

Classics Reread**What Makes a Woman Beautiful?**

Havelock Ellis *

Today, when empirical sex studies are bestsellers and few disputes the right of scientists to inquire into sexual matters, it is easy to forget how recently this right has been won. When the first volume of Henry Havelock Ellis' (1859-1939) path-breaking *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* appeared in England it was banned by the courts as "wicked, bawdy, and scandalous." Fortunately, Ellis found a courageous American publisher, and it was in this country that the seven volumes of the *Studies* finally appeared. They were the first notable effort to survey the entire field of sexuality, normal and abnormal, from a scientific point of view.

The following selection, a slightly abridged chapter from one of the *Studies*, discusses five factors that Ellis considers basic in a woman's sexual appeal. (In his own case, it is interesting to note, he married and passionately loved a woman of masculine appearance and strong lesbian impulses.) Ellis once wrote that he tried to present his findings "in that cold and dry light through which alone of the goal of knowledge may truly be seen." But Ellis was wrong. No scientific writing was ever less cold or dry. In addition to his sound medical training and a thorough knowledge of the relevant sciences of his day, his writings also reflect an incredibly broad acquaintance with world literature. Add to this the intimate revelations of his case histories and the charm of elegant style, and it is not difficult to understand why the *Studies* remain a delight to read long after they have been superseded by more accurate (and colder and dryer) investigations.

What Makes a Woman Beautiful?

In the constitution of our ideals of masculine and feminine beauty it was inevitable that the sexual characters should from a very early period in the history of man form an important element. From a primitive point of view a sexually desirable and attractive person is one whose sexual characters are either naturally prominent or artificially rendered so. The beautiful woman is one endowed, as Chaucer expresses it, "With buttokes brode and vrestes rounde and hye"; That is to say, she is the woman obviously best fitted to bear children and to suckle them. These two physical characters, indeed, since they represent aptitude for the two essential acts of motherhood, must necessarily tend to be regarded as beautiful among all peoples and in all stages of culture, even in high stages of civilization when more refined and perverse ideals tend to find favor, and at Pompeii as a decoration on the east side of the Purgatorium of the Temple of Isis we find a representation of Perseus rescuing Andromeda, who is shown as a woman with a very small head, small hands and feet, but with a fully developed body, large breasts, and large projecting nates.

To a certain extent-and, as we shall see, to a certain extent only-primary sexual characters are objects of admiration among primitive peoples. In the primitive dances of many peoples, often of sexual significance, the display of the sexual organs on the part of both men and women is frequently a prominent feature. Even down to medieval times in Europe the garments of men

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sometimes permitted the sexual organs to be visible. In some parts of the world, also, the artificial enlargement of the female sexual organs is practiced, and thus enlarged they are considered an important and attractive feature of beauty.

This insistence on the naked sexual organs as objects of attraction is, however, comparatively rare, and confined to peoples in a low state of culture. Very much more widespread is the attempt to beautify and call attention to the sexual organs by tattooing, by adornment and by striking peculiarities of clothing. The tendency for beauty of clothing to be accepted as a substitute for beauty of body appears early in the history of mankind, and, as we know, tends to be absolutely accepted in civilization. “We exclaim,” as Goethe remarks, “‘What a beautiful little foot!’ when we have merely seen a pretty shoe; we admire the lovely waist when nothing has met our eyes but an elegant girdle.” Our realities and our traditional ideals are hopelessly at variance; the Greeks represented their statues without public hair because in real life they had adopted the oriental custom of removing the hairs; we compel our sculptors and painters to make similar representation, thought they no longer correspond either to realities or to our own ideas of what is beautiful and fitting in real life. Our artists are themselves equally ignorant and confused, and, as Stratz has repeatedly shown, they constantly reproduce in all innocence the deformations and pathological characters of defective models. If we were honest, we should say-like the little boy before a picture of the Judgment of Paris, in answer to his mother’s question as to which of the three goddesses he thought most beautiful- “I can’t tell, because they haven’t their clothes on.”

