Scientific Forum

Editorial

Beauty: Who Sets the Standards?

A concept of beauty is built into all of us and involves a balance between objective criteria and subjective impressions and a capacity to perceive order, symmetry, and harmony. Beauty involves an equilibrium between the whole object and its parts, as well as the various parts in relation to each other. The absence of this balance translates into the “unaesthetic.”

Since classical times, attempts have been made to define beauty. The history of the Western cultures reveals that many concepts of beauty have been celebrated at different places and times.

The ancient Greeks believed that a beautiful face was defined in terms of a harmonious proportion of facial features. For them the ideal face was divided into three equal vertical sections and was two thirds as wide as it was high. In his book, Beauty: An Analysis and Classification, Alexander Walker accepted standards of beauty that were congruent with those of classical antiquity, but he also identified the need for a degree of asymmetry.

The standard of feminine beauty exalted by Anglo-Saxon poets of the Middle Ages was a waxy, pale complexion so arduously sought that some women actually bled themselves regularly to achieve it. By the Renaissance, concepts of feminine beauty included not only physiognomy but also emotional and spiritual components, such as delicacy, fragility, mystery, and maternal tenderness.

Because of their visibility, royalty once served as prevailing models of beauty. Queen Elizabeth I and the noblewomen of her court dictated fashion by dying their hair, plucking their eyebrows, and applying heavy cosmetics to their cheeks. Before World War I, voluptuous faces and bodies were popular. Since the advent of motion pictures, the faces and bodies of Hollywood stars have often defined the parameters of our concept of beauty, whereas a few have been able to parlay their own “quirky” look in counterpoint to the prevailing standard.

Clearly, neither the classical standard of ideal beauty nor any other single standard has always been in vogue. Nevertheless, our experience and instincts tell us that a kind of beauty exists that defies history. Although some “beautiful faces,” like clothing and body conformations, go in and out of fashion, certain faces in every era are considered truly beautiful.
Moreover, the history of beauty in Western culture is only one part of a much larger story. What about the concepts of beauty among Asians, Indians, Laplanders, Mongols, or Mayas? All these cultures have their own concepts of beauty, each with its own history and evolution. In fact, we could say that each person has his or her own concept of beauty, established by both culture and tradition and by individual temperament and sensibility. At the same time, a beloved face that is less than perfect is often found beautiful regardless of any cultural or historical standard.

So, then, given all this, who sets the standards for facial beauty? For the aesthetic surgeon, this is not only a question of philosophy, history, or culture, but part of everyday professional experience. Through their films, TV, magazines, and other mass media, the developed countries have spread their prototypes of beauty globally, influencing the original concepts held by other cultures and ethnic groups. Presentations at our international congresses demonstrate the interest of patients in changing their original look, not only to become beautiful by the traditional standards of their own cultures, but often to look as similar as possible to the Hollywood star prototype. How many times has a patient asking for facial aesthetic surgery brought with him or her the picture of some actor or actress from a magazine as a model? Nothing escapes the influence of media and communications.

The plastic surgeon has the opportunity to generate transcendent beauty, but how is it to be defined? Which are the right components? How can they be pulled together? Although there are many factors to consider, perhaps the most important point is that, independent of the current concept of beauty, the ultimate goal of aesthetic surgery is to harmonize the body with the spirit, allowing the patient to perceive his or her own image to be in harmony with the surrounding world.

Editor’s Note: The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery is now featuring “The Art of Beauty: A Virtual Museum Tour” on its Web site. “The Art of Beauty” is a multimedia presentation examining cultural ideals of beauty as depicted in works of art throughout history. It also seeks to educate the public about how aesthetic surgery contributes to our modern-day ability to look and feel our very best. Visit “The Art of Beauty” at www.surgery.org.