

The Beauty Industry, Aldous Leonard Huxley

The Beauty Industry

The one American industry unaffected by the general depression of trade is the beauty industry. American women continue to spend on their faces and bodies as much as they spent before the coming of the slump—about three million pounds a week. These facts and figures are 'official,' and can be accepted as being substantially true. Reading them, I was only surprised by the comparative smallness of the sums expended. From the prodigious number of advertisements of aids to beauty contained in the American magazines, I had imagined that the personal appearance business must stand high up among the champions of American industry—the equal, or only just less than the equal, of bootlegging and racketeering, movies and automobiles. Still, one hundred and fifty-six million pounds a year is a tidy sum. Rather more than twice the revenue of India, if I remember rightly.

I do not know what the European figures are. Much smaller, undoubtedly. Europe is poor, and a face can cost as much in upkeep as a Rolls-Royce. The most that the majority of European women can do is just to wash and hope for the best. Perhaps the soap will produce its loudly advertised effects; perhaps it will transform them into the likeness of those ravishing creatures who smile so rosily and creamily, so peachily and pearlily, from every hoarding. Perhaps, on the other hand, it may not. In any case, the more costly experiments in beautification are still as much beyond most European means as are high-powered motor cars and electric refrigerators. Even in Europe, however, much more is now spent on beauty than was ever spent in the past. Not quite so much more as in America, that is all. But, everywhere, the increase has been undoubtedly enormous.

The fact is significant. To what is it due? In part, I suppose, to a general increase in prosperity. The rich have always cultivated their personal appearance. The diffusion of wealth—such as it is—now permits those of the poor who are less badly off than their fathers to do the same.

But this is, clearly, not the whole story. The modern cult of beauty is not exclusively a function (in the mathematical sense) of wealth. If it were, then the personal appearance industries would have been as hardly hit by the trade depression as any other business. But, as we have seen, they have not suffered. Women are retrenching on other things than their faces. The cult of beauty must therefore be symptomatic of changes that have taken place outside the economic sphere. Of what changes? Of the changes, I suggest, in the status of women; of the changes in our attitude towards 'the merely physical.'

Women, it is obvious, are freer than in the past. Freer not only to perform the generally unenviable social functions hitherto reserved to the male, but also freer to exercise the more pleasing, feminine privilege of being attractive. They have the right, if not to be less virtuous than their grandmothers, at any rate to look less virtuous. The British Matron, not long since a creature of austere and even terrifying aspect, now does her best to achieve and perennially preserve the appearance of what her predecessor would have described as a Lost Woman. She often succeeds. But we are not shocked—at any rate, not morally shocked. Aesthetically shocked—yes; we may sometimes be that. But morally, no.

We concede that the Matron is morally justified in being preoccupied with her personal appearance. This concession depends on another of a more general nature—a concession to the Body, with a large B, to the Manichaeian principle of evil. For we have now come to admit that the body has its rights. And not only rights—duties, actually duties. It has, for example, a duty to do the best it can for itself in the way of strength and beauty. Christian-ascetic ideas no longer trouble us. We demand justice for the body as well as for the soul. Hence, among other things, the fortunes made by face-cream manufacturers and beauty-specialists, by the vendors of rubber reducing-belts and massage machines, by

the patentees of hair-lotions and the authors of books on the culture of the abdomen.

What are the practical results of this modern cult of beauty? The exercises and the massage, the health motors and the skin foods—to what have they led? Are women more beautiful than they were? Do they get something for the enormous expenditure of energy, time, and money demanded of them by the beauty-cult? These are questions which it is difficult to answer. For the facts seem to contradict themselves. The campaign for more physical beauty seems to be both a tremendous success and a lamentable failure. It depends how you look at the results.