The concealment actually attained was not, however, it would appear, originally sought. Various authors have brought together evidence to show that the main primitive purpose of adornment and clothing among savages is not to conceal the body, but to draw attention to it and to render it more attractive. Westermarck, especially, brings forward numerous examples of savage adornments which serve to attract attention to the sexual regions of man and woman.¹ He further argues that the primitive object of various savage peoples in practicing circumcision, as other similar mutilations, is really to secure sexual attractiveness, whatever religious significance they may sometimes have developed subsequently. A more recent view represents the magical influence of both adornment and mutilation as primary, as a method of guarding the insulating dangerous bodily functions. Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, is the most able and brilliant champion of this view, which undoubtedly embodies a large element of truth, although it must not be accepted to the absolute exclusion of the influence of sexual attractiveness. The two are largely woven in together.

There is, indeed, a general tendency for the sexual functions to take on a religious character and for the sexual organs to become sacred at a very early period in culture. Generation, the reproductive force in man, animals, and plants, was realized by primitive man to be a fact of the first magnitude, and he symbolized it in the sexual organs of man and woman, which thus attained to a solemnity which was entirely independent of purposes of sexual allurements. Phallus worship

1 *History of Human Marriage*, Chapter IX, especially p. 201. We have a striking and comparatively modern European example of an article of clothing designed to draw attention to the sexual sphere in the codpiece (the French braguette), familiar to us through fifteenth and sixteenth century pictures and numerous allusions in Rabelais and in Elizabethan literature. This was originally a metal box for the protection of the sexual organs in war, but subsequently gave place to a leather case only worn by the lower classes, and became finally an elegant article of fashionable apparel, often made of silk and adorned with ribbons, even with gold and jewels.

may almost be said to be a universal phenomenon; it is found even among races of high culture, among the Romans of the Empire and the Japanese to-day; it has, indeed, been thought by some that one of the origins of the cross is to be found in the phallus.

Apart from the religious and magical properties so widely accorded to the primary sexual characters, there are other reasons why they should not often have gained or long retained any great importance as objects of sexual allurements. They are unnecessary and inconvenient for this purpose. The erect attitude of man gives them here, indeed, an advantage possessed by very few animals, among whom it happens with extreme rarity that the primary sexual characters are rendered attractive to the eye of the opposite sex, though they often are to the sense of smell. The sexual regions constitute a peculiarly vulnerable spot, and remain so even in man, and the need for their protection which thus exists conflicts with the prominent display required for a sexual allurements. This end is far more effectively attained, with greater advantage and less disadvantage, by concentrating the chief ensigns of sexual attractiveness on the upper and more conspicuous parts of the body. This method is well-nigh universal among animals as well as in man.

There is another reason why the sexual organs should be discarded as objects of sexual allurements, a reason which always proves finally decisive as a people advances in culture. They are not aesthetically beautiful. It is fundamentally necessary that the intermittent organ of the male and the receptive canal of the female should retain their primitive characteristics; they cannot, therefore, be greatly modified by sexual or natural selection, and the exceedingly primitive character they are thus compelled to retain, however sexually desirable and attractive they may become to the opposite sex under the influence of emotion, can rarely be regarded as beautiful from the point of view of aesthetic contemplation. Under the influence of art there is a tendency for the sexual organs to be diminished in size, and in not civilized country has the artist ever chosen to give an erect organ to his representations of ideal masculine beauty. It is mainly because the unaesthetic character of a woman's sexual region is almost imperceptible in any ordinary and normal position of the nude body that the feminine form is a more aesthetically beautiful object of contemplation than the masculine. Apart from this character we are probably bound, from a strictly aesthetic point of view, to regard the male form as more aesthetically beautiful. The female form, moreover, usually overpasses very swiftly the period of the climax of its beauty, often only retaining it during a few weeks.

The primary sexual characters of man and woman have thus never at any time played a very large part in sexual allurements. With the growth of culture, indeed, the very methods which had been adopted to call attention to the sexual organs were by a further development retained for the purpose of concealing them. From the first the secondary sexual allurements than the primary sexual characters, and in the most civilized countries to-day they still constitute the most attractive of such methods to the majority of the population.

