

The Art of Appearance: The Concept and Implications of Cosmetics in the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

A study of an excerpt from *Letters to the Ladies, on the Preservation of Health and Beauty. By a physician*, (1770), and a *boîte à mouches*, (c. 1750-1755), to explore how, in the eighteenth century, achieving beauty became a preoccupation in itself. Its importance is focused on by exploring the effort – and dangers – taken in its achievement. The article will also use the artefacts to assess the language of appearance, in terms of status and intention. It will demonstrate that 'beauty' became such a preoccupation that some even gave their lives in its name.

The eighteenth century marked the dawn of an era in which looks and fashions became as important as birth.¹ It was a period when 'getting ready' became about far more than simply putting on clothes and looking presentable; it was a time when looks – and the process of achieving those looks – became crucial. The 'beau monde', synonymously known as the 'haute ton', came to characterise London's elite society, and the importance placed on beauty, as made evident in the group's French name, reflected and encouraged its necessity. This article will examine two artefacts, one of instruction and one of use, to examine and demonstrate the importance placed on good looks. It will also bring in further sources to demonstrate the efforts taken to achieve beauty, as well as critiques of doing so, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the concept of achieving beauty and the ways in which such activities were regarded. Interestingly, the instruments used to achieve the highest 'physical' state often caused far more contention than pleasure, and they were much more dangerous than they were necessary. The two artefacts focused on in this article will touch upon these facets, whilst allowing the reader to understand at first hand why the value of cosmetics became widespread, and how even the instruments used were designed accordingly.

The first artefact to be examined is a letter from a work published in 1770 entitled *Letters to the ladies, on the preservation of health and beauty. By a physician*. It is a handbook dedicated to the importance of looking one's best, and contains numerous recipes enabling one to do so. Its purpose in itself suggests the efforts women were willing to make in order to enhance their looks, whilst acting as an example of why they believed that it was necessary to do so. Such is immediately evident in the work's title, which relates and prioritises 'health and beauty'. Such a connection suggests that they are of equal importance, immediately allowing the reader to infer the necessity of being beautiful. Indeed, *Letters* profoundly demonstrates the importance of appearances, opening with 'As beauty is the most amiable of all personal endowments...it will ever command the attention of the elegant and refined part of mankind'.² It specifies the context in which readers understood beauty, as both a gift and an objective. It was written at the height of the eighteenth century, in a world where beauty had grown into a quality necessary for elite social standing, alongside birth and culture.³

¹ See Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

² *Letters*, p. 12.

³ See Greig, 2013.

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L E T T E R II.

AS beauty is the most amiable of all personal endowments, and the principal object which attracts the affection of the sexes, the improvement and preservation of it will ever command the attention of the elegant and refined part of mankind. A life of gaiety conducted with temperance, is less injurious to beauty than a life of austerity. For the agreeable ideas which constantly engage the mind in the former, animate the countenance, and preserve a lively complexion, which is apt to fade by too close an indulgence of serious and abstruse contemplation. The art of improving beauty was so diligently cultivated in ancient Greece, that it was as much the care of parents.

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parents to model the faces of their children to the standard of perfection, as to polish their minds with philosophy. In those happy ages of every human excellence, the delighted mothers might be beheld daily bending the eye-brows of their little offspring into a beautiful arch; while, during the task of parental fondness, the smiling prattlers would exult at the prospect of their future charms, and kiss with filial ardour the hands that were forming them for transport. This is still the practice in many parts of Turkey; but particularly in Circassia. Leaving, however, the form of the face to the bountiful hand of nature, let us turn our thoughts to the complexion, and enquire what are the most proper means to eradicate accidental blemishes from that delicate field where all the Graces delight to play; and how it may best be preserved clear, polished,

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and unspotted. And here, Ladies, let me congratulate you on that auspicious discovery of inoculation, which has, at length, disarmed the most terrible enemy to beauty that ever ravaged the human kind.

One of the most common blemishes of the face is freckles, which are almost peculiar to people who have red hair. The following application is excellent for removing them.

