriguing and exciting, capable of inspiring curiosity and engagement with a larger world. Teenagers are especially fascinated by this topic, as it relates to the formation of personal identity. Fashion trends, jewelry, piercings, and tattoos are all powerful hooks for adolescents interested in subcultures and visual expressions of identity.



Of course, the topic of beauty is also prone to controversy. Chinese footbinding, in which women's feet were deliberately and painfully deformed to achieve the aesthetically appealing "lotus" shape, was practiced for thousands of years before its decline in the 20th century. In modern times, fierce debate continues to rage over the use of the burqa in Islamic societies. While outside observers may be quick to call such practices repressive or cruel, they are often viewed as serving important social or religious functions by the cultures in which they are practiced.

The line between these distinctions is not always clear; but the purpose of these entries is not to pass judgment on any one culture or practice. Rather, they are meant to use the concept of beauty as a stepping stone to explore the history, traditions, and beliefs of different cultures. To that end, this collection provides a wide range of insights into beauty, beauty practices, and standards of beauty around the world.

Source:



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BURQA

The burqa is a traditional garment worn by women in conservative Islamic communities. The burqa is designed to completely cover the body and face. As with all cultural practices, veiling and the use of the burqa is a complex, historically grounded practice that is not the same in all cultures, nations, or time periods. Because of this, it is crucial to consider the lived experiences of women and to resist the urge to make big generalizations about their identity based only on a visible garment.



Veiling in Islam

Within Islam, according to Qu'ranic scripture, women are expected to dress modestly in public. Veiling is a part of this expectation, though the range of veiling options expected of women varies according to the culture. Hijab is a form of veiling that covers the hair of the woman, usually with a headscarf. Niqab is a form of veiling that covers the entire face but leaves openings for the eyes to see without obstruction. Burqas are veils that cover both the face and the body worn by Muslim women and represent the most extreme form of veiling in the contemporary world, typically associated in the West with oppressive Islamist regimes that favor militarism. A panel of netting at eye level allows women to see out. The burqa of Afghanistan, light blue in color, is locally called a *chadri* and was rarely worn in public prior to the rise of the Taliban, when it became mandated in public.

However, women are not obliged to wear the burqa within their own homes or in the presence of close family members. In her 2007 book about post-war Kabul, Deborah Rodriguez highlights how valuable beauty practices remain to women who are living lives of extreme deprivation. She argues that for these women who have enrolled in her unusual "beauty school," maintaining control of their looks is one of the only options available to them in a cataclysmic world. Women who come to her salon to learn to be beauticians spend the day perfecting beauty practices on themselves and each other and shroud themselves in burqas to leave the female-only space and head back to their homes in Kabul. The only people who see them and the results of their exertions are other members of the beauty school and their husbands.

Honor-Shame Cultures

Across India, the Middle East, and North Africa, traditional cultures had been engaging in strict behavioral taboos that anthropologists classify as "honor-shame" taboos well before the onset of Islam. Within these traditions, the behavior of individuals was expected to match with rigid gendered guidelines that reflected upon the reputation of the entire family lineage. Not surprisingly, many of the standards for honor and shame revolved around standards for proper gendered and sexual behavior. Any deviations from these norms, especially concerning the virginity or sexual purity of young women (or even a rumor or suggestion that proper behavior had not been observed), could result in shame and dishonor falling upon the entire family.

These allegations could demand dire consequences from the family in order to "save" face in the community, including "honor killings," where the accused young woman was put to death. Many honor-shame cultures require the observation of *purdah*, the seclusion of women, in order to maintain the sexual purity of unmarried women and to avoid the possibility that the family's honor could be called into question by the inappropriate behavior of a woman. (The word "burqa" is an Arabized version of the Persian word "parda," which means curtain or veil.) Veiling is a part of this tradition: by shielding the woman from the gaze of unrelated men, women are both symbolically and literally protected from any potentially sexual, lewd, or untoward behaviors. Veiling was designed not only to protect the woman, but perhaps more importantly, veiling insured the wealth, status, and honor of the family name.

as daughters and wives was key to the production and functioning of the household economy. However, the mechanism of foot binding allowed the work of these women to be masked by the patriarchs of the economic system. Women remained uncompensated in this "petty capitalist" mode of production, subsidizing the family without adequate acknowledgement of their contributions. Homemade textiles, for example, were standard in all Chinese homes until 1925, when factory made textiles replaced home-based weavings. After this time, foot binding became redundant, as bound women were no longer required by the economic system. The new factory-based economy demanded women who could perform such heavy labor as portage, mining, road construction, and rice farming. Foot binding no longer made economic sense, and so the practice was abandoned.

Finally, the "marrying-up" thesis argues that women with bound feet were considered more beautiful and would be more likely to be chosen as brides if their families were able to begin the process very early. Women with especially small feet resembling lotus petals commissioned finely embroidered silk shoes, called "lotus shoes," which were considered intimate apparel. Lotus shoes were an important part of a brides' trousseau, and wedding shoes were always red and the most ornate, sometimes featuring erotic embroidery on the inside.

Gradual Decline

Of course, no single economic, social, symbolic, or psychological factor can explain why the custom of footbinding endured in such a widespread way for such a long period of time. Even trying to determine a direct linear progression that points to when the practice ended is a difficult proposition for historians, as footbinding was phased out over a period of time ranging from the 1880s to the 1930s. The invention of the term "natural feet" (also called "heavenly feet," or *tianzu*) in 1875 marked a distinct change in the way that the "lotus" feet were thought about across China. English missionaries, many of whom came to China during the Opium Wars, which directly served their country's economic interests, introduced the phrase to show that the doctrine of heavenly feet was predicated on the social construction of a God-given natural body that did not yield to modifications decided by men. However, it is important to note that indigenous reformers were also active in the campaigns to ban footbinding; educated women attempted to "liberate" their counterparts from the lower classes, with mixed success. After 1916, *chanzu* became criminalized by the nationalist government. Young girls under the age of 15 began to *jiefang* (to unwrap) and release their feet, and parents were forbidden to allow their young daughters to start binding under penalty of a fine.

In her 2005 history of footbinding, Dorothy Ko argues that for the women between the 12th and 20th centuries for whom footbinding was a lived reality, the practice of binding was an ongoing experience that required daily maintenance and care of the feet, which were often painful and distracting. The embodied experience of footbinding as a body modification was much more than an aesthetic statement; it was also a commitment to an ideology about gender and identity. The prototypes of Chinese womanhood were scripted by the history of the nation itself, and both economic and cultural transformations were involved in the eradication of the practice.