Thus we find, among most of the peoples of Europe, Asia, and African, the chief continents of the world, that the large hips and buttocks of women are commonly regarded as an important feature of beauty. This secondary sexual character represents the most decided structural deviation of the feminine type from the masculine, a deviation demanded by the reproductive function of women, and in the admiration it aroused sexual selection is thus working in a line with natural selection. It cannot be said that, except in a very moderate degree, it has always been regarded as at the same time in a line with claims of purely aesthetic beauty. The European artist frequently

seeks to attenuate rather than accentuate the protuberant lines of the feminine hips, and it is noteworthy that the Japanese also regard small hips as beautiful. Nearly everywhere else large hips and buttocks are regarded as a mark of beauty, and the average man is of this opinion even in the most aesthetic countries. The contrast of this exuberance with the more closely knit male form, the force of association, and the unquestionable fact that such development is the condition needed for healthy motherhood, have served as a basis for an ideal of sexual attractiveness which appeals to nearly all people more strongly than a more narrowly aesthetic ideal, which must inevitably be somewhat hermaphroditic in character...

The special characteristics of the feminine hips and buttocks become conspicuous in walking and may be further emphasized by the special method of walking or carriage. The women of some southern countries are famous for the beauty of their way of walk; “the goddess is revealed by her walk,” as Virgil said. In Spain, especially, among European countries, the walk very notably gives expression to the hips and buttocks. The spine is in Spain very curved, producing what is termed *ensellure*, or saddle-back—a characteristic which gives great flexibility to the back and prominence to the gluteal regions, sometimes slightly simulating steatopygia. The vibratory movement naturally produced by walking and sometimes artificially heightened thus becomes a trait of sexual beauty. Outside of Europe such vibration of the flanks and buttocks is more frankly displayed and cultivated as a sexual allurements. The Papuans are said to admire this vibratory movement of the buttocks in their women. Young girls are practiced in it by their mothers for hours at a time as soon as they have reached the age of 7 or 8, and the Papuan maiden walks thus whenever she is in the presence of men, subsiding into a simpler gait when no men are present. In some parts of tropical Africa the women walk in this fashion. It is also known to the Egyptians, and by the Arabs is called *ghung*. As Mantegazza remarks, the essentially feminine character of this gait makes it a method of sexual allurements. It should be observed that it rests on feminine anatomical characteristics, and that the natural walk of a femininely developed woman is inevitably different from that of a man.

An occasional development of the idea of sexual beauty as associated with developed hips is found in the tendency to regard the pregnant woman as the most beautiful type. Stratz observes that a woman artist once remarked to him that since motherhood is the final aim of woman, and a woman reaches her full flowering period in pregnancy, she ought to be most beautiful when pregnant. This is so, Stratz replied, if the period of her full physical bloom chances to correspond with the early months of pregnancy, for with the onset of pregnancy metabolism is heightened, the tissues become active, the tone of the skin softer and brighter, the breasts firmer, so that the charm of fullest bloom is increased until the moment when the expansion of the womb begins to destroy the harmony of the form. At one period of European culture, however, -at a moment and among a people not very sensitive to the most exquisite aesthetic sensations,-the ideal of beauty has even involved the character of advanced pregnancy. In northern Europe during the centuries immediately preceding the Renaissance the ideal of beauty, as we may see by the pictures of the time, was a pregnant woman, with protuberant abdomen and body more or less extended backward. This is notably apparent in the work of the Van Eycks: in the Eve in the Brussels Gallery; in the wife of Arnolfini in the highly finished portrait group in the National Gallery; even the virgins in the great masterpiece of the Van Eycks in the Cathedral at Ghent assume the type of the pregnant woman.

With the Renaissance this ideal of beauty disappeared from art. But in real life we still seem to trace its survival in the fashion for that class of garments which involved an immense amount of expansion below the waist and secured such expansion by the use of whalebone hoops and similar devices. The Elizabethan farthingale was such a garment. This was originally a Spanish invention, as indicated by the name (from *verdugardo*, provided with hoops), and reached England through France. We find the fashion at its most extreme point in the fashionable dress of Spain in the seventeenth century, such as it has been immortalized by Velasquez. In England hoop died out during the reign of George III but were revived for a time, half a century later, in the Victorian crinoline.

