A Second Look At Make-Up

by Luz Maria Martinez

I am one of those women who can't leave the house without applying some type of paint to my face. The amount of colour reflected on my face is the amount of time I had to "do myself up." Many hours of my teenage years were spent in front of the mirror experimenting with lipsticks, coloured pencils, shadows and blushes. Over the years, I have developed it to a science, and a simple make-up application can be done in five minutes or less.

As a college student, I tried to emerge into a more politically conscious woman, and read articles from feminists and consumer rights advocates that said makeup companies brainwashed women into thinking they need make-up to look beautiful in order to feed a multibillion-dollar cosmetic industry. Yes! I agreed. But at the same time, I was applauding newly emerging Black-owned cosmetic companies that were targeting make-up for black- and brown-skinned women. No longer were non-white women isolated from the world of the right colour lipstick and foundation. I now bought lipsticks that did not pale on my dark lips.

Attending a public urban university in Chicago, Illinois, I began to notice how differently and beautiful Middle Eastern, South Asian and Ethiopian women did their eye make-up. Black kohl eyeliner and smoky shadows made dark eyes deep and smouldering. I don't have to tell you that I bought kohl pencils to try the look. This began my journey of observing make-up application and looking at how women highlighted different features on their face, depending on where they came from. For example, I notice that Chinese and Southeast Asian women pencil their eyebrows beautifully—long before current Western beauty experts report that it's the eyebrows that are the focal point of the face and frame the eyes. Mexican women with their long, black lashes are never without several coats of mascara. Women who have full lips opt for dark lipstick tones. In essence, not only does skin colour dictate make-up choices but ethnic features and regional standards of beauty.

Yet, make-up is not always about beauty. Make-up can also be used to make political statements.

Make-up as a Political Stance

The punk rock look that emerged in London in the late 1980s was an anti-mainstream society message. Coloured spiked hair, black eye make-up and dark lips were meant to reflect a lifestyle that defied the norms of the "establishment."

On a trip to Iran in the mid-1990s, I saw how young women used make-up as a sign of resistance to the anti-make-up fundamentalist Islamic laws. It was not uncommon to see young women with the mandated scarf barely covering the hair. Their lips were scarlet and most hands flaunted the red matching nail polish. The Iranian officials would be hard pressed to try to arrest every young woman wearing red lipstick and red nails. I understood their make-up as a sign of protest to the imposed laws of dress on women.

A television special on Afghan women in time of the Taliban talked about how women rebelled and coped with the oppression. I was struck by one segment where the women established and participated in underground beauty shops. It was at great risk and with great effort to establish one, to visit one, and to buy beauty products. The women knew the consequences of such defiance but when asked why they participated in such activities, they said they wanted to feel like normal women with normal lives.

In the 1920s when American women gained the vote, and a new liberated woman emerged in the United States, the "flappers" became a symbol for these new, young and liberated women. These were the red lipstick and red nails that signalled a departure breaking from the Victorian attitudes that had dominated Western society since the 18th century.

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In the United States and in other developed countries, the onset of Hollywood spawned a mass appeal that took make-up out of the ideals of the elite into the masses. The masses now imitated the look of movie stars with cosmetics that were not only meant for the few rich. Newly emerged cosmetic companies offered working women the same look as the glamorous movie stars. Max Factor now offered the common women the Hollywood fantasy of looking like someone else.

Many feminists will argue that all this is all part of the brainwashing by multinational beauty companies. Current data puts the modern day cosmetic and toiletries industry at over US$45 billion to US$66 billion a year business worldwide.[1] This kind of money creates a commercial emphasis on women's beauty. It is no wonder that beauty contests initiated by Western multinational beauty companies dominate most parts of the world. There is big money in beauty and make-up. We cannot argue against feminist and consumer advocates that these messages are all part of money-making schemes. However, I don't think it's all about brainwashing but the fact that cosmetic companies exploit and capitalise on what is a human need.

