One of the most memorable episodes of “The Twilight Zone” television series begins as a woman chats with a doctor in a hospital room with her head covered with gauze. This woman has undergone a procedure to make her look normal and she is anxiously waiting to see her face without the bandages. “I never really wanted to be beautiful”, she tells the doctor. “I just wanted people not to scream when they looked at me”... “I want to belong; I want to be like everybody else”.

However, the doctor warns her that because she has undergone so many procedures, it will not be possible to try again. If the procedure proves unsuccessful, she will be sent to a special area where people of her kind have been exiled. The doctor removes the bandages from the final surgery, and he and the nurses are horrified to discover there has been “no change”.

When the woman’s face is revealed to the camera, however, we see that she is beautiful by human standards, but, to our surprise, when the camera turns to reveal the faces of doctors and nurses, we see that they are hideously deformed. The message is clear: Beauty is in the “Eye of the Beholder”.

Throughout history, people in every culture have sought to change the natural appearance of their bodies. They reshape and sculpt their bodies and adorn them with paint, cosmetics, clothing, and jewelry. These customs, however, are diverse and particular to a culture at a specific period of time.

The diversity of body costumes has led anthropologists (e.g., Douglas 1970; Strathern 1996) to conclude that a body is both a physical and a symbolic artifact, forged by nature and by culture at a particular moment in history (Sullivan, 2000). Social institutions, ideology, values, beliefs, and technology transform a physical body into a social body. Bodies, therefore, provide important clues to the mechanics of society (Sullivan, 2000).
Body customs have social significance. The body can be a site for the expression of power in a culture and for communicating group membership, social status, social identity and associated beliefs and values. All body customs, whether temporary, like tweezing eyebrows, or more permanent, like tattoos and cosmetic surgery, are forms of self-creation that establish a connection with a reference group. The cultural and social context influences individual body choices and gives them social meaning (Sullivan 2000).

**Body Size Ideals in African Cultures**

In Cameroon and many other parts of Africa, obesity, especially in the buttocks, has been associated with abundance, erotic desirability, and fertility. Fat has been seen as a statement of well-being and has been frequently produced artificially through fattening processes (Roybal, 2002). In a rite of passage, some Nigerian girls spend months gaining weight in what is known as “the fattening room”. In this culture, a woman’s rotundity is a sign of good health, prosperity and charm. “Beauty is in the weight”, says a defender of the practice, “To be called a slim princess is an abuse” (Angeloni, 2001).

**Body Size Ideals in the Western World**

In modern Western society "thin is in" and sometimes artificial means such as liposuction are used to lessen the appearance of hips, buttocks, and fat in general (Sullivan, 2002). In the United States, most people hold negative attitudes toward body fat. According to surveys, people attribute increased body weight to being poor or having poor health. Obese women, more than men, are rated negatively by peers (Levy and Shiraev, 2001).

Sobal and Stunkard (1989) reviewed several anthropological studies that measured correlation between the individual's body weight and socioeconomic status. They found out that in rich countries the correlation is negative: people who are richer tend to be thinner. In undeveloped countries the correlation is positive: thinner people, in general, are usually poorer than the ones who weight more (Levy and Shiraev, 2001).

Cogan et al. (1996) examined attitudes toward obesity and fitness in university students in the United States and Ghana. Students in Ghana rated heavier bodies more favorably than U.S. students did. American students were more likely to be dieting, especially women. U.S. women also scored higher on eating-restriction problems and interference of their body weight with social behavior (Levy and Shiraev, 2001).

Rites of passage between life stages in many non-Western cultures are marked by ritualized patterns of scarification, piercing and tattooing (Sullivan, 2001).
The Padaung women in Southeast Asia are often referred to as ‘giraffe’ women because of the custom of placing rings around their necks from when they are young girls until they marry. The pressure and weight of the rings (as much as 11 pounds) force the chin upward while pressing down the collar bones and ribs, elongating the neck.

Lip plates have been around in some African tribes for thousands of years. Young girls stretch their lips with round wooden or clay plates and wear them throughout their lives. The lip eventually gets so elastic that the plate can be taken in and out easily. The plate must always be in while in the presence of men and can only be taken out when sleeping or around other women.

The Kayapo people of the Amazon, use scarification, ornaments for pierced lips, ears, and noses, body paint and different hair styles to distinguish social and age classes, as well as to adorn themselves for potential mates.

In Papua New Guinea, scarification is usually related to initiation. The skin on the chest, back and buttocks of the initiate is cut with a bamboo sliver to test their physical strength and self-discipline. The scars, when healed, represent the teeth marks of a crocodile that has swallowed the initiates who are reborn as crocodile-men.

Technological innovations that inundate society with images of beautiful people are a cultural change that has helped to narrow the criteria for evaluating appearance (Sullivan, 2000). Few can compare themselves favorably to the beautiful people in the media, whose images are increasingly artificially enhanced. Fashion dolls, like Barbie, are an icon of female beauty for young girls to adopt.
Mass culture and the media have served to project the body ideal and turn gentle concern about appearance into obsessions. Beauty can become very unnatural. People will go lengths to live up to the beauty ideals of their society: eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, hair implants, etc.

"Even I don't wake up looking like Cindy Crawford."
- Cindy Crawford

Every period of history held its own standards on what was and was not considered beautiful.

In the early nineteenth century, European travelers and explorers expressed their disbelief at the "savage" and unusually decorated bodies of the natives, while asserting their own wildly interesting fashion statement consisting of wigs, large hats, painted faces, and body deformities caused by the wearing of narrow, pointed, and tight-fitting shoes.
(Roybal, 2002)

When powerful cultural ideologies and institutions change, body standards and customs change. This is clearly evident in the changing standards for feminine and masculine beauty over the last two centuries in the Western world.

Cultural Ethnocentrism
We tend to regard our own culture’s customs as highly "civilized" and others’ as “savage".
Beauty and Evolution

Beauty in women evolved in order to attract and hold the interest of men. The standards of what is beautiful might vary from culture to culture and from time to time, but there is something within female psychology which leads women to want to be beautiful and attractive to men. Women want to be beautiful because to be beautiful is to be desired by men and this means, hopefully, having access to a man's resources for herself and her offspring in order to ensure their survival (Sones, 2002).

Throughout cultures world wide, women's looks seem to be more important to men than men's looks to women. While a man's looks might be important to women, when it comes to a long-term partner women are more interested in a man's access to economic resources (or skills in hunting or fighting in less-developed societies). There is no culture, as far as we know, in which women actively seek to be unattractive to men (Sones, 2002).

References