Only second to the pelvis and its integuments as a secondary sexual character in woman we must place the breasts. Among barbarous and civilized peoples the beauty of the breast is usually highly esteemed. Among Europeans, indeed, the importance of this region is so highly esteemed that the general rule against the exposure of the body is in its favor abrogated, and the breasts are the only portion of the body, in the narrow sense, which a European lady in full dress is allowed more or less to uncover. Moreover, at various periods and notably in the eighteenth century, women naturally deficient in this respect have sometimes worn artificial busts made of wax. Savage, also, sometimes show admiration for this part of the body, and in the Papuan folk-tales, for instance, the sole distinguishing mark of a beautiful woman is breasts that stand up. On the other hand, various savage peoples even appear to regard the development of the breasts as ugly and adopt devices for flattening this part of the body. The feeling that prompts this practice is not unknown in modern Europe, for the Bulgarians are said to regard developed breasts as ugly; in medieval Europe, indeed, the general ideal of feminine slenderness was opposed to developed breasts, and the garments tended to compress them. But in a very high degree of civilization this feeling is unknown, as, indeed, it is unknown to most barbarians, and the beauty of a woman's breasts, and of any natural or artificial object which suggests the gracious curves of the bosom, is a universal source of pleasure.

The general admiration accorded to developed breasts and a developed pelvis is evidenced by a practice which, as embodied in the corset, is all but universal in many European countries, as well as the extra-European countries inhabited by the white race, and in one form or another is by no means unknown to peoples of other than the white race.

The tightening of the waist girth was little known to the Greeks of the best period, but it was practiced by the Greeks of the decadence and by them transmitted to the Romans; there are many references in Latin literature to this practice, and the ancient physician wrote against it in the same sense as modern doctors. So far as Christian Europe is concerned it would appear that the corset arose to gratify an ideal of asceticism rather than of sexual allurements. The bodice in early medieval days bound and compressed the breasts and thus tended to efface the specifically feminine character of a woman's body. Gradually, however, the bodice was displaced downward, and its effect, ultimately, was to render the breasts more prominent instead of effacing them. Not only does the corset render the breasts more prominent; it has the further effect of displacing the breathing activity of the lungs in an upward direction, the advantage from the point of sexual allurements thus gained being that additional attention is drawn to the bosom from the respiratory movement thus imparted to it. So marked and so constant is this artificial respiratory effect, under the influence of the waist compression habitual among civilized women, that until recent years it

was commonly supposed that there is a real and fundamental difference in breathing between men and women, that women's breathing is thoracic and men's abdominal. It is now known that under natural and healthy conditions there is no such difference, but that men and women breathe in a precisely identical manner. The corset may thus be regarded as the chief instrument of sexual allurements which the armory of costume supplies to a woman, for it furnishes her with a method of heightening at once her two chief sexual secondary characters, the bosom above, the hips and buttocks below. We cannot be surprised that all the scientific evidence in the world of the evil of the corset is powerless not merely to cause its abolition, but even to secure the general adoption of its comparatively harmless modifications.

The breasts and the developed hips are characteristics of women and are indications of functional effectiveness as well as sexual allurements. Another prominent sexual character which belongs to man, and is not obviously an index of function, is furnished by the hair on the face. The beard may be regarded as purely a sexual adornment, and thus comparable to the somewhat similar growth on the heads of many male animals. From this point of view its history is interesting, for it illustrates the tendency with increase of civilization not merely to dispense with sexual allurements in the primary sexual organs, but even to disregard those growths which would appear to have been developed solely to act as sexual allurements. The cultivation of the beard belongs peculiarly to barbarous races. Among these races it is frequently regarded as the most sacred and beautiful part of the person, as an object to swear by, an object to which the slightest insult must be treated as deadly. Holding such a position, it must doubtless act as a sexual allurements. "Allah has specially created an angel in Heaven," it is said in the *Arabian Night*, "who has no other occupation than to sing the praises of the Creator for giving a beard to men and long hair to women." The sexual character of the beard and the other hirsute appendage is significantly indicated by the fact that the ascetic spirit in Christianity has always sought to minimize or to hide the hair. Altogether apart, however, from this religious influence, civilization tends to be opposed to the growth of hair on the masculine face and especially to the beard. It is part of the well-marked tendency with civilization to the abolition of sexual differences. We find this general tendency among the Greeks and Romans, and, on the whole, with certain variations and fluctuations of fashion, in modern Europe also. Schopenhauer frequently referred to this disappearance of the beard as a mark of civilization, "a barometer of culture." The absence of facial hair heightens aesthetic beauty of form, and is not felt to remove any substantial sexual attraction.

