

What is Beauty Anyway?

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- I. Modern science is showing that beauty is no longer “in the eye of the beholder.”
 - A. Everyone has an idea of what is beautiful.
 - B. Patterns lie in what people perceive as beautiful.
 - C. What is beautiful is also what is good for propagation of the species.
- II. Female beauty standards call for a shorter lower jaw, smaller chin, plumped lips, narrowed nose, arched eyebrows, slightly larger eyes, prominent cheekbones, higher forehead and a .7 waist-to-hip ratio (WHR).
 - A. The hormones that usher us into adulthood cause these features to come about.
 - B. Women perceived to be beautiful across cultures are consistently found to be in their early twenties.
 - C. Such traits in women are fertility cues (child bearing best with WHR).
- III. Resource gathering is the largest factor in judging male attractiveness.
- IV. Bilateral symmetry is prized as a good indicator of fitness.
 - A. People like symmetry.
 - B. More symmetrical men generally started having sex 3-4 years before the average.
 - C. More symmetrical people generally had more past sex partners.
 - D. In general, women report better sex with symmetrical partners.
 - E. Generally, more symmetrical people have less aches and pains and bad feelings.
 - F. Averaged faces are usually judged more attractive than non-averaged faces.
 - G. In ideal growing conditions paired features would match perfectly.
- V. Beauty standards are too uniform to ignore and suggest aiding survival as their motive for being.

Every human has an inborn idea of what is beautiful, and so does every culture; this idea's attributes among other things strongly influence the selecting of mates. Nancy Etcoff, the author of *Survival of the Prettiest* and a neuroscientist, declares, "I defy anyone to point to a society, any time in history or any place in the world, that wasn't preoccupied with beauty" (Cowley 60). For thousands of years beauty was assumed to be in the eye of the beholder – it was argued that "real" beauty was a myth. However, in our era of scientific exploration, underlying patterns in human standards of beauty are being uncovered across all cultures. Anders Pape Møller, a noted biologist of the Université Pierre et Marie Curie, propounds a biologist's and evolutionary psychologist's point of view when he states that "Human behavior is to a large extent universal. This is the case with respect to certain beauty standards..." (Møller). Indeed, Møller and many others note that much of what is regarded as beautiful also relates directly to hormone levels and general fitness. Multiple studies done by researchers independent of one another show that an overwhelming amount of what is considered beautiful in a woman correlates directly with a woman's ability to safely and effectively bear children; that what a woman considers beautiful in a man shows direct links with his ability to obtain resources and that what humans in general consider physical beauty can be easily quantified as bilateral symmetry. The design at work behind physical beauty could not be better summed up than how Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser put it over 400 years ago: "Beauty is the bait which with delight allures a man to enlarge his kind" (Lemley 44). Biologists argue that much can be learned from a scientific interpretation of beauty, which is best summed up by Etcoff, who states, "The idea that beauty is unimportant or a cultural construct is the real beauty myth. We have to understand beauty or we will always be enslaved by it" (44).

In our time, the idea of free will is being increasingly eroded as biologists amass evidence that certain beauty standards existing within humans based on evolutionary adaptations and cross-cultural patterns. The eye of the beholder is designed with propagation of the species in mind.

Victor Johnston, a professor of biopsychology at New Mexico State University, conducted an Internet-based survey of 10,000 volunteers on his Web site. Each volunteer was asked to rate sixteen images of Caucasian female faces. Based on the person's individual tastes a second generation of images was spawned conforming more to the visitor's tastes. Twenty generations were done for each visitor, and clearly identifiable patterns emerged. The resultant visages had the following traits exaggerated: a shorter lower jaw, fuller lips, and slightly larger eyes (44). Other researchers conducting independent experiments find similar results. For example, psychologist David Perrett of the University of St. Andrews found that when he exaggerated traits judged to be attractive in female faces such as an arch in eyebrows, larger eyes, a smaller nose, fuller lips, a narrower jaw, and a smaller chin the result was judged to be even more attractive (45). Johnston refers to this phenomenon as the "hyperfemale" because each trait is a clear indicator of a high level of estrogen flowing through a female's body. Besides the face of a woman, much beauty is assigned to her if she possesses larger breasts and hips. These traits are accentuated repeatedly in all manner of media and are also excellent indicators of high estrogen levels in the female body. In fact, as far as hips are concerned there occurs a delightful ratio in conjunction with waistline. Devendra Singh, a University of Texas psychologist, surveyed men of various backgrounds, nationalities, and ages as diverse as 8 and 85 and found that regardless of race, culture, or age men overwhelmingly prefer a female with a .7 waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) (Cowley 6). A 1993 study conducted by Netherlands researchers

