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# Mirror, Mirror, On The Wall, Who's The Fairest Of Them All?

by Rachelle Bierl

*"Had not my soul been created God-like it would seek no more than outward beauty, the delight of the eyes. But since that fades so fast, my soul soars beyond, to the eternal form."*

Michelangelo

Michelangelo, the well-known artistic master of the Renaissance, understood the concept of physical beauty as defined by the ancient Greeks. Their views of ideal beauty had far-reaching effects on the works of the Renaissance period when Greek ideals were resurrected. During this era of humanism and Neo-Platonism, when the idealistic vision of perfecting humanity through the contemplation of beauty prevailed (Willis 516), Michelangelo chipped away at the marble surrounding his statues and revealed the ideal form hidden beneath. He and many others believed that the form sought release from the stone. With his appreciation for beauty he helped to revive the classical concept of beauty drawing from the Greek ideal form.

American Popular Culture is highly influenced by the Greek ideal of the "body beautiful" as transmitted through the Renaissance and late nineteenth century. The art of ancient Greece, unique unto itself, suggested a universality that had not existed prior to the Greek culture (Lerner et al. 131). The ideal physical form, illustrated in classic works which still exist today, had high status in the Greek culture.

Several differences exist, however, between the classical ideal of beauty and the ideals of today. In the Greek culture, artists and athletes set the standards for what society considered a beautiful body. Sculptors and painters designed the ideal body in their art works and displayed it to society; they gave their undivided artistic attention to expressing human ideals through the human body (Lerner et al. 132). The athletes, while aspiring to Olympic fame and working to develop strength, speed, and endurance, also tried to achieve physical beauty. The populace could see and admire the body beautiful as it was portrayed in art and athletics. Today the creators of desirable body images are advertisers who use their skills to influence the public's concept of beauty. They produce images to form and alter what people perceive as beautiful, just as the Greek artists did.

A second difference between the advertisers and the Greek artists is their purpose for creating beauty. The artists worked to create beauty, not only for beauty's sake, but because the Greeks equated beauty with goodness (Lerner et al. 132). They wanted to show perfection in the human form because it demonstrated their world view and symbolized their religious values. Their deified human forms may have been dedicated to the gods (Willis 99). In honoring the gods and goddesses by creating them in human form the Greeks glorified themselves as well (Lerner et al. 131).

Advertisers, however, strive neither to create beauty for its own sake or for moral uplift; they are trying to sell a product by linking it with a perfect body (or hair, or skin, or face). An ad attempts to appeal to a person's desire to appear beautiful and to equate attaining beauty with the purchase of a certain item (Renzetti and Curran 121).

Another notable difference between the artists and the advertisers is the number of people they influence. The Greek artists' concept of ideal beauty did not have the wide range of influence in ancient Greece that exists for advertisers in American Popular Culture. The Greek sculptors and painters generally presented their works to a local population. A statue would be placed in a courtyard or in a temple; a painting often would be indoors. Therefore, the number of people the work could reach was limited. Today's print advertisers, however, can touch millions of readers with a single issue of a magazine. Because more people see the ideal body portrayed than in Greek times, the portrayal has an impact on more of the population.

Michelangelo's well-developed male forms, derived from the Greeks and influencing later sculptors like Auguste Rodin, have muscular bodies (Jeffery 690) and fine emotional features. The best example of ideal male beauty in his work is the statue of *David*. The generous proportions of the subjects in his paintings and sculptures depict the popular concept of beauty at that time, and today's ideal male body image parallels this concept of beauty.

Today's ideal female form has been highly influenced by the great French nineteenth century artist: Rodin. His supple, muscular, and slender female figures also draw from the Greek concept of the body beautiful (Los Angeles County Museum of Art 40). Rodin's well known sculpture *The Kiss* illustrates ideal female beauty in his work.

Today's advertising expresses the current popular concept of beauty. The classical, Renaissance, and nineteenth century influences are evident in advertisements which use beautiful models to encourage readers to strive for the perfect body image. Exercise programs by famous and attractive personalities promise to whip one's body into

shape instantly. "The Quick One Day Diet" will save the guilty glutton after a giant splurge. Advertisements and articles are laden with pictures of stunning, flawless models. The main message of these ads is that if one uses the advertised product, one can obtain the perfect image. According to Bill Moyers' "Consuming Images," from *The Public Mind* television series, the images in photographs are assumed by the public to be reality despite the fact that almost all magazines alter their photographs with airbrushes. Also, many models today are used for only one particularly attractive body part--hands, legs, feet, or hair--leading society to believe that the models have *all* the perfect features. This may give viewers the mistaken notion that all the ideal elements are necessary to have the coveted ideal body image.