We have seen that there is good reason for assuming a certain fundamental tendency whereby the most various peoples of the world, at all events in the person of their most intelligent members, recognize and accept a common ideal of feminine beauty, so that to a certain extent beauty may be said to have an objectively aesthetic basis. We have further found that this aesthetic human ideal is modified, and very variously modified in different countries and even in the same country at different periods, by a tendency, prompted by a sexual impulse which is not necessarily in harmony with aesthetic canons, to emphasize, or even to repress, one of other of the prominent secondary sexual characters of the body. We now come to another tendency which is apt to an even greater extent to limit the cultivation of the purely aesthetic ideal of beauty: the influences of national or racial type.

To the average man of every race the woman who most completely embodies the type of his race is usually the most beautiful, and even mutilations and deformities often have their origin, as Humboldt long since pointed out, in the effort to accentuate the racial type. Eastern women possess by nature large and conspicuous eyes, and this characteristic they seek still further to heighten by art. The Ainu are the hairiest of races, and there is nothing which they consider so beautiful as hair. It is difficult to be sexually attracted to persons who are fundamentally unlike ourselves in racial constitution...

An interesting question, which in part finds its explanation here and is of considerable significance from the point of view of sexual selection, concerns the relative admiration bestowed on blondes and brunettes. The question is not, indeed, one which is entirely settled by racial characteristics. There is something to be said on the matter from the objective standpoint of aesthetic considerations. Stratz, in a chapter on beauty of coloring in woman, points out that fair hair is more beautiful because it harmonizes better with the soft outlines of woman, and, one may add, it is more brilliantly conspicuous; a golden object looks larger than a black object. The hair of the armpit, also, Stratz considers should be light. On the other hand, the pubic hair should be dark in order to emphasize the breadth of the pelvis and the obtuseness of the angle between the mons veneris and the thighs. The eyebrows and eyelashes should also be dark in order to increase the apparent size of the orbits. Stratz adds that among many thousand women he has only seen one who, together with an otherwise perfect form, has also possessed these excellencies in the highest measure. With sparse, blonde, and curly axillary hair; but, although her eyes were blue, the eyebrows and eyelashes were black, as also was the not overdeveloped pubic hair...

The main cause, however, in determining the relative amount of admiration accorded in Europe to blondes and to brunettes is the fact that the population of Europe must be regarded as predominantly fair, and that our conception of beauty in feminine coloring is influenced by an instinctive desire to seek this type in its finest forms. In the north of Europe there can, of course, be no question concerning the predominant fairness of the population, but in portions of the centre and especially in the south it may be considered a question. It must, however, be remembered that the white population occupying all the shores of the Mediterranean have the black peoples of Africa immediately to the south of them. They have been liable to come in contact with the black peoples and in contrast with them they have tended not only to be more impressed with their own whiteness, but to appraise still more highly its blondest manifestations as representing a type the farthest removed from the Negro. It must be added that the northerner who comes into the south is apt to overestimate the darkness of the southerner because of the extreme fairness of his own people. The differences are, however, less extreme than we are apt to suppose; there are more dark people in the north than we commonly assume, and more fair people in the south. Thus, if we take Italy, we find in its fairest part, Venetia, according to Raseri, that there are 8 percent communes in which fair hair predominates, 81 percent in which black predominates; as we go farther south black hair becomes more prevalent, but there are in most provinces a few communes in which fair hair is not only frequent, but even predominant. It is somewhat the same with light eyes, which are also most abundant in Venetia and decrease to a slighter extent as we go south. It is possible that in former days the blondes prevailed to a greater degree than today in the south of Europe. Among the Berbers of the Atlas Mountains, who are probably allied to the South Europeans, there appears

to be a fairly considerable proportion of blondes, while on the other hand there is some reason to believe that blondes die out under the influence of civilization as well as of a hot climate.

