

The Daily Runway:

The Origin of “Beauty” and the Struggles to Achieve It

Hikari Murayama

May 2012

Global Citizenship Certificate Candidate

I roll onto my side, making my old bed frame squeak, and pull the bed sheets over my eyes to shield them from the morning rays that began to shine through my incompetent window shades. I close my eyes and begin to slip into slumber, until my 6:45 alarm starts beeping merrily, forcing me to crawl out of bed to turn it off. I rub my eyes and look around my room that screams about the remnants of my girly childhood. My room is strewn with stuffed animals, pink colored items, and flowery decorations. An American Girl sits at the foot of my bed, while several posters of ballerinas are plastered on the wall. The five year old me dreamt of going to ballet classes and twirled around in my living room while singing ballet music.

Although my mother might classify me as a tomboy, she would say that I still do “girly girly” things. I go to ballet 6 days a week, I like baking, and I do enjoy dressing nicely. I like reading Japanese fashion magazines, and sometimes I end up trying to mimic the outfits that I see in them. But when I flip to the back to the magazines, I am appalled to see ads upon ads for plastic surgery.

That’s one thing that helps me get up in the morning; the beautiful pictures of models sit in the back of my brain as if they were last night's nightmare. Before I roll out of bed, when I’m still half asleep, I think about the numerous things I have to do before I step out of the front door. I have to wash my face, apply lotion, brush my teeth, brush my hair, change into some clothes, put in contacts, put on make-up, do my hair... all in preparation for my encounters with the people outside of my home. First impressions are key, even from day to day. If I don’t look my best one day, a friend might ask, “What’s wrong are you okay? Did you not sleep well? You look tired”. When in reality, you may have just woken up 15 minutes late and didn’t have time to go through your whole morning routine.

Boys often complain about how girls take so long to get ready, my father being one of them. Sometimes if I forget to turn on my alarm, he will wake me up 20 minutes before we have to leave. That might be enough for him to finish his morning routine (wash his face, brush his teeth, brush his hair, maybe shave), but not enough for me. I'm still clambering to put on socks and brush my hair when he calls from the open garage that it's time to leave. Prom preparations are also a good example. While I took 3 hours to do everything I needed to do last year, my date probably took around 30 minutes to prepare. Yes, I did feel more confident when I walked out the door with my dark blue dress and perfectly curled hair, but it makes me jealous that the opposite gender does not go through great pains to improve their appearance. I strive to look the best I can in the time span that I have, daily. Sure, I have lazy days and bad hair days, but that doesn't stop me from trying. I work to make my eyes look bigger with eyeliner, my skin flawless with tedious skin care, my waist thinner by limiting consumption. I feel as if the awareness of "natural selection" makes me want to look better in order to make me feel better about myself as well as to make sure that others will look at me and not turn away in disgust. It's an arms race to see who can win the game of sexual selection. The games played a little differently in each section of the globe... but the general rules remain the same.

Although the basis behind beauty may seem to be just a culturally influenced phenomenon, psychologists and anthropologists argue otherwise. Psychologists Anthony Little and David Perrett argue that if different people from different cultures are able to agree upon what faces are attractive and what faces are not, there must be a similar criteria that most humans naturally follow. Plato wrote of "golden proportions" in order to try to make sense of the thought of a fundamental tendency (1). According to Kendra Schmid of the University of Nebraska Medical

Center, the golden ratio between the length and width of the face is 1.6; Only the stunning Cindy Crawford and Helen of Troy, a woman from ancient Greece known for her physical perfection, seem to fit this ratio (4).

Today, symmetry between the left and right sides of the face is thought to be the most attractive to the human eye (1). Not only is this tendency found in humans, but it is also found in animals as well, showing that it is a natural inclination and not something that humans have adapted through their cultures. Even infants seem to share this notion. In an experiment, Judith Langlois of the University of Texas, Austin placed pictures of different women's faces in front of 3 to 6 month old babies and found that the babies looked at the "attractive" women's faces significantly longer than that of the more "unattractive" counterparts. She says that even though they have never been under the influence of the media, they "make the same judgements as adults" (3).