of 500 women attempting to be artificially inseminated may have an explanation for this pattern. The study found that the most pregnancies carried to term happen when a woman's WHR is .7 and that the prospect of conceiving declined by 30 percent for every 10 percent increase in WHR after .7 (6). Estrogen is molding a woman's body so that it might better sustain a pregnancy. And men notice when it happens: Singh notes in another study that between the years 1923 and 1990 the WHR of all *Playboy* centerfolds and Miss America winners stayed within 2% of the coveted .7; from .68 to .72 (6). To evolutionary psychologists there is little surprise that such a WHR also means 80,000 calories of fat, precisely the optimum amount needed to safely and effectively carry a child to term (6). Johnston states that such traits in bodily features "are telling you that I have an abundant supply of estrogen, so I am a fertile female." Additional evidence for this claim originates in studies conducted to find the age of females thought to be beautiful. Between 1953 and 1990 the average age of *Playboy* centerfolds was 21.3 years old (Lemley 46). Additionally, Johnston has found that the beauty of a Japanese female face is thought to be at its peak at 22.4 years (46). Such studies are important because the early twenties are when a woman is most fertile. Female fertility declines by two-thirds between the ages 20-44, and by age 54 menopause has set in, preventing pregnancy (Cowley 5). Johnston, Perrett, Singh, and others argue that such results show that there lies deep within our brains set ideals making beauty at least partially a matter of DNA perpetuating traits that endure.

When judging male beauty people still have mating potentials in mind, though its priority is adjusted in favor of resource gathering. As Møller puts it, "Human evolutionary psychological studies across a wide range of cultures have shown that men rank female beauty the highest among a long list of attributes, while women rank male resources as the most important attribute of potential mates." (Møller). For example, Anthropologist John Marshall Townsend conducted

a study where he took photographs of people said to be either beautiful or homely and also assigned social standings to the faces, i.e., teacher or doctor. Then it was up to men and women to rate the pictures by their personal preferences. For women unattractive men in high-paying positions ranked just as highly as attractive men in lower-paying positions – this was not the case when the sexes were reversed (Lemley 49). Judging by ability to obtain resources is quite logical once one takes into account the fact that men remain fertile most all of their lives.

Fertility in females and resources in males are good indicators for the successful rearing of a child, but are only part of an evolutionary psychologist's argument for physical beauty. Symmetry is also highly prized by humans in all variety of media. University of New Mexico ecologist Randy Thornhill and psychologist Steven Gangestad measured overall body symmetry for hundreds of college-aged men and women and then had them fill out confidential surveys. More symmetrical males were found to have become sexually active an average of three to four years earlier than the populace at large, and symmetrical people in general had more past sex partners (Cowley 63). In another study Thornhill and Gangestad surveyed 86 couples and found that women with highly symmetrical partners were twice as likely to climax during sex – an experience that has been proven to increase the chances of pregnancy by significantly increasing the amount of sperm that is retained, helping sperm to the uterus ("Orgasm Wars"). And a University of Michigan Study of 100 students found that over a two-month period the least symmetrical individuals had the most physical ailments and more feelings of anger, jealousy, and withdrawal. Science has touched on this subject as far back as the late 1800s, when English dilettante scientist and cousin of Charles Darwin Sir Francis Galton conducted a study where by he would create blurry combination faces of multiple people. The only particulars to be drawn from his faces were that they were better looking than most people (Lemley 45). Blurring the

faces together averaged the outcome face, which produced the result of greater symmetry.

Psychologist Judith Langlois of the University of Texas at Austin tested Galton's premise by using computer software to meld faces together which were then shown to 300 people, who judged them more beautiful than most of the images used to produce them. Langlois hypothesizes that "Human beings may be born cognitive averagers" (45). Thornhill, Gangestad, Møller and others through independent studies all conclude what biologists have known for years: that, given ideal growing conditions animals' paired features would match up the left side with their right one perfectly. However, this is never the case in reality, as all manner of environmental conflicts arise, meaning that the more symmetrical an individual is the less the individual is swayed by his or her harsh environment for myriad reasons and the more likely the individual's genes are suited to said environment. The idea that beauty is an innate propensity from the human genome is the obvious front-runner when trying to explain our love for symmetry.

Through dissimilar aptitudes of the past, natural selection has designed what many have deemed impossible: a universal language for humans to communicate sexual attraction. Some of the terms of this language may seem archaic in a contemporary western society that considers everyone to be created equal, but physical beauty standards are too uniform to ignore, and what they suggest is clear: beauty is a message aiding survival.

Works Cited

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