It is a success in so far as more women retain their youthful appearance to a greater age than in the past. 'Old ladies' are already becoming rare. In a few years, we may well believe, they will be extinct. White hair and wrinkles, a bent back and hollow cheeks will come to be regarded as mediaevally old-fashioned. The crone of the future will be golden, curly and cherry-lipped, neat-ankled and slender. The Portrait of the Artist's Mother will come to be almost indistinguishable, at future picture shows, from the Portrait of the Artist's Daughter. This desirable consummation will be due in part to skin foods and injections of paraffin-wax, facial surgery, mud baths, and paint, in part to improved health, due in its turn to a more rational mode of life. Ugliness is one of the symptoms of disease, beauty of health. In so far as the campaign for more beauty is also a campaign for more health, it is admirable and, up to a point, genuinely successful.

Beauty that is merely the artificial shadow of these symptoms of health is intrinsically of poorer quality than the genuine article. Still, it is a sufficiently good imitation to be sometimes mistakable for the real thing. The apparatus for mimicking the symptoms of health is now within the reach of every moderately prosperous person; the knowledge of the way in which real health can be achieved is growing, and will in time, no doubt, be universally acted upon. When that happy moment comes, will every woman be beautiful—as beautiful, at any rate, as the natural shape of her features, with or without surgical and chemical aid, permits?

The answer is emphatically: No. For real beauty is as much an affair of the inner as of the outer self. The beauty of a porcelain jar is a matter of shape, of colour, of surface texture. The jar may be empty or tenanted by spiders, full of honey or stinking slime—it makes no difference to its beauty or ugliness. But a woman is alive, and her beauty is therefore not skin deep. The surface of the human vessel is affected by the nature of its spiritual contents. I have seen women who, by the standards of a connoisseur of porcelain, were ravishingly lovely. Their shape, their colour, their surface texture were perfect. And yet they were not beautiful. For the lovely vase was either empty or filled with some corruption. Spiritual emptiness or ugliness shows through. And conversely, there is an interior light that can transfigure forms that the pure aesthete would regard as imperfect or downright ugly.

There are numerous forms of psychological ugliness. There is an ugliness of stupidity, for example, of unawareness (distressingly common among pretty women). An ugliness also of greed, of lasciviousness, of avarice. All the deadly sins, indeed, have their own peculiar negation of beauty. On the pretty faces of those especially who are trying to have a continuous 'good time,' one sees very often a kind of bored sullenness that ruins all their charm. I remember in particular two young American girls I once met in North Africa. From the porcelain specialist's point of view, they were beautiful. But the sullen boredom of which I have spoken was so deeply stamped into their fresh faces, their gait and gestures expressed so weary a listlessness, that it was unbearable to look at them. These exquisite creatures were positively repulsive.

Still commoner and no less repellent is the hardness which spoils so many pretty faces. Often, it is true, this air of hardness is due not to psychological causes, but to the contemporary habit of overpainting. In Paris, where this

overpainting is most pronounced, many women have ceased to look human at all. Whitewashed and ruddled, they seem to be wearing masks. One must look closely to discover the soft and living face beneath. But often the face is not soft, often it turns out to be imperfectly alive. The hardness and deadness are from within. They are the outward and visible signs of some emotional or instinctive disharmony, accepted as a chronic condition of being. We do not need a Freudian to tell us that this disharmony is often of a sexual nature.

So long as such disharmonies continue to exist, so long as there is good reason for sullen boredom, so long as human beings allow themselves to be possessed and hag-ridden by monomaniacal vices, the cult of beauty is destined to be ineffectual. Successful in prolonging the appearance of youth, of realizing or simulating the symptoms of health, the campaign inspired by this cult remains fundamentally a failure. Its operations do not touch the deepest source of beauty—the experiencing soul. It is not by improving skin foods and point rollers, by cheapening health motors and electrical hair removers, that the human race will be made beautiful; it is not even by improving health. All men and women will be beautiful only when the social arrangements give to every one of them an opportunity to live completely and harmoniously, when there is no environmental incentive and no hereditary tendency towards monomaniacal vice. In other words, all men and women will never be beautiful. But there might easily be fewer ugly human beings in the world than there are at present. We must be content with moderate hopes.

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