With this facial symmetry, potential mates are displaying a mate value, showing their strong immune systems and developmental stability (1). Biologists have long used bilateral symmetry with components such as wings, eyes, and ears in order to figure out ideal growing conditions. Factors such as pollution, disease, and in general, genetic mutations, cause animals to become asymmetrical (3). Not only do the lucky animals find mates more quickly and reproduce, they are more likely to survive and are more desirable to produce strong offspring. These beautiful ones have the means to "buy" the biologically expensive beauty, unlike their uglier counterparts who are using their immune system to sustain their health, rather than their physical appearance.

Everytime I whip out an eyeliner pencil, I have to carefully draw the black lines to make my eyes look identical. Although this isn't naturally part of my attributes, I can use these lines to

make my eyes have the same shape and size. I have one eyelid that sometimes slips into a double eyelid, depending on how tired my eyes are, while the other is always a monolid. I even have double eyelid glue, a popular item used by girls in Japan, given to me by a friend, stocked in the back of drawer in case of emergencies. By making sure that my eyes are identical looking, I look more awake and less as if I just woken up or have an allergy attack.

Biological proportions are also key to the beauty of an individual... especially in women. In addition to the symmetry in her two sides, her curves are also a stamp of biological premium quality, signifying her internal health. During puberty, a female gains at average of 35 pounds of adipose tissue or reproductive fat on her hips and thigh areas. This fat is essential for sustaining the fetus during the nine-month pregnancy, containing about 80,000 calories for that sole purpose (3). Healthy, fertile women have an average WHR, waist-to-hip ratios, of about .7. Meaning, there is more tissue on the hips and derriere than on the stomach area (1). With this proportion, which can be seen from a distance, a woman is more likely to be healthy and be able to produce a thriving family. However, women who have higher WHRs, meaning more fat deposits on the stomach rather than the lower region, are more likely to suffer from an illness (1). A 1993 study in the Netherlands discovered that even a slight increase in this delicate ratio can signal reproductive problems (3), confirming that health is closely related to what measuring instruments perceive as beautiful.

From these studies, it seems that primitive sexual selection is still playing a key role in our urge to find the perfect mate. However, you could question whether we really can just “eyeball” these ratios and symmetries. Does a man lifting weights across the room from a woman on a treadmill really know that the woman really has the .7 WHR? Can he tell that her eyebrows are not “twins” and that one arches slightly more to the outside? Can he tell that her

left ear is slightly longer than her right from that far away? It's odd how we are able to tell what's attractive without rulers and pencils in hand, but studies have shown there really is an importance in symmetry. Victor Johnson of the New Mexico State University uses an application called FacePrints in order to merge faces of almost symmetrical appearances in order to create the "perfect face". He asked his subjects to rate each face 1 to 10 (1). Schmid claims that most faces would average from a 4 to a 6 (4). Only the merged photographs received tens in the experiment.

Yet, its not as clear cut as the biological world makes it seem to be. Yes, symmetry is an important basis in any culture's beauty standards. Yes, prettier people might be healthier. But so what? What makes the weight lifting man get up and go talk to the lady on the treadmill? He isn't likely to be holding a ruler... what else is he looking for? What does the woman on the elliptical think of the woman on the treadmill? What is she looking for? Why has this scene, a man judging a woman, a woman judging a woman, become so typical in today's society?

The semi-dark room, full of students grade 9 through 12 groaned, impatiently texted, and whispered to their neighbors as history teacher Mr. Scott announced the day's assembly, the continuation of the movie *Missrepresentation*. Then it became utterly silent when the lights turned completely off inside the crowded Mary E. Wilson Auditorium at the Head-Royce School. The techies fidgeted with the lights and sound for a bit as people shifted in their seats, causing a squeak to resonate through the bleachers. I was scared about how people were approaching the movie. Did everyone think it was angry? Were the boys even listening? I had

heard some talk of sleeping through the movie, but I was glad that the auditorium was silent as the movie picked up from where we had left off.

During the previous assembly, members of the Women's literature film class introduced this movie, which was written and directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom. Working tirelessly as an advocate for women, girls, and families, Newsom aimed to expose the realities of how mainstream media continues to under represent women in positions of power throughout the U.S. From the start, I was intrigued to see how she would tie in history, the culture today, and various well known women's voices to create a story that would create a lasting effect on the audience.

