

Health Signals Beauty
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In this second discussion in a four-part series on the relationship between health, beauty, and senior life, we ask: **What Is Beauty?**

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is a popular saying in modern times, but it certainly is not new. In Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost* the same idea is expressed in the line "Beauty is bought by judgment of the eye" (Act II, Scene I), and there are plenty of other references to this idea prior to the 21st century. The implication of this saying is that there are no universal or 'objective' standards for beauty. This seems to be endorsed by differences in tastes across time and across cultures.

I was struck by this when I was visiting a video store last week. A bunch of teenagers were also choosing films, and as they looked through the selections they made a lot of comments about different films. One of the teenagers picked up a copy of *The Seven Year Itch* starring Marilyn Monroe and asked laughing, "Oh man, what about this one?"

In response, another teenager shouted, "No way, have you noticed how fat she is?"

A third teenager added, "Yea, I heard she was a size sixteen or something!"

"Wow! What a whale!" The teenagers left the Marilyn Monroe section roaring with laughter.

I left the video store thinking about how much tastes seem to have changed. Marilyn Monroe was at one time the symbol of glamour and beauty, and now she is considered to be the wrong shape, and even a target of ridicule.

In many Eastern cultures the traditional preference persists for women to be shaped like Marilyn Monroe, rather than the 21st century heirs to Twiggy, the Gwyneth Paltrow types. The ideal 'belly dancer', for example, is full-bodied rather than skinny. A survey of traditional cultures in Asia and Africa reveals many examples of teenage girls being encouraged to eat well and to develop a full figure, so as to become more beautiful according to local tastes. So when we consider ideal weight, it seems that there are a lot of differences across time and cultures, and 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'.

As Karl Groning has described in *Decorated Skin: A World Survey of Body Art (2002)*, there is also wide variation in the ways in which different human groups transform the body to beautify it according to local norms. Some of the traditional body decorations appear strange and even grotesque from the perspective of outsiders. For example, Kau women in the Sudan traditionally receive ritualistic 'welts', which seem to us to be severe scarring, of the body. The first scarring is given at pubescence, and after that scars are added at major life transitions, until she gives birth to her first child. If this seems severe, consider the 'beautification surgeries' that increasing numbers of people undergo in Western societies. Surely treatments to create 'sculptured bodies' or 'pouting lips' or 'tucked chins' are no less extreme. All this seems to underline the variations across time and across cultures in our ideas about beauty. The only consistency seems to be our willingness to go to any lengths to try to become beautiful.

But is this really the case? Does beauty vary in significant ways across time and cultures? I want to argue that actually there are some very important consistencies in human

conceptions of beauty, and these are closely tied with health. In the final analysis, when we ask the question "What is beauty?" we are really also asking, "What is health?"

The Beautiful Face: Taking Another Look

What is a beautiful face? In the nineteenth century Francis Galton (1822-1911) created composite faces by superimposing one photograph of a face on top of another. He discovered that the 'average' face that resulted was more beautiful than any of the original faces. The idea that 'averageness' is beautiful is supported by more recent research, using computer technology to create a composite face. There is also some evidence that a composite face made of more attractive faces is even more attractive, but the intriguing question remains: what is it about a composite or 'average' face that makes it more attractive?

One answer, endorsed by studies of attractiveness using international faces, is that 'baby-face' features are seen as more beautiful. These include clear skin, large and widely separated eyes, a smallish nose and chin. The most obvious reason for this is that these features are all interpreted by us as signs of good health.

The Beautiful Body: Taking Another Look

The case of Marilyn Monroe seems to indicate that what we see as a beautiful body today may not be seen as such tomorrow. Cross cultural studies appear to suggest that a body judged as beautiful in one culture may not be seen as such in another. But is this proposition valid? Not necessarily, because when we look more carefully there do seem to be some important consistencies in what is considered to be a beautiful body.

Devendra Singh scrutinized statistics for body measurements for Playboy Magazine centerfolds between 1955 and 1965 and of Miss America contest winners from 1923 to 1987. In line with earlier research, he found that there was a reduction in body weight over the years. Thus, as far as total weight is concerned, the women were getting lighter over time. However, he discovered that the waist-to-hip ratio of these beautiful women remained within a narrow low range. According to Singh, the importance of the waist-to-hip ratio is that it indicates the health of the female and her potential to have children. It was found that men between the ages of 25 to 85 show a strong preference for women with this health indicator. This suggests that the preference goes across generations and is not limited to one era. Research involving both males and females suggests that a healthy body is more likely to be seen as a beautiful body.

The irony of our situation is that in many cases we are investing more in the beauty industry than we are on health, at least directly. We need to rethink the relationship between beauty and health, remembering that health means beauty. Despite variations in taste across cultures and time, there is consistency in a preference for seeing more healthy as more beautiful.

For more discussion of the research on this topic, see:

[Callaghan, K. A. \(Ed.\) \(1994\). *Ideals in feminine beauty*. Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press \(see related book below\).](#)

Singh, D. (1993). Adaptive significance of female physical attractiveness: Role of waist-to-hip ratio. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 293-307.