Decorating the Human Body

According to archaeologists, one of the differences between the Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens was intellectual evolution. An evidence of this intellectual evolution is that Homo Sapiens decorated themselves, using plants, flowers and ashes to paint themselves. Bones, seeds and stones were used to make jewellery for the sole purpose of decorating their bodies and living quarters. Anthropologists interpret this aesthetic practice as an indication of creativity in both men and women. The Neanderthal were functional beings but were unable to evolve with the ingenuity and creativity of the Homo Sapiens, therefore perishing in the evolutionary process.

Evidence of the practice of decorating one's body, as well as the home, goes back an estimated 800,000 to 900,000 years. For example, anthropologists have found in caves skeletal remains covered in ochre. Ochre is the common name for the iron ores of limonite (brown), goethite (yellow), and hematite (red). Most ochre used by ancestral man was hematite. It is also believed that women used the red ochre to mimic the flow of menstrual blood, which was seen as sacred. Tattooing was also another way of decorating the body. In the Italian Alps in 1991, the body of a frozen man estimated to date 5,000 years was found with tattoos all over his body.[2]

In evolved ancient cultures, body paint and decorations were marks of beauty, power, and a connection with the earth. They were also part of religious and cultural rituals. Beauty was not focused only on the body, but also in the textiles, jewellery, pottery, baskets, etc., with everyday items taking on the meaning of connecting with the gods and the earth. The most famous of the beauty connoisseurs were the Egyptians. In ancient Egypt, beauty parlours dated back 6000 years. Pharaohs, the rich and the working class indulged in make-up and beauty treatments as part of their everyday rituals.

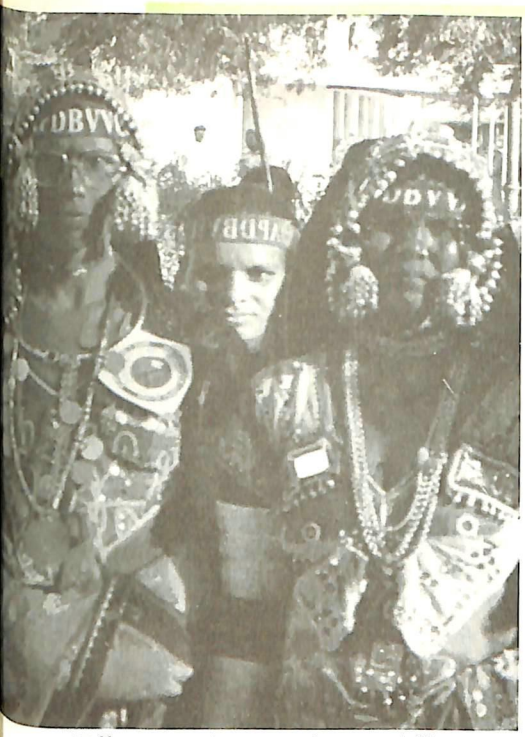
The Persians too were known to have used henna dyes to stain their hair and faces as a way to connect with the earth and summon the "majesty of the earth." There is also evidence that Aztec courtesans used a pale yellow ochre powder on their faces to make themselves look beautiful. Paintings of Chinese royalty illustrate how they too painted their eyes.[3]

Different cultures take on different forms of decorating themselves for the purpose of beauty. For example, in Nepal, babies' eyes are still painted with eyeliner derived from highly priced oil and plant extract not only as a beauty ritual but also as to prevent eye infections. In the Solomon Islands, handmade shell and stone necklaces are polished to perfection and recognised as symbols of beauty, decoration and in previous times used as monetary exchange, proving that items of decoration held value and could be used for bartering. The peoples of remote places in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Pacific Islands continue decorating themselves suggesting that painting their bodies, hair and faces are signs of beauty.

We too in the more "modern" regions continue to paint ourselves, though we have adapted a more Western style to reflect our decorating.

Colonial Impact

The current overall standards of beauty throughout the "modern" world are those of the West. These attitudes and values most likely emerged during the colonisation period of the Western world over the non-Western world. Clearly colonisation has lefts its prints on how make-up and beauty is defined today in both the colonising world and those who were colonised.