One of the most important woman I heard about in the movie was not actual woman, but a character devised to inspire women. Rosie the Riveter literally riveted women to take up jobs in factories to make up for the lacking workforce, due to the absence of men. It is known to be the most successful recruitment advertising done in history, bringing two million women out of their comfort zone, the home bubble, and into the outside world (10). The women worked in factories that made the essential weapons for war as well as in places that normally only men would hold. By the end of the war, most women had their hearts set on staying with their jobs. Then the men came home. Women quit, got laid off and most of them ultimately headed home to fulfil their previous duties of just being a "housewife". The post-war atmosphere involved the re-institution of traditional gender roles and the "retour au foyer" (return to the home) (11).

Compared to the war years, the home is a place of calm and stability, which the women serve as the guardians of. She wakes up first in the morning, taking time to pamper herself to make herself presentable, make breakfast for her husband and kids, and send them off to school. And during the time she has the house to herself and cleans the house spotless, goes grocery shopping, maybe watches some TV, or hangs out with some of her girl friends. When everyone

comes home, she cooks dinner, cleans up; gets the kids to do their homework and gets them to sleep. This scene is still typical in the Japanese culture.

She would also probably flip through some magazines in her spare time, as a lot of women do so today. However in the post-war era of the 1940s to 1960s, most media sources encouraged women to embrace their true nature of being a mother or a housewife (11). Ann Oakley, a British sociologist of the Social Science Research Unit at the Institute of Education, University of London, in her book, Housewife, argues that by the traditional women's magazines role was established by the 1950s. The magazines enabled the woman to "make contact with her ideal self: the self which aspires to be a good wife, a good mother, and an efficient home maker... women's expected role in society [was] to strive after perfection in all three roles" (64 12). Companies like Moulinex in France began developing more and more household appliances and produced countless ads geared towards the housewives. As a result they were able to increase their revenue from 1 billion francs to 2 billion in a course of ten years. In order to really touch upon the woman's desire to achieve the "ideal" woman, the market researchers found that by making a woman feel insecure and guilty about herself, she would be more susceptible to ads when she flipped through her monthly magazine (65 12). Advertisers guilt tripped housewives to buy products to eliminate hidden dirt, promised achievement in household chores with the new product, made the woman understand that if she used the product she too could be considered a guru in her field (65 12).

However, when women started to escape from the home bubble through the women's movement, the world economy started losing a valuable consumer group. The working woman no longer had leisurely time to go shopping, gossip about clothes with friends, or research about various household appliances. So, by applying the same technique of poking at the guilt

conscience, the market was able to create a flame of a problem that wasn't necessarily a problem before. With the age of high fashion ending in the 1960s, the fashion industry was brought to the greater population. The number of diet articles in women's magazines rose 70% from 1968 to 1972 (67 12), changing the focus from household woes and clothes to something that even the working woman could lug around with her to all the meetings she attended: her body. The attention was stripped down from how the woman did her chores with what products to a new, made-up problem of the woman's body itself.

As a modern day woman, I'm eager to see the pages and pages of shiny photos of models plastered with make-up in cute outfits holding cute bags. Although I am still eager to see these and mimic them, I was even more so when I was in Japan, where outside appearances are a large factor in how people approach you. The magazine is a way of life in a nutshell... a monthly, mainstream book that millions of women read monthly to ensure their success in receiving compliments. It's something I flip through every so often, see it, and push all the things absorbed into the back of my head... unless there's something gripping about a pair of shoes, a bag, or an article about a change in a celebrity.

Sometimes when I walk to my ballet school from the Bart station, I stop by a Walgreens to pick up a snack. I briskly walk in, shivering and slightly damp from the San Francisco fog and go directly to the fresh produce area. Depending on the day I might pick up some juice, a packet of fruit, or a Clif bar. I carry the goodies in my arm, my large ballet bag slung onto one shoulder, and stand in line, tapping my foot and checking the time to make sure I'm not late for my 5:00 class. But what always gets me are the things lined up next to the cash register. No, I am not

talking about the candy that may be tempting from time to time. Nor am I talking about the cigarettes in the glass cases with their lofty air, or the contraceptives that are in reach of a small child. Its those OK! and People magazines with the “X lost 15 pounds?” or “Madonna and her wrinkles” or the endless headlines of Justin Bieber or famous couples. Or the headlines with “Did she get something done?”