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Elderly Chinese woman with bound feet: Torsten Stahlberg/iStockphoto.com

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TOOTH CHIPPING

The practice of tooth modification can be seen historically in a number of different regions around the world. Depending on the style the culture prefers, teeth can be filed flat or exaggerated into sharp points. Tooth modification is potentially painful and dangerous, as the removal of enamel can expose the nerve inside the tooth and allow bacteria to infect the pulp within the tooth. Pain, discomfort, and swelling would likely require a tooth that was not properly prepared to be extracted. In some cultures, specific teeth are also deliberately removed in order to enhance beauty, a process called ablation. For added beauty, in some parts of the world, teeth may also be intentionally stained either on the tooth itself or in the surrounding soft tissue (called a gingival tattoo).



Africa

In Africa, the cliff-dwelling Dogon people of Mali are one group that historically filed their teeth into sharp points. The goal was to create teeth that looked like a loom to evoke the sense that speech that passed through the mouth wove into a tapestry of reality. On the other side of the African continent, the Makonde people of southern Tanzania also practiced teeth filing and chipping into sharp points to mark individuals who had undergone rites of passage and were accepted adult members of the group.

The Basongo Menos people of present-day Democratic Republic of Congo also covered their faces in tattoos and filed their teeth into sharp points, a practice commented upon derisively by European colonialists who went to the region seeking rubber in the late 19th century. Also known as the "Zappo Zap," this group's larger name derives from Belgian speculation that they practiced cannibalism and were named for *ba* ("the people"), *songa* ("to file"), and *meno* ("teeth"). In an upsetting example of the racist politics comprising anthropology and "evolutionary science" of the day, Ota Benga (1883–1916) was a young Congolese boy who was "imported" to the United States for display at the St. Louis World's Fair in Missouri in 1904 in part because of his dramatically sharpened front teeth. He was later exhibited at the Bronx Zoo where he was forced to share quarters with an orangutan before being released to live in a church-sponsored orphanage in Virginia. Sadly, Benga took his own life in 1916.

Indonesia

A number of Indonesian cultures also have traditionally practiced teeth chiseling. Sometimes, teeth were chiseled in order to emphasize humanity. In Bali, teeth are thought to represent anger, jealousy, fear, and other negative emotions. Pointed teeth were culturally associated with monsters and witches. People were encouraged to file their teeth flat to discourage any potential associations with evil intentions.

However, in other parts of Indonesia, teeth were deliberately chiseled to enhance a dramatic, otherworldly effect. The Mentawai people of Sumatra are a seminomadic foraging group who practice animism. Their faith connects them deeply on an individual and communal level to their rainforest environment. Traditionally, both men and women used a chisel to file their teeth to increase their beauty and to draw totemic connections to the animal world in which they lived. Members of the group also practiced tattooing with a needle, hammered with a piece of wood by a shaman to create a geometrically pleasing design that mimicked the look of a rainforest animal or bird.

Central and South America

Central Americans also historically practiced teeth modification. Ceramic figurines from the Remojadas style (100 BCE to 800 CE) of the Veracruz region demonstrate sharpened incisors. In addition to filing their teeth to pleasing shapes with stone abraders, the ancient Maya used hardened bone drills, aided by water and abrasive sand (or powdered quartz), to carve into the enamel of teeth in order to set stones in the smile. Mayans filled the resulting cavities in the exposed teeth with colorful stones like jade, obsidian, pyrite, hematite, mother-of-pearl, or turquoise in order to enhance beauty and prestige. Practitioners had to be careful not to drill too deeply into teeth to avoid exposure of the pulp and potentially dangerous infections; it was also possible that the inlay protected the teeth from decay. Stones were then held in place with pressure or cement made of organic materials. Partial to the semi-divine properties of certain semiprecious stones, especially jade, these tooth ornaments sat within prominent front teeth of both men and women for a more dramatic smile during the Classic era (250–900 CE). By the Postclassic era (900–1500 CE), archaeologists estimate that about 60% of the population was engaging in some form of dental modification.

South American Indians of the Amazon Valley are also known to file their central incisors to sharp points in imitation of the piranha fish who occupied the river. Sharpened teeth may have been considered a mark of beauty and ferocity.

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Bagobo with filed teeth: The Print Collector/Print Collector/Getty Images

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GEISHA

The unique tradition of geisha (meaning "one who lives by art") found in Japan centers on a highly stylized woman who is accomplished in the art of entertaining men. The arts of the geisha were performed in special venues for exclusively male audiences, with the intent of creating an atmosphere of luxury and tranquility.

Training

Typically, a geisha would begin her training as a young girl at an *okiya*, or geisha house. During training, a geisha is called *maiko*. While in training, a *maiko* may be identified by the style of her kimono, as well as her hairstyle, which is frequently arranged by pulling hair from both the front and the back of the head and then rolling it so that there is an attractive overlap of hair on either side of the face.

Training would include attention to speech and graceful movements. Geisha were also trained to play a three-stringed instrument called a *samisen* to accompany poetry recitations or songs. Geisha were also given extensive training in the classical arts of femininity, which included mastery of refined conversation, as well as *sado* (the Japanese tea ceremony), *ikebana* (flower arranging), calligraphy, and perfumery.

Makeup

Geisha are identifiable by their dramatic makeup, which features very light skin and very dark eyes and hair, complimented by a pop of red color at the lips. First, the face was prepared to appear as white as possible with an application of rice powder followed by an application of white pancake makeup covering the face and the neck. White is considered a sign of purity in Shintoism (a religion in Japan) and was both beautiful and desirable. The lips are colored a shade of very rich red and are shaped to resemble the bud of a flower. Sometimes, a red color may also be added to the cheeks. The natural brow is either plucked or shaved, and a strong, dramatic brow line is added with black pencil. Historically, there were a variety of styles for the shape and placement of the brow. The arch of the brow could, for example, indicate marital status and other important information.

White teeth were considered unattractive and even vulgar. Geisha often blackened their teeth with a dye made from soaking a powdered nut in tea or vinegar, a custom known as *o-haguro*. Some speculate that by rendering the teeth less visible, the geisha was better able to control her presentation of emotion and not be seen to smile in a way that might be considered unbecoming.

Dress: The Kimono

The stunning kimono costume worn by geisha begins with T-shaped robes with wide sleeves that ideally fall to the ankle. Kimonos are secured with a wide, belt-like sash called an *obi*, which is tied at the back. Kimonos were traditionally made from a single bolt of fabric measuring about 36 centimeters in width and 11.5 meters in length. A finished kimono typically is made of four main strips of fabric and requires that the wearer be fairly slim to fit the dimensions available within the bolt of fabric. The most expensive kimonos are made of silk, silk brocade, or silk crepe, but today, it is possible to buy kimonos in a variety of less expensive, easier-to-care-for fabrics. A kimono may also be layered with an under-kimono, called a *hiyoku*. An accomplished *maiko* or geisha may use this layering technique to emphasize the back of the neck in order to add a subtle erotic suggestion to her costume by discreetly displaying something that is meant to remain unseen.



