

From Mud to Make-up

'Cosmetics are as old as vanity'

Mankind has been playing around with its image ever since people became self-aware, realising for the first time that the dirt-streaked face staring back at them from pond or river was actually themselves!

With that self-awareness came the thought, 'um, room for improvement', and so the possibility of cosmetics was born. Today the Americans alone spend \$20 billion a year on beauty products. So how did we get from that pre-stone age self awareness to today's cosmos of cosmetics?

Stone age stunners

Red ochre, a red coloured rock, was used by our ancestors for rock-art. A recent find (see *Painted Ladies*, *New Scientist*, 13.10.01) shows we may have used it on our bodies as well. A study of 74 sites in southern Africa, dating from more than 20,000 years ago, reveals an explosion in the use of red ochre and other red pigments about 100,000 years ago.

Of course, not everyone is convinced, but anthropologists are starting to take the idea seriously. People in Papua New Guinea and Brazil's rainforest certainly use a wide range of cosmetics and personal adornments. Ash and charcoal from fire is used to create wild contrasting patterns for special events, like going to war or at a funeral, while plant oils and animal fats are used to make the skin glisten.

Egyptian elegance

From at least 4,000 BC the Egyptians were applying a bright green paste of copper minerals to their faces to provide colour, used perfumed oils, and painted their eyebrows with kohl (a cream made out of sheep's fat and powdered lead, or antimony and soot). The Egyptians even tackled body odour by mashing incense soaked porridge into their armpits!

Far Eastern favourites

In China and Japan in 1500 BC rice powder paint was used to paint faces white. Eyebrows were plucked, and teeth were painted black or gold. Henna dyes were used to stain hair and faces, as well as to trace the skin's veins.

Grecian grace

In Greece in 1,000 BC women and men of the upper classes wore wigs. This was sometimes because they had been using bleaches to lighten their hair, and ended up destroying their hair completely! Their cosmetics were kept in intricate boxes. Rouge reddened the cheeks, and various white powders (white lead and chalk) were used for a fair complexion. Women used ochre, a clay stained red with iron, as lipstick, and painted their palms with henna, a red-brown dye, to make them look younger.

Roman refinement

'A woman without paint is like food without salt'

Not an attitude that a man would express today, but in 100 AD, men would have thought nothing of it. The Romans took bathing seriously, built public baths, and caused themselves no end



From Mud to Make-up

of pain by their attempts at being hair-free. One Roman author who lived near his local baths complained about the noise caused by people yelping while their body hair was being pulled out! The Romans used crocodile excrement for mud baths, barley flour and butter for pimples, and sheep fat and blood for nail polish. Women wore white lead and chalk to lighten their faces, a look that was to last off and on to the present day. Part of the reason for this look was that it demonstrated wealth. Only the wealthy could stay inside and avoid a sun-tan.

Medieval to middle ages

If the fashionable sixth century woman could not afford white make-up, she achieved the same result by bleeding herself! Meanwhile the Egyptians had learnt the art of distillation and were busy extracting the perfumed oils of a wide range of plants. These were used to make strong long-lasting perfumes that were traded throughout the middle-east. It was not until the 13th century that alcohol-based perfumes were available in Western Europe, brought back by Crusaders to apologise that they had gone out with the lads and not got back until very late, several years later! Italian women started to use pink synthetic lipstick at about the same time.

Renaissance look

The dead-white look took on a new meaning thanks to Signora Toffana in Italy. Ms. Toffana made an arsenic based white face paint, Aqua Toffana. The cosmetic container instructed women to visit Ms. Toffana to learn its proper use. During their visit women would be warned never to ingest the makeup, but to apply it to their cheeks when their men were around. Six hundred dead husbands (and many wealthy widows) later, Ms. Toffana was executed.

After an uncertain start during the 14th Century (when cosmetics were thought to be a health threat), make-up was soon back in fashion. Women wore egg whites over their faces to create a glazed look and in Elizabethan England dyed red hair was the fashion. Women also slept with slices of raw beef on their faces to get rid of wrinkles.

Fragrant France

By the 16th century Italy and France became the chief centre of cosmetic manufacture in Europe. The art of creating new fragrances by blending ingredients was developed in France. Essential oils were extracted from plants such as Lavender, which were being mass cultivated for this purpose for the first time. The white look continued to be popular, a 16th century whitening agent for the face was composed of carbonate, hydroxide, and lead oxide. These agents, cumulatively stored in the body with each use, were responsible for numerous physical problems and resulted in some cases of muscle paralysis or death.

Make-up for the masses

By the 18th century increasing wealth and the beginnings of mass production meant that cosmetics were in use by nearly all social classes. Red rouge and lipstick were all the rage in France. The more puritanical protestant countries were slower

Cosmetic culture

With anti-perspirants, hair-dyes, creams, colorants and water-proof make up, the 20th century has been the cosmetics century. Here are a few high-points:

1920s: New chainstores mass market cosmetics

1927: Permanent waving as a chemical method was invented

1930s: Hollywood shows tanned stars reversing the desire for the white-look for the first time in 2000 years!

Max Factor opens salon in Hollywood and introduces pancake make-up

1940s: Aluminium chlorohydrate replaces Aluminium chloride in anti-perspirants, etc. So no more skin irritation and it's still used today.

1950s: Skin tanning aids developed from World War II 'leg make-up'. All because of a shortage of nylon stockings!

Start of TV and TV ads. Procter & Gamble transfer ads for cosmetics and hair products to television.

1960s: Purple lips and Egyptian-style eyeliner, growing popularity of false eyelashes.

1970s: Certain ingredients were banned from use by the industry because of endangered species legislation.

1980s: Ever wider colour range in eye make-up.

Today's Western make-up claims to be a melange of past styles with a new emphasis on the natural look, whatever that is. New products even promise to reduce or prevent male baldness.

From Mud to Make-up

to take up the trend and accused the French of hiding their ugliness behind paint. In the 19th century Zinc oxide replaced lead as a white colorant, but other poisonous substances continued in use. Lip reddeners contained mercuric sulphide and the deadly nerve toxin, belladonna, was added to the eyes to open up the iris 'and make one's eyes sparkle'.

Whatever next?

Partygoers may be wearing lipsticks, nail varnishes and mascaras that change colour from red to gold or violet to green before your very eyes. BASF, the German chemicals giant, has developed colour-variable pigments that look different depending on the angle from which you view them (*New Scientist*, 17.10.98). There may even be calls to reduce perfume production, because of a possible threat from fragrances. Synthesised perfumes have now reached detectable levels in the air we breathe. The compounds build up through the food-chain and accumulate in our bodies, but nobody knows if they are dangerous.

From Mud to Make-up

What you need to do:

Choose one of the assignments below:

History

- Write a history of one type of cosmetic (for example, hair dye). You can use these questions to help you structure your answer. Explain who used it, whether it had any social function, other than making the wearer more beautiful. How was the cosmetic made, who made the cosmetic and how was it distributed. What is the value of the market in this product today? How do you think this product will evolve in the future?
- Write a history of hair-dressing. The oldest known comb was from the stone-age and was carved out of boxwood.

General studies

- Find some recipes for making cosmetics at home and make some.

Business/Media studies

- When advertisers sell cosmetics, what are they really selling? Youth? Beauty? Analyse one major cosmetics manufacturer. How much do they spend on advertising, how do they know if this spend is effective. Analyse their advertising, what is it selling and how.