“Something” can be anything from her nose, her jawbone, her boobs... it could even be the complete reconstruction of her appearance. These nosey articles may show before and after pictures, circling the suspected areas of surgery in bright red, with additional commentaries from plastic surgeons on what might have occurred behind the closed doors, with people clad all in mint green plastic saying the occasional “knife” or “pump”.

I’ve tried to imagine myself going through the surgeries when my desire for double eyelids or a slimmer jaw became too much for me to bear. I would probably sign some liability forms... step into a paper robe, with a stylish plastic beret on top. The doctor would talk about the procedure one more time before I was put into a drowsy stance, only waking up groggily to pain and mummified with bandages. The mint green colors, the smell of disinfectant, and the multiple assurances by the doctor with a certificate on the wall would have a calming effect. I would be able to tell myself over and over again that this surgery would be successful. But then I’d snap back into reality... reminding myself that it was against my values. Yet, then I think, what if people don’t have the means to pay for these reliable surgeries? Would I actually know if the doctor or hospital is really qualified?

Sometimes cosmetic surgeries don’t happen in a hospital. Clifford Coonan, a correspondent of The Independent in China, witnessed one of these in a hair salon. In the seat beside him, a man, who was clearly not a doctor, was conducting an eye tuck surgery on a young

woman (5). In Beijing, many beauty salons seem to be offering these beautification procedures for a fraction of the price of a hospital rate. Even hospitals do not seem to be trustworthy. Out of 11 hospitals in Beijing that were inspected in 2010, not even half of them were fully qualified to offer cosmetic surgery and did not meet the national standards (8).

Mao Xiaowei, China's vice health minister, thinks of the plastic surgery industry as a "disaster zone", where frequent and numerous accidents occur. Wang Bei, a 24-year old who was on her way to become a pop star via the show Supergirl (a show similar to American Idol), died during a routine plastic surgery. In order to raise her chances of winning the competition, she had undergone cosmetic surgery before to become closer to the beauty ideal. However a doctor had punctured one of her blood vessels during the first procedure, and she never recovered (5).

Although many women may hear these scary stories, most will brush these off and will take the risk. As the doctor was drawing arches on top of Chang Hyang-sook's, a makeup artist for South Korea, eyelids in blue pin, she said, "Never mind the pain. I can take it" (9). Doctors in Korea say that most of their patients are women in their 20s and 30s entering the marriage and job markets. Some patients have claimed their new beauty has greatly contributed to their success. Others, who have not been as lucky with unsuccessful and deformative surgeries, either go back to try to fix what a previous doctor had done... or attempt to leave this world forever (9).

Some sociologists claim that there is a "halo effect" for prettier people. These attractive people seem to be more socially adept, popular, and more intellectual (1). Even though our mothers have told us "not to judge books by their covers", there is a tendency to try to hypothesize about the person who might be standing in front of us, whether it's a stranger on the train or a new person a friend is introducing to you. From movies (that our mothers allowed us to

watch), we were fed to believe that good people are pretty, while the evil are ugly. Elliot Aronson, a social psychologist at Stanford University, argues that armed with their beauty, pretty people are more confident and outgoing and are therefore one step ahead of the ugly crowd, who tend to be more shy and timid (1).

When I was young I was teased about my school lunches. I would zip open my conventional American lunchbox, made out of a cushioned plastic material for insulation, and would pull out my Hello Kitty lunch box, complete with matching chopsticks. I would open up the top box of my stacked box lunch, and would open it to find 2 rice balls wrapped in seaweed nestled inside. “Ew, what’s that black stuff wrapped around your food?” “Yuck, is that mold?” “Are you eating that stuff from the ocean?” “It smells funny. Get away from me.” I would stare in shame at my lunch boxes and some days I would beg my mom, who woke up earlier than the rest of the house in order to make 3 bento boxes, to let me buy school lunches. I would sit at the long lunch tables with my class, happily eating a greasy cheeseburger full of chemicals and drinking a chocolate milk taken from caged cows. The absurdity of my pleas astounds me as I look back.

