

The fashionable body: a brief history

By Nancy Etcoff PhD

Many girls and women feel excluded from society's stereotype of ideal beauty.

In fact, in a study commissioned by Dove, we found that only 2% of women around the world feel comfortable describing themselves as beautiful! The current recipe for ideal beauty has the following ingredients: a beautiful woman must be extremely tall and very thin, have small hips but a big bust. She has large eyes, large lips and a small nose. We are so used to seeing this beauty stereotype in the media that we assume that such features have always been considered ideal. Think again.

Curvy didn't always mean "fat" and "fat" didn't always mean anything other than underweight and underfed. In fact, wide hips and bottoms were once so prized that women hid their unfashionably slim hips beneath bustles, an undergarment that tied at the waist and padded their backsides with rolls stuffed with cork, horsehair or down. In the 1880's bustles were so flamboyantly huge that "it was popularly declared a tea-tray could be comfortably rested on it."

At one time, smaller breasts reigned as the ideal. Women did not wear push up bras or get breast implants: they sought breast flatteners. Early corsets flattened breasts and pushed them to the side, the better to highlight the beauty found further south in wide hips. In the 1920s, the ideal of beauty for the flappers was the flat chest; to the newly emancipated women of the 1920's breast implants would have been hideous.

The fashionable face also changes through time. One of the legendary beauties of all times was Cleopatra, the last queen of ancient Egypt and the lover of Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Newly authenticated portraits show that Cleopatra was not a beauty by current standards -- she was too short, too fat, and her nose was too big. Cleopatra was barely 5 ft tall (average for her time) and had rings of fat around her neck, called "Venus rings" by art historians. Her nose was prominent and long with a pronounced downward curve.

Full-lipped beauties like Angelina Jolie would have been out of favor in England of the eighteenth century. At that time, Sir Henry Beaumont said that in the ideal feminine face "the mouth should be small... a truly pretty mouth is like a rose-bud that is beginning to blow."

This brief tour of the fashionable face and body has one major take away lesson: ideals of beauty change and beauty is and always has been a moving target.

Prominent noses or button noses, thin or plump, big breasted or flat chested, curvy or petite, straight hair or ringlets a diversity of features have been the ideal of beauty at one time or another in history. Be yourself and prize the features you have and feel confident in the skin you are in.

“Wide hips and bottoms were once so prized that women hid their unfashionably slim hips beneath bustles”

Sources

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