Kimonos are also highly formalized and quite difficult to put on, requiring the assistance of a professional dresser. The level of formality of women's kimonos is reflected in the weight and pattern of the fabric and the predominant colors. Usually, unmarried women's kimonos have longer sleeves than kimonos for married women. The *uchikake* is a highly formal, heavily brocaded kimono in white or red, usually only worn by a bride, with a train that is supposed to trail along the floor. Less formal "visiting" kimonos are known as *homongi* and may be worn by both married and unmarried women. There are also specific types of kimonos suited for mourning. The typical kimono geisha are expected to wear is called a *susohiki* or *hikizuri* and are a bit longer than the standard ankle length. They also typically feature an elaborate underskirt, which is designed to be displayed. A geisha would typically wear a kimono with *geta* (similar to flip-flops, but with an elevated heel platform at the front and the back of the shoe) and split-toe socks (*tabi*). Depending on their quality, kimonos can easily cost tens of thousands of dollars.

Hairstyle

In addition to the luxurious kimono worn by geisha, special care and attention were paid to the dressing of the hair. The traditional hairstyle of an accomplished geisha comprises an elaborately arranged high bun, called *shimada*. Throughout their training period, the geisha would have a variety of hairstyles, each signifying her occupational role. Traditionally in Japan, long hair was elaborately arranged by specialists into traditional styles called *nihongami*, which was then sometimes set with specially made combs, ornaments, and hot wax (*bintsuke*) in order to stay in place. Additional hair jewelry, sometimes made of crane bones or tortoiseshell, called *kansashe*, were sometimes added to the hairstyle to increase the drama. In order to prolong the effect of elaborate coiffures, geisha slept on special pillows or wooden props (*takamakura*) that allowed them to keep their head elevated while they slept.

It is important to note that the beauty and the elegance of the geisha were intended to mark her as an ideally feminine hostess. Geisha do not typically engage in sex work. Courtesans, called *oiran* in Japanese, rose to prominence during the Edo period (1600–1860) in the pleasure quarters of the exclusive closed districts available to important men. Courtesans of this era were prostitutes (called *yujo*) who shared some training in the traditional feminine arts with geisha. The status of an *orian* was based on her beauty and her mastery of the traditional arts.

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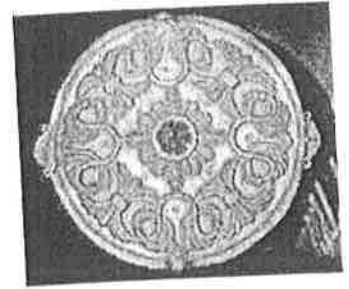
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JEWELRY

Nearly any part of the face or body can be adorned with jewelry. Body ornamentation not only beautifies the self, but it may also render the boundaries of the individual or group identity into physical form. Evidence of jewelry is found in every known culture and worn on appropriate occasions by some combination of women, men, children, and even animals. A wide range of materials can be used to create jewelry, presented alone, strung together, or set into metals, including pearls, coral, bones, teeth, or amber. Other materials can also be used to make jewelry, including plastic or found objects of any type.



Archaeological Record

According to archaeologists, early humans made and wore jewelry as long as 135,000 years ago. Perforated beads made from the shells of sea snails were discovered at a Stone Age site in Skhul, Israel, and necklaces of shell ornaments stained with hematite or ochre are commonly found in burials associated with Neanderthal burial, dating to about 50,000 years ago. The oldest stone bracelet, found in the Altai region of Siberia, dates to Denisovan occupation of a cave complex and was made by carefully drilling chlorite, probably with an antler or bone boring tool. Chlorite does not occur naturally in the vicinity of the cave, leading archaeologists to believe that the precious stone, which was polished to reflect the light, was traded as a luxury or prestige item, and the resulting bracelet was worn by someone of high social status.

The invention of metallurgy allowed metals, especially bronze, gold, and silver, to be fashioned into ornaments. The oldest gold jewelry, a 24-karat, two-gram pendant, was unearthed in the Varna region of Bulgaria and dates to 6,600 years ago. The gold was soft enough to have been hammered into shape, and it is unknown whether it was worn by a man or a woman. Because jewelry tends to be relatively small, the skill of the metal worker is tested to render exquisite detail. Two gold earrings were found in the tomb of a 1,500-year-old woman named Farong buried in Datong City, China. The earrings are extraordinary in their tiny, detailed representation of two dragons and a human figure, with a cascading trail of jade, turquoise, and amethyst, held aloft by tiny chips of precious stones in an elaborate teardrop-shaped setting that decorates the sides of the earrings. Today, platinum and titanium are also used extensively in jewelry.

The female Sumerian dignitary buried in the Royal Tomb of Ur, nicknamed Queen Pu-abu during the excavation, wore an estimated 14 pounds of jewelry composed of an elaborate gold leaf headdress and hair ornaments, two sets of large gold lunate (hoop) earrings, a wide, choker-style necklace, and a "cape" and "belt," each made of semiprecious stone beads and gold and silver rings. She also wore a wrist cuff and ten rings. Elaborate jewelry is found in burials across Mesopotamia. Jewelry was used as a wedding gift, as well as a convenient way to store wealth used in dowries and inheritances. Mesopotamian men also wore earrings, necklaces, armlets, bracelets, pectoral ornaments, and headbands. Elite women also wore diadems (crowns or headbands) made of semiprecious stone beads and gold. Many of the materials used in the jewelry were imported from very far distances, adding to their value. Jewelry found in Mesopotamian burials serves as markers of individual and family wealth, and underscores the differentiation of the people of this era into social classes.

Labrets, disc-shaped jewelry worn as piercings in the skin below the lower lip, are also found around the world dating to the prehistoric period. In ancient Chile of the El Molle period (1-700 CE), labret jewelry functioned to denote and perhaps even create identities through the social processes necessary to acquire the ornamentation.

Archaeologists have identified a relationship between heavily labretted men and warriors of the society who were at risk for high rates of traumatic injury through warfare, suggesting the right to display jewelry was connected to masculinity in that culture.

Stiff neck rings called torques (also called "torc") are most commonly associated with the European Iron Age (from the 8th century BCE to the 3rd century CE) era. They were usually made either as a single piece of metal or with metal strands twisted or braided together with an opening at the front. Torques would have been difficult to remove and became permanent daily wear after they were originally placed on the wearer. Archaeologists have found torques made of bronze, silver, and gold (often mixed with other metals to improve strength and durability) in the Scythian, Thracian, Illyrian, and Celtic cultures. Similar bracelets, anklets, and armlets worn around the bicep have also been found. Celtic torques became quite elaborate, depicting images of animals, gods, and cultic symbols. They would have been very valuable, and appear as grave goods associated with the burials of both male and female high-status Celts.