Similarly, American parents are pushing their young sons and daughters to undergo plastic surgery in order to minimize teasing. Bullied and teased by his friends, similar to how I was teased about my school lunches, Michael Laudisio of New York, 22, had his ears pinned at the age of 10. His ears were so large and protruded outward that he was constantly made fun of. Although he was not fully able to understand the concept at that young age, he says that the family decision “made him free” (6). Furthermore, adolescents in their teens seem to be pressuring their parents to allow them to go under the scalpel. Before realizing the consequences and permanent nature of surgery, teens beg for cosmetic renovation for a social push upwards.

As I've mentioned before, social pressures are one of the main reasons for a desire to change oneself. Whether it be the bullies on the playground, the woman at the office who gives you a disgusted look at you when you walk in every morning, or the billboard you drive past every morning, everyone wants to be liked by others and accepted. To be pleasing to the eye has its effects on the potential suitor or potential boss.

Not only are women trying to impress the opposite sex by trying to be like the BMI 17 models with clothes much too expensive for the average Joe, they are also trying to impress other women. As *Missrepresentation* clearly expressed in its 90 minutes, sometimes women are the worst critics of their gender. My mother and I are culprits of this habit. Because I speak Japanese fluently, and since it's the only language I speak with my mother, we often speak it in public. We might be sitting at a restaurant enjoying a meal when my mom says, "Look at that lady over there". From there, my mom may start laughing about the woman we are observing and I cannot help giggling as well. What led her to put on the matching upper and bottom bright pink Juicy sweat suit? Why had she decided to top it all off with ridiculous eyelashes?

I myself have felt the pressures to be considered "pretty" in society's standards. From my freshman year in high school, like all other girls, I started to wake up to my outward appearance, begging my mother to buy me makeup or the same type of shoes everyone else was wearing.

It was even more astonishing when I found myself in a completely different environment when I spent a year abroad in Japan. With most everyone having the same ethnicity, there is more room to be nitpicky about each feature of a girl you see. My seeming Japanese home, did not seem to coincide with the real Japanese culture as theirs. On the first day at my new school, a girl asked, "Are you hapa?" I stared at her with a puzzled look. A hapa is an individual who is only half Japanese. Apparently my identity screamed "not Japanese". My hair was voluminous

and curly, while everyone else had straight, sleek, black hair. I stood 160 cm tall, a full 5 cm above the Japanese average. I was tan as the average "gal", a type of Japanese girl rebel, all thanks to the California sun. I could probably never achieve the normal Japanese stereotype of pure, white skin. In short, the world I thought I belonged to my entire life did not want to accept me as one of their own. And the world back in the U.S. didn't fully accept me either. I was either too American or too Japanese.

Most girls say they keep this acceptable outward appearance to attract boys. In Japan, boy and girl interactions don't kick off without the participants having an acceptable outward appearance. The ideal girl, as I have stated before, is shy in front of the opposite sex. So in order to even start an acquaintance, she has to be approachable. And men, being awkward and shy as the timid Asian stereotype suggests, would be afraid to approach something or someone that is unfamiliar from anything they've known. Therefore, it is advantageous for a girl to fit into the stereotype in order to be successful in the "dating game". Fitting in is just a requirement for social status. This phenomenon is even demonstrated by how most schools have uniforms. If you stand out too much, nothing good will come of it. People will ostracize you and whisper behind your back. They'll call you things like "Busu" (ugly) and "Aho" (stupid). You could even be a victim to bullying, which is a common cause for suicide in Japan. As a result, Japan can be dubbed as a highly judgmental country that bases most of its ideas off of the outward appearance of something and jump to conclusions from there. And to escape these unwanted criticisms, a girl has to lie low and blend with everyone else. But it doesn't happen just in Japan... it happens everywhere. Using the media as a basis, we use this to ostracize others, in order to try to make ourselves look more beautiful and try to boost our own confidence.