### **The Perfect Body Image of 1990**

In a recent survey conducted by Dr. Linda Lazier-Smith, who is presently teaching at Ohio State University, the majority of the people surveyed agreed that there exists in our society an expectation to conform to the ideal body image (Marquardt 33). What is this perfect image that Americans are striving for? People agree on the elements that make up an attractive person (Wortman and Umberson 480); thus beauty is not just "in the eye of the beholder." Such models as Pauline Porizkova are considered to have ideal female body images. She and other famous models have many of the classic elements of the ideal female form. The ideal image of 1990 seems to consist of the following:

*Wide shoulders* like Raquel Welch's, according to fashion model Joanna Rhodes ("Cover Look": 32). If a woman does not have broad shoulders, padding can be added to create the illusion of shoulders.

A *narrow waist*, another coveted feature, is often paired with broad shoulders to make the waist look smaller.

A *full bustline* is also essential for a beautiful figure, but too little or too much is undesirable.

*Slim hands and fingers* are also considered highly desirable, along with long, tapered nails.

*Long, slender legs* complete the perfect figure. Hair is another aspect regarded as important to create the per-

fect image. *Long, gossamer tresses* like Carol Alt's are the ideal. The most admirable colors are Christy Brinkley's true golden blond or a rich brown like Brooke Shields'.

Most women strive for *high, prominent cheek bones* like Cher—even if they must be applied with make-up.

*Large, wide eyes*, which are the most important part of the face, are topped by *slender, arching eyebrows* and framed with *lush, curled eyelashes*. Many make-up tricks exist that can create ideal eyes, eyebrows, and eyelashes.

Make-up can also be used to make *full, red, "beestung lips."*

Height is also important to the female ideal body image—or actually the lack of it. The shorter a woman is, the more likely that she will be considered attractive (Umberson and Hughes 232). This contradicts the earlier statement about long legs, but beauty ideals are not necessarily logical. The exception to this is tall female models, whose height is considered an asset to their careers (Umberson and Hughes 232).

The best example of the ideal look is the short, slim, and curvy Marilyn Monroe image. The concept of ideal beauty that women strive for is derived from a "cult of femininity," according to author Marjorie Ferguson (Renzetti and Curran 126). Magazine ads promote this cult by equating perfect physical appearance or the "business of making oneself more beautiful" with personal success in the worlds of love and work (Renzetti and Curran 114).

According to Dr. Ann Kearney Cooke, a Cincinnati based psychologist, "the traditional source of power for a woman is her beauty." A body image preoccupation exists in today's society (Duran 212). Women use their bodies and what they think of them as a means for self-esteem. They often blame what they believe to be inadequate features for personal failures in fulfilling their life goals. If things are not going well with a boyfriend, a teenage girl will often blame herself for being too fat. If a woman thinks she is unattractive because she is flat chested, it can create a sense of anxiety (Duran 112).

Beauty can have many far-reaching and unconscious effects on people, especially women. The desire to have a healthy-looking body

can be carried to the extreme; a woman's efforts to obtain the ideal figure can actually do more harm than good. Presently it is not enough for a female to have a slender body. American women want to look like the toothpick-thin models that advertising has portrayed as normal and standard (Marquardt 33). A recent study by Lazier-Smith reported that many of the young women she worked with said they wanted to attain the unreasonably thin images depicted in advertising. The bony images in ads may be partly responsible for the estimated 12 percent of college females who have serious eating disorders (Marquardt 33). Disorders like anorexia and bulimia can be viewed as a direct result of people's trying to obtain the ideal body image by using extreme and harmful means (Marquardt 33).

The concept of a beautiful body for men seems to be somewhat simpler. Again, in American Popular Culture the male ideal of beauty draws from the classic Greek concept. Preserved in the work of such artists as Michelangelo and Rodin is the key element of the ideal male: a developed body. In American Popular Culture there is an additional element to achieve a perfect body image which is epitomized by the old phrase "tall, dark and handsome." The following are considered the elements of the ideal male body image:

*A moderately well-developed body.* Patrick Swayze is an excellent example. His broad back, muscled shoulders, arms, and legs mirror the Greek ideal. For men, anxiety can stem from feeling that their body is underdeveloped.

"Tall" is anything over six feet, and *height* is important to the concept of male attractiveness.

"Dark" means *dark hair*. The ideal is blue-black. In today's society, dark also implies tanned, wealthy, and carefree. George Hamilton stands as an example.

Specific facial features compose the "handsome" face: Kirk Douglas's *cleft chin*, a *patrician nose*, a *finely chiseled jaw* like River Phoenix's, and *expressive eyes* like Mel Gibson's.

*Charm* or *boyishness* is another characteristic that is also considered ideal for young men. An example of this is winsome Michael J. Fox.