Charms and Symbols

In addition to being pleasing to the eye or used to reinforce messages about femininity or masculinity, jewelry often has a functional spiritual or religious significance, or may be designed as a talisman to protect the wearer from harm. Amulets, objects with the power to ward off evil, are sometimes used as pendants and hung from necklaces, bracelets, rings, or other forms of jewelry. Amulets can be quite beautiful and fashioned from precious stones, gems, plants, bones, or other objects. "Sacred eye" agate beads (*dzi*) are used widely in Tibet to ward off evil. In Asian countries, amber beads are also commonly thought both to be beautiful and to offer protection from ill-wishers. The hand-shaped hamsa design (sometimes called the "Hand of Fatima") is an ancient symbol in the Middle Eastern world dating back to Mesopotamia as a universal sign of protection, blessings, power, and strength associated with the goddess Ishtar.

Metalwork

To increase the dramatic effect of jewelry, stones—referred to as "jewels"—were set into worked metals. The most valuable gems include diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires, prized for the way they are cut to reflect the light. There are also many semiprecious stones, typically chosen for their bright colors, including the regal purple of amethyst; the various shades of blue in aquamarine, lapis lazuli, and turquoise; and the bright orange-pink of carnelian (a form of agate). Of course, many other semiprecious stones exist, including tourmaline, chrysoberyl, alexandrite, peridot, garnets, and tanzanite.

Egyptian tombs are famous for the discovery of "scarabs," elaborately jeweled beetle designs. The beetle hieroglyphic is usually translated as "to come into being," and so it is likely that in addition to being attractive, the design carried a spiritual symbolism. These ornamental scarabs were central to a wide variety of jeweled designs that included brooches, earrings, and diadems meant to be worn on the head much like a crown or a tiara. Upper arm bracelets were also commonly worn by ancient Egyptians, sometimes fashioned into the shape of a serpent. Possibly the most distinct form of ancient Egyptian jewelry is known as the "pectoral," a large collar necklace worn by pharaohs and other elites for aesthetic purposes and to display wealth. Pectorals were usually made of gold with gem inlays. Ancient Egyptians also wore a variety of amulets, frequently elaborated with gems or precious metals.

Classical Greek jewelry featured a number of animals fashioned into hoop earrings, bracelets, necklaces, and brooches, including motifs of the ram, owl, bull, stags, and lions. These were fashioned into jewelry from eighteen-carat gold by heat treatment and skilled hammering.

Spread to the Middle Class

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Gradually, fine jewelry became democratized and more affordable for those who were not royalty. The growing middle class developed a taste for elegant jewelry in their pursuit for conspicuous consumption. In the post-World War II reconstruction period, Rome became the worldwide center of glamour as the budding young celebrities of Hollywood flocked there to make high-profile films. Many of the starlets of the age frequented European jewelers, adding to the "material girl" reputations of famous women of the age like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and Sophia Loren.

Fine jewelers also view the current trend in body jewelry as a new opportunity for experimentation and aesthetic impact, including body chains, multiple ear piercings, navel rings, anklets, and labrets. One of the "youngest forms of fine jewelry" is the wristwatch.

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KAYAN NECK RINGS

Gradual stacking of brass or bronze coils, often called "rings," around the neck is practiced among the indigenous, Karenic-speaking people of the hills of northern Thailand and Myanmar, a region often referred to as the Golden Triangle. These women are sometimes known as the "giraffe women" and are highly photographed by curiosity seekers. Long necks are associated with wealth and beauty, and are said to give young women more options in attracting a successful husband.



Ring Stacking

Padaung women are fitted with these metal coils gradually from childhood, usually at the age of 5 or 6, to give the illusion of a longer, more slender neck. Each year, women are able to add more rings according to their ability to afford them. Adult women can wear about 20 of the rings, although there are examples of women with up to 25 rings, each ring weighing about 4 to 5 pounds. The look is so striking some outsiders worry that "stretching" the neck in this way can cause orthopedic damage. In fact, the rings do not actually lengthen the neck, but instead, the heavy weight associated with the coils forcibly push down the collarbone to create the visual appearance of a longer, more pleasing neck. The ligaments and cartilage attaching the clavicle to the sternum also can be slowly stretched to accommodate more and more rings. Over time, this process begins to press on the upper ribs, further opening the space for the rings to be stacked.

Cultural and Practical Functions

Tribal women of the region are noted for their jewelry, which may also include silver chains, an assortment of glass beads, buckles, earrings, and finger rings. Women also favor decorative additions in the form of tassels, seeds, shells, and other natural products that may be attached to clothing or worn in an ornamental way. The value of a woman's jewelry represents the wealth of her family and may attract suitors. Within the region, marriage negotiations are often made using silver as the standard for exchange, though brass and copper are also used widely. The Padaung observe matrilineal descent patterns, which means that ornaments and jewelry may pass from mother to daughter, although they are also bought independently whenever possible. The coils are carefully wrapped, usually by a local spiritual leader, who also anoints the neck with protective ointments and cushioning.

Less dramatic, but still notable in Karenic women's appearance, is the presence of large, "gauge-style" earrings, originally made from the ivory of elephant tusk. Until recently, men also wore these distinctive ear plugs with projections of varying lengths. Like the neck rings, these gauges are fitted into the earlobes of young girls, and the lobe is stretched progressively to achieve a pleasing size. The women also wear brass rings around their calves.

According to the legends of the people, the neck rings were originally designed to give women the striking appearance of a dragon or possibly to prevent tigers from fatally attacking women. Another explanatory story suggests that women were fitted with the neck rings to discourage being kidnapped by neighboring tribes, who might find the longer necks unappealing.

Once attached, the rings are rarely removed, and women wear them for the duration of their lives. The region is also noted for the high-quality looms which allow the locals to spin thread from their own cotton and create intricate textile patterns of bright colors from locally sourced dyes. Women also traditionally wear their hair long and tied into a knot at the top of the head, covered by a turban-like head covering with a long fringe. Young women often add brightly colored pompoms around the head covering, which may hang down and swing attractively close to their neck rings.

Controversies

In the last few decades, political unrest in the region has pushed increasing numbers of Karenic people from Burma into Thailand. Today, the government of Myanmar (formerly Burma) actively discourages the practice of adding neck rings to young girls' growing bodies. However, many Thai tour companies offer treks with the explicit promise of viewing the extraordinarily long necks of these "hill-women," leading to serious consideration about whether or not the desires of outsiders to pay to see "exotic" women in their native habitat is a form of exploitation.