In my Environmental Philosophy class, our teacher introduced us to the artist Andy Goldsworthy. He goes into the wild in order to utilize its beauty to make something of his own; allowing himself to be immersed in it and acting as a translator for the rest of the world. He wants to show that that's where he wants to be, where he should be, and how he wants to stay connected to nature. Even as the class drifted off topic, my mind remained on Goldsworthy's artwork. In the same way, we want to make sure we're still in our bodies, making sure to know what it looks like, knowing our limits. He only utilized the things he found in nature, put his own twist on it to make it something others may be able to understand and enjoy. I think Goldsworthy's philosophy of the way to make artwork can also be applied to beautification. We can encounter what we have and observe it, pull a few weeds, move a few rocks to make a bridge across the creek, or pick a fruit off of the tree. Similarly, we can paint our fingernails, shape our eyebrows, or put on a cute shirt to conform to a socially acceptable level of beauty. However, he would argue that a total demolition and landscaping of a plot of land would destroy its beauty and would never allow for its natural radiance to shine out again. And I agree.

Bibliography:

1. Feng, Charles. "Looking Good: The Psychology and Biology of Beauty." *Journal of Young Investigators*. The National Science Foundation, The Burroughs Wellcome Fund, Glaxo Wellcome Inc., Science Magazine, Swarthmore College, Duke University, Georgetown University, Dec. 2002. Web. 13 Mar. 2012.
<<http://www.jyi.org/volumes/volume6/issue6/features/feng.html>>.
2. Little, Anthony, and David Perrett. "Putting beauty back in the eye of the beholder." *The Psychologist* 15.1 (2002): 28-32. *The Psychologist*. Web. 13 Mar. 2012.
<http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive_home.cfm/volumeID_15-editionID_76-ArticleID_352-getfile_getPDF/thepsychologist%5Clittle.pdf>.
3. Newsweek, and The Daily Beast. "The Biology Of Beauty." *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast, 2 June 1996. Web. 13 Mar. 2012.
<<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/1996/06/02/the-biology-of-beauty.html>>.
4. The Oprah Winfrey Show. "5 Elements of Attractiveness." *Oprah*. N.p., 14 Aug. 2009. Web. 13 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.oprah.com/relationships/5-Elements-of-Attractiveness-The-Science-of-Sex-Appeal/3>>.
5. Coonan, Clifford. "Wang Bei, the tragic face of China's craze for plastic surgery." *The Independent*. The Independent, 26 Nov. 2010. Web. 28 May 2012.
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/wang-bei-the-tragic-face-of-chinas-craze-for-plastic-surgery-2143889.html>>.
6. Sweeney, Camille. "Seeking Self-Esteem Through Surgery." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 15 Jan. 2009. Web. 18 Mar. 2012.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/fashion/15skin.html?pagewanted=all>>.
7. Dolnick, Sam. "Ethnic Differences Emerge in Plastic Surgery." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 18 Feb. 2011. Web. 18 Mar. 2012.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/19/nyregion/19plastic.html?pagewanted=all>>.
8. LaFraniere, Sharon. "For Many Chinese, New Wealth and a Fresh Face." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 23 Apr. 2011. Web. 18 Mar. 2012.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/world/asia/24beijing.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=for%20many%20chinese,%20new%20wealth&st=cse>.
9. Sang-Hun, Choe. "In South Korea, Plastic Surgery Comes Out of the Closet." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 3 Nov. 2011. Web. 19 Mar. 2012.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/04/world/asia/in-south-korea-plastic-surgery-comes-out-of-the-closet.html?pagewanted=all>>.

10. Ad Council. "Women in War Jobs - Rosie the Riveter." *Ad Council*. Ad Council, 2011. Web. 22 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.adcouncil.org/Our-Work/The-Classics/Women-in-War-Jobs-Rosie-the-Riveter>>.
11. McNeill, Tony. "Women in Postwar France: The Domestic Ideal." *University of Sunderland*. University of Sunderland, 12 Mar. 1998. Web. 26 Mar. 2012. <<http://seacoast.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0tmc/contem/women.htm>>.
12. Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*. New York: William and Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991. Print.