Take of Venice soap, two ounces; dissolve it in an ounce of lemon-juice, to which add of bitter oil of almonds, and deliquiated oil of tartar, each half an ounce. Let the mixture be placed in the sun, till it acquires the consistence of an ointment, shaking it a little daily. Afterwards, add six drops of oil of Rhodium, and keep it for use.

The

Figure 1. An excerpt from 'Letter II', in *Letters to the Ladies, on the Preservation of Health and Beauty*. By a physician (London: Robinson and Roberts, 1770).

The writer continues relating the work to the upper classes, noting that 'The art of improving beauty was so diligently cultivated in ancient Greece'.⁴ This links the art of beauty with the art of culture, thus emphasising its value. The importance of the Classical world was relished during the era, with the Grand Tour opening the eyes of many to the wonders of the ancient world. The inherent social standing implied by one's travel to, and thus appreciation of, the world of antiquity, increased its status in contemporary understanding. Further, the Classical age was regarded as one of 'human excellence' and 'perfection',⁵ and the constant references made towards the time reinforce the importance of beauty.

Somewhat problematically, the work is written by 'anon', which prevents the historian gaining a full understanding of its background. One cannot infer the class, or intentions, of the writer. Was it written by someone of the social standing it alludes to? The reader does suppose that it was written by a 'physician' as suggested in the title, which is interesting in terms of the implicit dangers of using the cosmetics listed in the work. The nature of the author therefore implicitly suggests the importance of makeup, by suggesting its importance in the light of medical dangers. However, whilst physicians were not women, one must wonder whether there is any truth in this suggested authorship. For if it was written by a woman, or user of such cosmetics, it would call for a different interpretation. As will be explored, the use of cosmetics was appreciated in varying ways between the sexes and the classes.

Letter II goes on to demonstrate the efforts required to achieve the predefined concept of beauty. It specifies the importance of complexion, which, as Caroline Palmer explains, was the height of fashion in the Georgian era⁶ and manifested in terms of white paint, rouge and patches to cover any blemishes. It presents the reader with a recipe for the removal of freckles.⁷ The chosen passage only details the first stage of the method, which takes over twenty-four hours to complete and requires at least one more recipe.⁸

⁴ *Letters*, p. 12.

⁵ *Letters*, p. 13.

⁶ See Caroline Palmer, 'Brazen Cheek: Face-Painters in Eighteenth-Century England', *Oxford Art Journal*, 31.2 (2008), pp. 198-213.

⁷ Palmer, p. 14.

⁸ Palmer, p. 15.

Such recipes, it was believed, had the ability to alter a woman's appearance so as to achieve the 'beauty' accepted by social norms. They consequently demonstrate how much effort women went to in order to achieve their looks.



Figure 2. Thomas Rowlandson, 'Six Stages of Mending a Face', 1792.⁹

'Six Stages of Mending a Face', a print by Thomas Rowlandson (1792; see Figure 2), was usefully published at the same time as *Letters*, and so exemplifies this wonderfully. It portrays Lady Sarah Archer emphasising the lengths gone to in order to achieve the perfect appearance, using the six images to demonstrate the lengthy work by allowing them to crowd the image. Her facial expressions are particularly interesting. They initially tell of the struggle and discomfort associated with the *toilette*, and the pride in her smile – found only in the last illustration – stresses the need to look beautiful. One can further compare the first and last illustrations to infer the perceived power of makeup and cosmetics, such as that created by the recipe above. The cartoon allows one to infer the different techniques required in achieving the desired looks, whilst appreciating the way in which every last detail must be accounted for. *Letters*, in its entirety, is one hundred and eighty-eight pages long, reinforcing the extent to which even the most minute details of beauty were approached, and the lengths gone to, in order to rectify them. The cartoon also highlights this article's suggested correlation between status and beauty, its subject linking the importance of beauty to the upper classes. The use of 'mending' in its title suggests that the resulting stage and its beauty was the way one's face ought to look, thus indicating the necessity of beauty.

⁹ Mike Rendell, 'Lady Sarah Archer, facing the Press...', *Georgian Gentleman: The Musings of Richard Hall 1729-1801* <http://mikerendell.com/dedicated-to-lady-archer-the-six-stages-of-mending-a-face/> [Accessed 18 February 2015].