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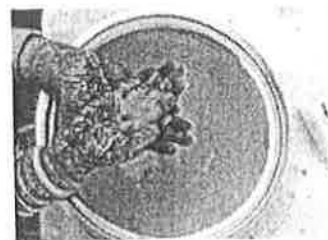
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MEHENDI

Mehendi is the art of temporarily marking the hands or feet of women in elaborate lace-like designs, usually as part of a preparation for a rite of passage or other festive occasion. The practice is most commonly found in North Africa, India, and the Middle East. The word "mehendi" (sometimes spelled "mehndi") comes from Sanskrit and appears in the earliest Hindu Vedic ritual texts. The design stains the skin and nails, and can last for several weeks.



Henna Paste

In order to create the design on the skin, the leaves of the henna plant (*Lawsonia inermis*, also known as the *mignonette* tree) are cultivated from a bush. Henna paste is prepared by grinding up the leaves and adding oil to create the "ink." Historically, the paste is carefully applied from a cone-shaped bag with a small hole or funnel-shaped tip or tiny rod at the end; today, henna paste is often applied with a syringe. The paste is left to dry and then it is removed, leaving a deep red stain on the surface of the skin. Sometimes a top layer "fixative" made of water, rose sugar, ground cloves, and lemon juice is also dabbed onto the henna design after its application to make the image last longer.

As a botanical product, henna paste also has prophylactic and healing properties. It may also be used for its natural cooling properties as a skin conditioner or to reduce the itching of a rash. Henna may be used to counter fever, hair loss, and ringworm. The combination of the beautifying capacity, as well as the possibility of healing, lends the henna plant a rich folkloric history, including the idea that it is a carrier of *baraka*, which means divine blessing. These blessings are desired by brides, which is why mehendi applications are central to marriage preparations in some parts of the world.

Moroccan Wedding Traditions

In Morocco, a bride is literally inscribed as a carrier of social symbols that can be read by members of the society. The bride is the visible embodiment of the meanings of feminine beauty that exist within the society. Geometric and floral patterns are ritually applied to the backs of her hands and tops of her feet following the natural lines of her features on the day before her wedding, called *nhar al-henna* ("day of henna," also sometimes called *nhar an-nquash*, "the day of engraving").

First, the bride is purified by soaking for several hours in a public bath. The process of marking the bride with these gender-specific body ornaments and symbols can take up to eight hours, and the designs are usually made by a professional henna artist, called an *nqasha*. The patterns usually lead the eye in a path through intricate lines that culminate in a triangular-shaped filigree above the wrist or the ankle. Male palms are also dabbed with henna at the marriage ceremony, though they do not receive the elaborate designs on the backs of their hands. In general, male henna designs are much less intricate and much smaller than the designs of women.

Women may also gather together to apply mehendi designs in a more secular event called a *hefla*, or party held by women for women. The process of applying the henna and waiting for the design to emerge is one of the few self-initiated events that allow for feminine celebration in the general public. It allows women to express their own version of feminine aesthetics, signifying important values about what it means to be a woman in the society. Whenever possible, a Moroccan woman also paint herself with henna just prior to the birth of a child, believing that if she dies in childbirth she will enter heaven as a bride.

Cultural Variations

In India, mehendi designs were originally associated with the Vedic tradition of "awakening the inner light." Designs were created to represent the sun on the palm, signifying inner light, and radiating out into the world. Symmetrical floral designs also capture the sense of sunlight or radiating energy. This Vedic custom remains important in the context of the Indian Hindu marriage ceremony.

Henna has also flourished in Islamic countries. The recognizable, hennaed "Hand of Fatima" wards off the evil eye and is found over door lintels, on taxis, in market stalls, and in most other public places. Each finger represents a pillar of Islam (faith, charity, prayer, fasting, and the profession of Allah), and so may be decorated with specific henna designs. Henna designs in the Arabic tradition are usually identifiably different from those in India. Whereas Indian mehendi designs involve paisley and lacy patterns comprised of fine, thin lines, Arabic henna designs are usually large, floral patterns that are focused on the hands and the feet. The designs are more abstract and less dense than Indian design, featuring trailing floral and vine motifs.

Henna is also worn throughout a number of regions of northern and west Africa. Designs on the African continent are generally large, bold, and geometric. Henna-stained nails are considered especially attractive.

Cultural Appropriation

Western celebrities like Madonna and Gwen Stefani began to wear henna decorations, sometimes called "henna tattoos," in the 1990s, prompting critics to chastise these celebrities for cultural appropriation and cultural insensitivity. No stranger to religious controversy surrounding her provocative music videos, Madonna brought strong criticism from a Hindu group called the World Vaishnava Association, who objected to her sacrilegious use of henna marriage patterns, a black sari, and a Tilak facial adornment which signified purity in her sexually charged performance at an awards ceremony. In Western cities, modern henna decorations are sometimes sought out by young people in ways comparable to tattoo designs, but, of course, mehendi is far less permanent.

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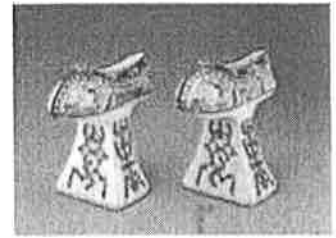
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HIGH HEELS

Although high-heeled shoes are nearly synonymous with fashionable modern femininity, the practice of wearing shoes with heels is a centuries-old tradition associated with high status for both men and women. Sixteenth-century ladies in Venice, for example, wore high platform shoes of embroidered cloth attached to wooden pedestals ranging from six to twenty inches in height called "*chopines*" to elevate themselves above earthly triviality (and the soupy terrain of flooded Venice).

During the Renaissance, upper-class European men wore wigs and stacked heel shoes, most likely inspired by Persian riding boots, as an integral symbol of male privilege and support for the hierarchy of dynastic monarchies.



Ancient Origins

The earliest known high heels were worn by the most stylish residents of ancient Greece. Known as the *korthonos*, these lace-up shoes featured a built-up elevated sole along the length of the foot (including the heel, arch, and ball) made from exaggeratedly thick cork soles. Wealthy Etruscan women during this period also wore a type of platform sandal with hinged soles and golden laces. During the Roman Empire, these shoes were worn by actors and courtesans and came to be known as *cothurni*. During the Ottoman Empire, women wore wood stilt-clogs with two heels balanced beneath the heel and the ball of the foot, called *qabâqib*, to balance on the slick floors of the steamy *hammam*, or public baths. Elite women wearing these impractical, elevated, slip-on shoes would almost certainly have needed assistance from a servant, maid, or slave to prevent dangerous slipping or falling.