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During the Middle Ages in Europe, the wealthy preferred pale skin, the mark of coming from a higher social class. Paleness meant that there was no need to toil under the sun nor to walk unshielded. Some women would go as far as to bleed themselves in order to appear more pale, therefore, more affluent. If that was not enough paleness, both men and women powdered their faces white. White powdered faces were often matched with white coloured hair wigs that hid dirty hair and lice, but that is another story. The colour of the skin was so important that Spanish prostitutes, who too were often pale because of little sun, wore red rouge on their faces to distinguish themselves as working women and not insult the wealthier women.

The need for a white face was in such demand that arsenic, a white powder that adhered to the skin, was the rage in Italy during the 13th century. Needles to say, many wealthy women and men died. Remnants of these Middle-Age European values continue to haunt us today where in many of the former colonised countries, women and men abhor getting dark as this still implies a lower class status, reflecting a social value, unconscious or conscious, that white skin is a sign of beauty while sun-coloured skin is not.

In England, Queen Victoria disliked make-up. She found it vulgar, decadent and a health risk. Of course she was not wrong, as death had been the price of beauty among the Italian elite. Queen Victoria also found the French to be decadent and vulgar with their use of make-up to cover dirt and imperfections (it was the French who initiated the concept of make-up to cover imperfections). Not wanting her kingdom to adopt the ways of the French and Italians, she banned make-up. However, the pale look was "in" so British women took up using egg whites as a way to give their skin that sought after pale and glazed look. The Victorian era's distaste for make-up and concept of self-decoration as primitive and pagan influenced the Christian disapproval of cultures where colour was used to paint the bodies and faces. Since part of colonisation included sending missionaries to convert the "pagans," these Victorian Christian beliefs infiltrated to the colonised and converted. The Spanish Catholic Church went one step further: red rouged cheeks became a sign of immorality.

The MTV Look

Why and how we paint ourselves have changed over the years. We may no longer be decorating ourselves to be in harmony with nature, or for religious practices, and make-up now embodies layers and layers of colonial and commercial influence and pressure, but the need to paint and decorate ourselves continues. It is often the young who define what is "in" and what is not. It is their quest to look different, to make a statement, to fit in, to defy. This all continues to be part of evolution and creativity. While we can argue that our youth look the same across most regions, that they seem to be adopting the "MTV" look, we still see traces of their own regional and cultural standards of beauty. Among the youth, there is definitely a Japanese look, a Filipino look, a European look, an American look, etc.—a standard that says this is who I am and where I belong. Each culture, religious group and class still has its own interpretation of what is beauty. At times the lower classes imitate the rich, but at other times, it is the poorer classes who define the look that the wealthy try to achieve. It is not uncommon to see rich young kids spend money to acquire an American urban ghetto look, or Jamaican Rastafarian dreadlocks or the British working-class look.

Women too have their own regional and cultural standards of beauty. That is why the women of South Asia continue to use dark kohl on the eyes, and women with long black hair still gloss and shine their locks. African women weave their hair into beautiful shows of art. Eyebrows are plucked to form perfect arches, and full lips sport dark tints and glosses. We still wear beads and stones to decorate ourselves and to say where we belong, who we belong to. We still use make-up and paint ourselves to rebel, to bond with one another, to compete, to cover imperfections, to highlight what we like about ourselves. Yet at the end of the day, we often paint ourselves only for that sole purpose of admiring that new coloured lipstick on our lips.

Luz Maria Martinez, with a background in psychology and sociology, enjoys people watching and spends much of her time observing people—in particular, the young. When she is not observing, she is busy working on Isis projects or managing her Mexican eateries in Manila.

Footnotes

[1] Cosmetics and Body Decoration, <http://www.beautyworld.com>, 22 October 2002.

[2] Ibid.

[3] History of Makeup, <http://www.beautyworld.com>, 22 October 2002.