However, it must be noted that it is entirely mocking the routine, suggesting conflicting opinions about cosmetics. It is important to recognise that Lady Archer and her looks were a frequent subject of such contemptuous cartoons, suggesting the attention given to the art of cosmetics and the perceived duplicity in the made-up face.

Turning one's attention back to *Letters*, the recipe also leads one to infer another contentious issue, that of the danger of cosmetics. It calls the reader to use 'oil of tartar',¹⁰ which is known today as the poisonous¹¹ potassium carbonate.¹² Other dangerous ingredients such as 'lead, mercury and arsenic',¹³ were prominent. Indeed, many cosmetics featured harmful substances, so much so that there had been a preventative Act in 1724,¹⁴ nearly fifty years before *Letters* was written, intended to regulate London-based cosmetics. Such a legal step emphasises the widespread use – and danger – of cosmetics.

One cannot infer the dangers of cosmetics from *Letters* alone; indeed one cannot assume that its author knew of the perceived threats of the recipe's ingredients. However, the poison in the ingredients was beginning to become apparent. Maria Gunning, a society beauty, was eventually killed by her extreme use of cosmetics at twenty-seven years old.¹⁵ She died in 1760, ten years before *Letters* was written. It is widely known that her husband had warned her against her prolific use of lead-based cosmetics¹⁶ and, when considered in tandem with the Act of 1724, it becomes apparent that an awareness of such dangers was almost definitely known by 1770 – particularly after such a high profile death. Poignantly, the frequent use of cosmetics despite their danger, reinforces the extreme importance given to looking good: it was worth risking one's life. Its irony is profound when one considers that *Letters* was written by a 'physician'.

The reader has learnt about the importance of cosmetics from such sources as *Letters*, above, and can therefore understand the intrinsic importance of such artefacts, which were necessary to the obligatory 'perfect beauty' of high society ladies. As already discussed, *Letter II* calls for a perfect, 'unspotted' complexion.¹⁷ This article's second artefact, a *boîte à mouches*, or rouge and patch box from 1750-1755,¹⁸ was necessary for achieving such looks.

¹⁰*Letters*, p. 14.

¹¹ The U.S. National Library of Medicine, 'Potassium Carbonate Poisoning', *Medline Plus* <<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002481.htm>> [accessed 15 February 2014].

¹² 'Alchemical and Archaic Chemistry Terms', *The Alchemy Website* <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/al_term2.html> [accessed 18 February 2015].

¹³ Palmer, p. 202.

¹⁴ See Neville Williams, *Powder and Paint: A History of the Englishwoman's Toilet, Elizabeth I– Elizabeth II* (London and New York: Longman, Green, 1957), p. 56.

¹⁵ Cynthia Marsh, 'The Gunning Sisters – A Georgian Cinderella Story', *History Times History* (2011) <<http://historytimeshistory.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/gunning-sisters-georgian-cinderella.html>> [accessed 15 February 2015].

¹⁶ Marsh, [accessed 15 February 2015].

¹⁷ *Letters*, p. 14.

¹⁸ The Metropolitan Museum of Art [accessed 18 February 2015].



Figure 3. An eighteenth-century *boîte à mouches*.¹⁹

Made a mere twenty years before this article's first artefact, the box is a physical manifestation of the instructions and wording in *Letters*, designed to help uphold a woman's perfect complexion. It features three main compartments: one for rouge, another for taffeta patches, and the third for the mirror and brush necessary for applying the makeup. Its practicality is implicit, being small enough to be available for whenever needed and consequently often carried around by its owner.²⁰ Its size and thus portability implies the importance of its contents, which could be required at any given moment.

The box contained rouge, which was a primary aspect of the desired complexion mentioned in *Letters*, and introduces the understanding of makeup as a tool. Interestingly, periodicals valued the prominence of rouge in portraits,²¹ 'as a means of catching husbands, since men were foolish enough to be taken in by it'.²² As objects intended to capture the best of their subjects, the prominence of rouge in paintings can be used to imply its value. Simultaneously, its prominence in portraiture connects it to the upper classes, attributing it a social prestige that will be explored later. However, it was incredibly popular in eighteenth-century England, as demonstrated by the vast amounts being imported.²³

¹⁹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 'Box for rouge and patches', *The Collection Online* <<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/198051?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=patches&pos=2>> [accessed 18 February 2015].