Trade routes spread the influence of stylish shoes back and forth from Europe to the so-called "Orient," giving rise to a market for luxurious shoes that marked social status. Although many Europeans wore clog overshoes to protect their feet in nasty weather, during the 14th and 15th centuries, the *chopine*, a slip-on, mule-style shoe with an elevated heel and embellished with velvet or embroidery, became popular in Italy. Despite not being visible beneath a long gown, *chopines* were made specifically for women to elongate their silhouette and were designed to be worn in public. In the Far East, Ottoman influences inspired the "Manchu *chopine*," a clunky, oversized shoe with an elevated sole that compelled the wearer to take dainty, mincing, feminine steps and was seen by some as an alternative to the practice of footbinding. Later, this dual-pedestaled style of shoe appeared again as a thong variation in Japan as a *geta*, worn by the geisha to embody women's fragile, delicate grace.

In the 15th century, the *chopine* shoes that had become so fashionable for women in Europe came under fire of the Venetian Major Council, which fined women for wearing shoes that were "excessively high" in accordance with a new set of sumptuary laws designed to reinforce modesty and respectability among the wealthy citizens of Europe. During this period, elevated shoes became associated with prostitutes and vice, though they continued to be worn into the 17th century.

Heels for Men

Historically, men also appreciated the way that heels augmented their stature. In the 16th century, the "high heel" was adopted across Europe from Persia as a part of equestrian military wear, initially designed to keep the foot securely in the stirrup while riding. In the 1590s, new construction techniques allowed stacked leather heels to become possible with a flat sole at the front of the shoe, allowing the wearer more stability than the elevated sole styles of the *chopine*. New materials were also used for creating innovative styles of shoes: Persian "shagreen" became wildly popular as a durable material for boots and was in great demand as a luxury export. Shagreen was

made using horse hide, dyed a green color and featuring mustard seeds that were embedded into the wet leather that left a rough, patchy appearance that reduced the look of wear. (Today, shagreen is made from the skin of sharks or rays.)

The "breasted heel" was a technique in which the leather of the sole followed the curve of the heel to become the front-facing surface, thus enhancing and supporting the natural arch of the wearer. Later, metal was added to shoes in the heel and also in the form of eye-catching buckles. When King Louis XIV of France (1643–1715) held court at Versailles, he elevated the status of fancy shoes to a type of political tool. In the early 1670s, he declared that only aristocrats wearing red heels would have access to his court.

Men's heels were typically squared at the toe and more sturdy than women's shoes. High heeled shoes for women were higher and more tapered to the toe, providing less support, and designed primarily to be noticed as they peeked out from under the edge of a long skirt. As men's fashions gradually became more subdued and men abandoned high heels as daily dress by the 1730s, women's clothing styles continued to incorporate lavish and extravagant details, confining women's movements at the same time that public sentiment agreed that women were inherently deficient in reason, unfit for education, citizenship, and control of property. Elite women were encouraged to look good and to enhance the reputation of the men in their lives.

Modern Development

Gradually, heel heights decreased to make way for the so-called "cult of domesticity" in the United States and Britain, which directed women to concentrate on sentimental emotions of homemaking and motherhood, less concerned with matters of physical adornment. High heels went out of fashion in favor of practical, side-lacing ankle boots, which preserved modesty by covering the ankle and the lower part of the leg.

In the 19th century, a revival of the high heel accompanied new ideas about industrialization and the commodification of fashionable display across Europe. High heels, especially those that could be easily slipped on and off, came to be associated with prostitution and the new technology of photographic pornography. Women who adopted the newer high-heeled styles were often considered at high risk for moral corruption and the inevitable doom of women's independence and agency. The eroticization of the high heel in the contemporary era can be traced directly to this period and the explosion of imagery that featured women mostly undressed except for very high-heeled shoes.

Undeniably cramped, impractical, and uncomfortable, high heels made a resurgence in 1947 to complement Christian Dior's "New Look," which demanded an hourglass figure. Heels are designed to artificially transform the physical posture of the wearer to appear both precarious and imperious by extending the length of the leg and transferring the center of gravity to accommodate an exaggerated posture with breasts pushed forward and derriere arched to the back. High heels continue to be endured by women around the world for the alluring ways that they make the foot appear more delicate and accentuate the sensual curve of the foot's arch. The stiletto ("little knife" in Italian) was invented by Roger Vivier, Dior's shoemaker, thanks to postwar industrial innovations that allowed shoes to be manufactured with a strong metal rod to support needle-thin heels. The newly-strong heel supported women's weight and allowed women of the era to rebalance their posture in ways that emphasized the breasts and the buttocks.

Heel sizes flattened out again for women in the free-wheeling 1960s era, but "the peacock revolution" opened up new possibilities for men to wear more colorful clothing and jewelry, as well as a return to men's high heel shoe styles. In the urban United States, African American men wore high heel styles, and in the UK, garish platform shoes became fashion standards for glam rock stars like Elton John and David Bowie, who used spectacle to project a unique take on gendered identity and fame. Higher heels crept back into women's fashions, too, in the "power dressing" of the 1980s era of professional women in the workplace. Women were encouraged to dress as much like men as possible, with the exception of heels. Later, a consumer-oriented wave of "girl power" encouraged women to indulge themselves in luxury items, including finding ways to consume fashion to promote

self-actualization. Popular culture sources like HBO's hugely successful *Sex and the City* celebrated the ability of regular women to buy and wear expensive heels from designers like Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo as a way to proclaim their newly found equality.

Feminist Critique

Some feminist scholars argue that wearing of high heels in contemporary culture carries ambiguous, contradictory, and contested messages. Many professional women view the wearing of high heels in the workplace and in social settings as a way to communicate good taste, elegance, luxury, and power. In this sense, women perform their wealth and status through purchasing expensive high-heeled shoes and by literally "elevating" themselves, making themselves taller and giving them the feeling of self-confidence, authority, and control. Men, however, do not commonly view high heels on women as either natural or transgressive markers of wealth and authority. Rather, for many men, high heels are erotic and seductive tools that communicate power, but the specific erotic power of seduction. In this way, for many men, high heels on women, especially in the workplace, are sometimes interpreted as tools designed to distract men through sex appeal.

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Imperial Chinese women's shoes: Corbis

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TATTOOS

Tattoos are permanent imprints made on the skin using ink. The word "tattoo" comes from the islander word "tatatau" from British explorer James Cook's expedition to Tahiti in 1769. The first Europeans to tattoo themselves were sailors, but the practice spread quickly upon their return home.



Though tattoos can be a sign of beauty, they are also a mark of stigma. Tattoos can indicate important spiritual ideals, but mainstream religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam actively condemned them. The permanence of tattoos was also used at various times in world history as a punishment or indelible identifying marker on the bodies of slaves, convicts, or members of a persecuted group, including concentration camp victims of the Nazis.

Ancient Tattoos

The earliest evidence of tattooing is found on the body of a mummy from the Italian-Austrian border. Discovered in 1991, Ötzi the Iceman displayed small tattoos in the shape of dots and crosses on his lower spine, right knee, and ankle joints. Archaeologists speculate that the 61 separate tattoos were added to Ötzi's body about 5,200 years ago, not for beautification but rather as a therapeutic remedy to alleviate joint pain possibly caused by arthritis.