Mel Gibson unquestionably epitomizes the modern concept of the ideal male body image. He is tall, dark, handsome and possesses a moderately well-developed body.

Some final elements of the ideal body image for both sexes are:

*Good posture and balance.* These help to create an air of gracefulness, looked upon as beautiful for both men and women.

*A person's stance, bearing, body language, and presence.*

These descriptions, based on the current ideal of beauty, are generalizations, and they are just as dangerous as any other generalizations. Many people have their own personal interpretations and tastes concerning the concept of the body beautiful. These are affected largely by age and upbringing.

The ideal of beauty has changed for both men and women over the course of history, and it is changing again in the present era. A healthy, well-maintained and physically fit body has been added to today's ideal image. Slim and trim, Jane Fonda's body is much admired. Her healthy look shows society that taking care of one's body can have an attractive result. This can, however, be taken to an extreme that is detrimental to the health.

### **The Effects of Beauty On Social Interaction**

The building of biases concerning beauty starts at an early age (Wortman and Loftus 481). Toys such as Barbie and G.I. Joe teach young children that the body image is important in our society. Women and men have been bombarded with the image of the "Body Beautiful" in all aspects of their lives. They often feel they must meet high standards of attractiveness to be successful or to find fulfillment (Duran 214). Failure to meet the perceived acceptable standard can lead to lower self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness.

As tragic as this may seem, feelings that success is dependent upon beauty are not far from reality. Studies have shown that attractive people have certain social advantages that are denied to unattractive people (Webster and Driskell 141). Beautiful people are expected to achieve and excel in areas not even remotely related to physical appearance. They are given more leeway for mistakes and more praise for their successes (Webster and Driskell 141). This can also have an influence on self-esteem. When people receive praise, they are more

likely to continue to try to better themselves, and a form of self-fulfilling prophecy is brought into effect (Wortman and Loftus 480).

One of the major effects of attractiveness is the way it alters the behavior of those who deal with beautiful people. According to Webster and Driskell: "Attractive people receive cues from others which actually make them behave better; the reactions that pretty people get may, in fact, make them learn to be more adept socially. Thus they get a double advantage: from status generalization and from learning social skills" (160). It is likely that people base their expectations of others on their appearance (Umberson and Hughes 227). These expectations then influence the way in which an individual is treated and how an individual is judged in social situations. This special treatment can increase achievement levels and influence how beautiful people are treated, resulting in clear advantages for the physically attractive (Umberson and Hughes 234).

Most people do not even know they are using physical beauty as a basis for discriminating. People may insist that they do not take physical attractiveness into account when they judge people, but research proves this is not true (Wortman and Loftus 408). Not only are people unaware that they are discriminating, they perpetuate the use of body image as a distinguishing characteristic by their ignorance of its existence (Umberson and Hughes 235).

Another form of perceived skills that has absolutely nothing to do with physical beauty, but yet is linked with it, exists in the world of business. It is not uncommon for businesses purposely to hire good-looking sales people to try to create the impression of knowledgeable help (Webster and Driskell 159). Another aspect of beauty in business is the fact that attractiveness is advantageous in finding a job. Beautiful people create a better first impression and so have a clear advantage in the career world. They are seen as more competent and generally as more desirable socially, and thus are more readily hired than unattractive people (Umberson and Hughes 230).

The advertising medium is the main culprit for the barrage of images of the physically perfect body (Downs and Harrison 10). Television, newspaper, and magazine ads promote the use of physical appearance to achieve personal goals in romance and careers. Magazines target their advertising to very specific groups of people (Renzetti and Curran 114). For example, *Ms.* magazine directs its ads at liberal independent feminists. The ads in *Ms.* are dramatically different from those in *Cosmopolitan* (Renzetti and Curran 114). Readers of *Cosmopolitan* are trying to find out about beauty and fashion to try to catch the male eye. In many advertisements, according to Ferguson, "Themes of

getting and keeping a man are often indistinguishable from physical attractiveness..." (Renzetti and Curran 115). By linking these two, the advertising world wields a powerful psychological tool. By appealing to humanity's basic desire to be cared for, advertisers can influence what society deems acceptable concerning attractiveness.

In the United States, where beauty has particular relevance because great value is placed on physical attractiveness (Webster and Driskell 235), the effects of values placed on the beautiful body are far-reaching, unconscious, yet consistent. They affect major decisions about ourselves and other people in everyday life. Michelangelo's understanding went beyond the classical concepts and sought for deeper, hidden beauty. By understanding the effects of a culture which values striving for ideal physical appearance, individuals can make decisions based on deeper, perhaps more reliable, characteristics than physical appearance.

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