²⁰ 'Patch Box', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/446239/patch-box>> [accessed 18 February 2015].

²¹ See *Letters*.

²² Palmer, p. 202.

²³ *The Flapper*, Vol. 2, 14 January 1797.

The *boîte* was also made to hold patches. These, in particular, were necessary to cover up any blemishes in the skin. Although the box dates slightly earlier, they were prominent from around 1760,²⁴ in an era where many succumbed to smallpox.²⁵ However, they were useful even in the absence of pox marks, or to distract from their original intention when the marks were present. The patches were often used to convey a message, as conveyed in *Figure 4*. One's sexual desires, even political ambitions, could be determined by where one placed the patches on one's skin.²⁶ Their aesthetic potential was enhanced by their availability in heart or star shapes,²⁷ suggesting a frivolous and amusing aspect of covering blemishes.



Figure 4. Modern diagram of the meaning of patches, as understood in the eighteenth century.²⁸

One will note that the descriptions are written in French, reminding one of the widespread influence the French court had over appearances. The box reinforces this concept both in terms of nature and material. Poignantly, this influence can be detected in its design. The French design of Rococo is abundant in the curls of the gold, and the

²⁴ Lucy Inglis, 'Patches, Beauty Spots and What They Mean', *Georgian London* <<http://georgianlondon.com/post/49463394378/patches-beauty-spots-and-what-they-mean>> [accessed 18 February 2015].

²⁵ See Stefan Riedel, 'Edward Jenner and the History of Smallpox and Vaccination', *Baylor Universal Medical Center Proceedings*, Vol. 18, January 2005, pp. 21-25.

²⁶ Rendell [accessed 18 February 2015].

²⁷ Inglis [accessed 18 February 2015].

²⁸ 'Beauty Spots – More than Just a Mark', *This is Versailles* <<http://thisisversaillesmadame.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/beauty-spots-more-than-just-mark.html>> [accessed 18 February 2015].

shell-like quality of the agate;²⁹ the use of gold in such a manner resembles the design schemes of the French court.³⁰ The utensil was even named in French, *boîte à mouches*, and was probably sold in France,³¹ suggesting a symbiotic relationship. This French influence reflects the use of cosmetics in general; many of the English cosmetic fashions, particularly rouge and patches, were influenced by the French.³²

This is particularly troublesome in terms of the struggling Anglo-French relations of the mid-eighteenth century, which is interesting in this case. The context in which the box was made was either just before, or during the Seven Years' War. It is here that one begins to see the influence of the French on English cosmetics. This led to a widespread dislike of rouge, with its French influences conferring on it a nature of moral deterioration.³³ Consequently, such obvious French influences, both in terms of its nature and design, indicate a lack of importance given to politics by the consumers, even though they would have been members of the influential and politically inclined upper classes. Conversely, it could suggest the importance of beauty in its priority over political allegiances.

There was another contentious aspect to the use of makeup. Cosmetics, such as those featured in the *boîte*, symbolised an artificial change to nature in the name of vanity.³⁴ In masking her ugliness and blemishes, as suggested by the Rowlandson cartoon above, a woman could also hide her true nature.³⁵ Makeup allowed women to be appreciated for things they were not, and enticed men under false pretences.³⁶ Lady Archer, pictured in *Figure 3*, was a regular illustration of the duplicitous nature of cosmetics, her over-emphasised ugliness reinforcing the power of cosmetics.