Other early evidence of tattoos appears in the ancient remains of Egypt, Nubia, Thrace, Greece, Japan, Mexico, Greenland, and Polynesia. The first evidence of cosmetic tattoos that were likely designed to be pleasingly decorative comes from ancient Egypt. The tattoos, dotted patterns of lines and diamonds, were made by pricking the skin with specially designed wooden tools and then rubbing in a dark pigment that contained a high percentage of soot. Brighter colors were also used. Some women mummies from the era were also tattooed with figures of the dwarf god Bes on the thigh area.

Iron Age burials of the Pazyryk culture in the Altai Mountains, located at the juncture of present-day Siberia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China, display a wide range of human burial mounds where entire horses were sacrificed and buried with the deceased. Horses were important for both the daily lives of these nomadic people and also their religious ideology, which included a permeable boundary between human and animal, living and dead, and a rider and her horse. In this cold environment, many of the frozen embalmed mummies found in the tombs still possess enough skin to make out the dramatic features of animal tattoos, including birds, fish, reindeer, ibexes, mountain sheep, felines, and probably most importantly, horses. The most famous of these mummies is a fifth-century elite woman sometimes sensationally called the "Siberian Ice Maiden," who was unearthed with dozens of tattoos, six horses (saddled and bridled), a three-foot-tall headdress, and a container of marijuana. Researchers believe that she likely suffered from cancer, exacerbated by a fall from a horse, and the cannabis was used to alleviate her pain in her final hours. Some have called her tattoos "the most complicated and the most beautiful" of those found in the ancient world.

Cultural Functions

Tattooing, and body painting in general, can be thought of as a way to differentiate the body of the human from the natural world. For many cultures, visible markings on the body indicate what Turner calls "the social skin," that which identifies a person's achievements or their group membership.

Tattoos and other body paintings may also distinctively mark social rank and class. In his influential memoir written during the 1950s, Lévi-Strauss said of the native Brazilian Guaycuru peoples (also called Kadiwéu or Caduveo), "The nobles bore, quite literally, the 'mark of rank' in the form of pictorial designs—painted or tattooed

—on their bodies." Both men and women wore elaborate tattoos, often augmented with body paint.

Moko facial tattoos are symbolically significant for the Maori people of New Zealand for the ways they represent ancestral lineages. Originally, these tattoos were worn as a sign of status, but today, many Maori men and women wear "moko" as an honorary reflection of their cultural heritage. Moko tattoos are usually done on the head and face, which is considered to be the most sacred part of the body. The Maori also tattoo the lips. A Maori woman with full, blue lips is considered the most beautiful and desirable.

Another culture that historically practiced facial tattooing was the Lai Tu Chin tribe of Myanmar. Dramatic "spider-web" tattoos were part of coming-of-age ceremonies for young women and were considered marks of beauty. The ink was made from organic ingredients, including soot from cooking lids and plant material. Old women describe the process as lengthy and painful, especially in the eyebrow and eyelid area. Outlawed in the 1960s, the practice of facial tattooing for young women went underground, though it was still practiced by some in remote locations by women who waited for the soldiers to leave. Young women today are no longer receiving the characteristic facial tattoos.

Japanese Styles and Techniques

Among the most colorful tattoos found around the world are the incredibly lush Japanese tattoos called *irezumi* (also called *bunshin*). The intricacy of *irezumi* was inspired by Edo period woodblock artists (1600–1868), who considered human flesh to be the ultimate canvas and used many wood-blocking tools for transferring designs to bodies, including chisels, gouges, and a unique ink (called Nara ink), which turns blue-green under the skin. Popular *irezumi* designs include elaborately coiled dragons; lavish flowers, fish, and birds; Buddhas and Buddha themes; natural elements, such as bamboo, leaves, and feathers; images of the "Floating World" derived from *ukiyo-e* prints; and hybrid and mythical beasts, usually depicted in action.

Another technique is called *kakushibori*, literally "hidden carving," to "hide" tattoos in discreet body locations where they are unlikely to be seen, like the armpit or inside the thighs. *Kakushibori* also refers to the practice of "hiding" a word within a design, such as weaving the characters (letters) of a word into the scales of a fish or the petals of a flower. *Irezumi* tattoos are done by hand and take a very long time to complete, taking several visits of many hours each to accomplish the outline, coloring, and shading. The technique is reportedly more painful than Western tattoos, which are mostly done by machines. Artist practitioners spend years apprenticing to learn all the various techniques. Some *irezumi* enthusiasts cover their entire bodies in tattoos, called a "body suit," which covers the neck, chest, back, legs, and arms, but always leaves an unlinked space at the center of the body. This style of tattooing inspired Ed Hardy, the widely recognized popularizer of the contemporary American tattoo styles.

Contemporary Tattooing

Today, tattoos are often adopted by individuals as "body projects" designed as conscious and long-term strategies to alter the body as a way of rejecting cultural norms or to mark specific aspects of their personal journey. Tattoos are chosen to emphasize personal agency and to celebrate the various forms of body modification and individual sources of suffering and pleasure. Tattoos as a form of intentional body modification may also mark membership in a counterculture community.

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Traditional moko tattoo: George Steinmetz/Corbis

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TANNING

For many generations, porcelain skin untouched by the sun revealed a life of leisure spent indoors. Those who had to work outdoors as laborers or fieldworkers were recognizable by their darker skin. Spanning back to the Greek and Roman empires through the days of Jane Austen, women tried to create pale skin using a variety of skin whitening techniques, some of which contained toxins like arsenic that harmed them or even shortened their lives.

Popularization of Tanning

Following the Industrial Revolution, the logic about the skin of the worker changed: in an industrial age, low-class workers toiled indoors. The average working person's life was now spent living and working under damp, cramped conditions in small rooms in order to avoid the soot and smog of the streets. Ailments like rickets and tuberculosis became commonplace, and many doctors prescribed sunbathing as a remedy for those who could afford it. Wealthy sufferers in the early 1900s traveled to sunny spots to lie out on chaise lounge chairs and "take the sun."

The French fashion designer Gabriel Bonheur "Coco" Chanel is generally credited with popularizing the tanned skin of the wealthy elites when she took too much sun on a Mediterranean cruise in 1923. In the summer of 1927, *Vogue* magazine featured a tanned model on the cover, challenging the well-established precedent of the lily-and-rose complexion as the standard of beauty. Tanned arms and backs appeared with evening gowns, and formal gloves were abandoned. Sandals became standard etiquette for vacationing socialites. With these changes, the Riviera in the south of France rapidly became a "stockingless heaven," according to *Vogue* magazine.

In addition to popularizing the tan, Coco Chanel is credited with freeing women from the confining cage of the corset in the early 20th century. She popularized a casual, sporty silhouette, which encouraged women's movement and darker skin. Chanel resignified the sun-kissed, bronzed look as a mark of leisure and privilege.

Health, Wealth, and Masculinity

Today, tanned skin is often associated with health and vitality. White Americans, Australians, and Europeans believe that tanned skin is a sign of health, and a 2006 study of Australian teenagers found that tanned models were deemed to be more attractive than lighter-skinned models.

Tanned skin has also become an important signifier of masculinity. Studies find that darker tans are considered healthier for men than for women. Male celebrities like Cary Grant actively worked on their tans, and male politicians like Mitt Romney and Donald Trump use spray tan to maintain a healthy glow.

Tanning Beds and Health Risks

Sun lamps and tanning beds are widely available across the Western world to help light-skinned customers turn their skin a more attractive, darker shade of tan. Warnings from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration caution that tanning lamps may be more dangerous than natural sun because people can use them all year round, not allowing their skin time to heal in between doses of ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Additionally, tanning beds allow a person to expose all of their skin at one time, causing a larger strain on the body's natural ability to heal itself.

Like many beauty practices, tanning also poses some health risks. When skin is exposed to the sun, a natural pigment called melanin is produced to protect the body from UV radiation. Excessive UV exposure causes direct and indirect damage to the skin, causing rapid aging or wrinkling, impairment of the immune system, and

increased risk of skin cancers. The rise in skin cancer associated with sun bathing has concerned dermatologists and oncologists. By the 1970s, a wide array of suntan lotions was replaced by sunscreens that used sun protective factor (SPF) technologies to block the harmful rays of the sun.

Spray Tans

To avoid excessive UV exposure, many seeking darker skin sought out spray tans. Most spray tan technology applies the same process that makes an apple turn from white to brown when exposed to the air. When applied evenly to the skin using an aerosol spray, the naturally occurring chemical dihydroxyacetone (DHA) changes from a colorless sugar derived from sugar beets to an attractive shade of color when it comes into contact with the oxygen in the air. (Some complain that the DHA color is too orange in hue; another spray tan ingredient called erythrulose can also be used for a more "tan" color.) The effects of a spray tan are temporary, as people are constantly shedding the top layer of skin and replacing it with new cells. Spray tans can be applied at home or professionally in order to get even coverage and even specialized shading effects.

Other bronzing agents or temporary dyes may also be used on the skin to create the illusion of tanned skin. However, many of these will rub off with sweat or bathing. Bronzing agents are often added to plant-based moisturizers in order to help the skin absorb the tanning solution more quickly.

Global Perspectives

Some celebrities decry the fashionable practice of tanning. There are parts of the world today where darkened skin still indicates a lower class status. In India, many consumers seek a skin tone known as "wheatish," trying to avoid darker-colored skin that hints at an outdoors lifestyle. In China, beachgoers sometimes wear a "face-kini," a balaclava-like mask, in order to shield the skin of their faces from tanning.

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PIERCING

The piercing of body parts for decoration and display is a worldwide practice that goes back thousands of years. Mummies have been found with the elongated earlobes that indicate the use of heavy earrings, and historical and archeological records show that people have used shells, bones, feathers, and metallic objects as piercings for virtually every part of the face: ears, noses, lips, eyebrows, and tongue. Piercings are a way to enhance beauty and visual appeal, but also may serve an important social function as markers of wealth, class, race, and gender.



Social Norms

Social norms regarding body piercings vary from culture to culture and from subculture to subculture. Whereas piercing of female ears may be the norm in both U.S. and Latin American society, the age at which this procedure happens varies widely. In many Latin American nations ear piercing happens to infants in the hospital, but for many U.S. women, ear piercing is a preteen rite of passage. The number of piercings varies as well. In many European and North American cultures, multiple piercings of the earlobe may be accepted as the norm or understood as rebellious and taboo. In some cultures, these same rules of ear piercing apply for men, or there may be a whole different set of norms regarding male members of society.

In Europe and the United States one or perhaps two piercings of the earlobe are considered part of the cultural norm for women, whereas men's ear piercing is considered an act of rebellion and nonconformity, sometimes associated with homosexuality or lack of good judgment. Cultural arbiters in the United States, such as men's magazines, assert that although piercings may happen for men in college, part of "dressing like an adult" is getting rid of all piercings. Other piercings, of the nose or lip, for example, are also likely to identify the person as one who refuses to blend in, a choice that can have negative repercussions.

Cultural Contexts

Piercings for men are considered rebellious and outside the norm in many Western cultures; however, other cultures allow and celebrate piercings for men as part of social norms of adornment. In India, ear piercing for men is widely accepted and practiced as a religious ritual. In Kenya, Maasai men wear elaborately beaded ear ornaments that both pierce and cover the ear, stretching the earlobe in a way considered both beautiful and a mark of wealth. Indeed, both men and women of the Maasai practice ear "stretching," in which more weight is added gradually to the piercing to stretch the skin of the ear into a "donut" shape. This allows the wearer to display more wealth, an important piece of display for the nomadic Maasai, for whom body wealth is the ultimate form of portable wealth.

Whereas a few piercings are considered part of the norm of appearance in the United States and Europe, in a nation such as India a nose piercing for women is a well-established element of beauty norms. In India, where the practice of piercing is centuries old, nose piercings for women have special cultural significance. Indeed, as diverse as Indian culture and subcultures are, so, too, are the traditions of nose piercing. There are several different types of nose rings worn by women in different areas of the nation, from those that only pierce the left nostril, to those that pierce the septum, or middle part, of the nose. The rings that women wear in their noses also vary, from simple studs, to long and elaborately decorated rings that cover part of the mouth.

Traditionally, nose piercing for women was a part of the marriage preparations and ceremony and marked a woman as married. In these traditions, the nose stud or ring are important symbols of the woman's status and may not be removed until the death of the woman's husband. The size, metal, and jewels involved in the nose

piercing additionally communicate the wealth of the family. In the 20th century, however, the piercing is often simply decorative or is often rejected as an outdated symbol of submission and ownership.

Taboos and Stigma

It is perhaps the combination of the sensual with the visual that has made body piercings taboo in many cultures and limited the amount of acceptable piercings in others. Several forms of Orthodox Judaism consider piercing against God's will as a violation of the natural state of the body and because of its association with idolatry.

Some researchers also theorize that European, North American, and Asian subcultures that embrace rebellious forms of piercing or stretching are using practices considered more "uncivilized" in their home society to reject the conventions that they grew up with. This, generally, is effective. In more than one culture, researchers have found that wearing jewelry outside the social norm correlates with lower perceived levels of attractiveness, hireability, and credibility.

Source: Kenny, Erin, and Elizabeth Nichols. *Beauty around the World: A Cultural Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017

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