The makeup contained within the *boîte* demonstrates this, and was often understood by such prolific figures as William Hogarth as tools of a corrupt morality in terms of its powers of sexual attraction.³⁷ This made many uncomfortable, as they felt painted faces to be false, often removing any individuality and giving its wearers an air of 'unreadability'.³⁸

Such a criticism was extended by the more comical critique of the practicality of cosmetics. As *The Spectator* wrote, 'a sigh in the languishing lover, if fetched too near, would dissolve a feature; and a kiss snatched by a forward one, might transform the complexion of the mistress to the face of the admirer'.³⁹

Interestingly, by furthering the concept of makeup as a 'mask', one can argue that it had the ability to 'mask' one's true birth and status. The *boîte* is particularly ornate, being decorated with gold and agate.⁴⁰ Fundamentally, this luxury confirms and reinforces the poignancy of cosmetics and suggests its appreciation as valuable. This understanding applies to both the concept of beauty itself, and the cosmetics required to achieve it. Makeup had been inherently connected to the upper classes,⁴¹ and its status as expensive only served to increase its attractiveness. Its value increased one's looks, whilst also commodifying the concept of beauty. It could now be bought. Whilst this was

²⁹ <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/rococo.htm>

³⁰ Colin Gilbert et. al., *The Daily Book of Art: 365 Readings that teach, inspire and entertain* (Irvine: Walter Foster), 2009, p. 90.

³¹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art [accessed 18 February 2015].

³² See Lynn Festa, 'Cosmetic Differences: The Changing Faces of England and France,' in *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, ed. by Catherine Ingrassia and Jeffrey S. Ravel, Vol. 34, 2005.

³³ Palmer, p. 198.

³⁴ Palmer, 2008.

³⁵ Palmer, 2008.

³⁶ See *Letters*.

³⁷ See Palmer.

³⁸ See Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (London: Europa Publications, 1982), pp. 52-66.

³⁹ *The Spectator*, 1711, as quoted in John Liggett, *The Human Face* (London: Constable, 1974), p. 69.

⁴⁰ The Metropolitan Museum of Art [accessed 18 February 2015].

⁴¹ <http://www.nwta.com/Spy/Winter/Makeup.html>

beneficial to those of lower classes, it caused much unease amongst many as suggested elsewhere in this article.

This, together with the 'unreadability' of women's emotions and natural faces, was particularly confusing in a context of social malleability. What was once considered expensive and only accessible to the upper classes could now be consumed by those of a lower status. They were given the opportunity to look expensive. Further, in a climate where beauty was given an increased importance alongside birth and culture, one could now use makeup to climb the social ranks in a manner previously unheard of. Consequently, a critical link between makeup and social climbing developed to coincide with its masking nature. As Palmer explains, this was relatively threatening to men, particularly of upper classes, as the time was one of incredible social and economic movement.⁴² She continues this argument to perhaps unjustifiably suggest that '[m]akeup thus came to be characterised as a socially corrosive force, to be mocked in the same proportion as it was feared.'⁴³ Whilst there is no doubt that cosmetics clouded people's true looks and nature, referring to them as 'socially corrosive' may be particularly extreme language to use.

The eighteenth century introduced the concept of beauty as a prerequisite for ultimate social standing, immediately increasing the value of the objects which helped achieve this. Its power is both demonstrated and emphasised by the artefacts in this article. *Letters* clearly states the importance of beauty, allowing one to understand why cosmetics became so popular. Its recipe, together with the supporting sources, strengthens this by demonstrating the efforts put in to achieve such beauty, despite the known dangers of the process. The *boîte à mouches* allows one to visibly appreciate and connect with the manner in which 'beauty' was achieved, whilst its luxurious nature reinforces the importance of cosmetics as suggested by *Letters*. What was once reliant on birth was now tantalisingly straightforward to achieve. For the first time, there was something achievable that could enhance one's 'natural' being and allow one to rise up the social ranks. Importantly, it was something that was subtle in its obviousness; everyone was wearing it and there was no way to separate the 'real' from the 'false'. Cosmetics were a mask, a mask enabling sexual prowess and social malleability for those not 'deserving'; no one knew who was real. The frequent critiques and fears associated with cosmetics confuse the nature of 'beauty' somewhat. What was intended to attract often had the power to do just the opposite; it even had the power to kill. Whilst this article has merely scratched the surface of the world of cosmetics, it has given the reader a brief, yet broad, insight into its appreciation.

⁴² Palmer, p. 201.

⁴³ Palmer, p. 199.

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