However, this may be, the European admiration for blondes dates back to early classic times. Gods and men in Homer would appear to be frequently described as fair. Venus is nearly always blonde, as was Milton's Eve. Lucian refers to women who dye their hair. The Greek sculptors gilded the hair of their states, and the figurines in many cases show very fair hair. The Roman custom of dyeing the hair light, as Renier has shown, was not due to the desire to be like the fair Germans, and when Rome fell it would appear that the custom of dyeing the hair persisted, and never died out; it is mentioned by Anselm, who died at the beginning of the twelfth century.

In the poetry of the people in Italy brunettes, as we should expect, receive much commendation, though even here the blondes are preferred. When we turn to the painters and poets of Italy, and the aesthetic writers on beauty from the Renaissance onward, the admiration for fair hair is unqualified, though there is no correspondingly unanimous admiration for blue eyes. Angelico and most of the pre-Raphaelite artists usually painted their women with flaxen and light-golden hair, which often became brown with the artists of the Renaissance period. Firenzuola, in his admirable dialogue on feminine beauty, says that a woman's hair should be like gold or honey or the rays of the sun. Luigini also, in his *Libro della bella Donna*, says that hair must be golden. So also thought Petrarch and Ariosto. There is, however, no corresponding predilection among these writers for blue eyes. Firenzuola said that the eyes must be dark, though not black. Luigini said that they must be bright and black. Niphus had previously said that the eyes should be "black like those of Venus" and the skin ivory, even a little brown. He mentions that Avicenna had praised the mixed, or gray eye.

In France and other northern countries, the admiration for very fair hair is just as marked as in Italy, and dates back to the earliest ages of which we have a record. "Even before the thirteenth century," remarks Houdoy, in his very interesting study of feminine beauty in northern France during medieval times, "and for men as well as for women, fair hair was an essential condition of beauty; gold is the term of comparison almost exclusively used." He mentions that in the *Acta Sanctorum* it is stated that Saint Godelive of Bruges, though otherwise beautiful, had black hair and eyebrows and was hence contemptuously called a crow. In the *Chanson de Roland* and all the French medieval poems the eyes are invariably *vairs*. This epithet is somewhat vague. It comes from *varius*, and signifies mixed, which Houdoy regards as showing various irradiations, the same quality which later gave rise to the term *iris* to describe the papillary membrane. *Vair* would thus describe not so much the color of the eye as its brilliant and sparkling quality. While Houdoy may have been correct, it still seems probable that the eye described as *vair* was usually assumed to be "various" in color also, of the kind we commonly call gray, which is usually applied to blue eyes encircled with a ring of faintly sprinkled brown pigment. Such eyes are fairly typical of northern France and frequently beautiful. That this was the case seems to be clearly indicated by the fact that, as Houdoy himself points out, a few centuries later the *vair* eye was regarded as *vert*, and green eyes were celebrated as the most beautiful. The etymology was false, but a false etymology will hardly suffice to change an ideal. At the Renaissance Jehan Lemaire, when describing Venus as the type of beauty, speaks of her green eyes, and Ronsard, a little later, sang:

"Noir je veux l'oeil et brun le teint,
Bien que l'oeil verd toute la France adore."

Early in the sixteenth century Brantome quotes some lines current in France, Spain, and Italy according to which a woman should have a white skin, but black eyes and eyebrows, and adds that personally he agrees with the Spaniard that "a brunette is sometimes equal to a blonde," but there is also a marked admiration for green eyes in Spanish literature; not only in the typical description of a Spanish beauty in the *Celestina* (Act. I) are the eyes green, but Cervantes, for example, when referring to the beautiful eyes of a woman, frequently speaks of them as green.

It would thus appear that in Continental Europe generally, from south to north, there is a fair uniformity of opinion as regards the pigimentary type of feminine beauty. Such variation as exists seemingly involves a somewhat greater degree of darkness for the southern beauty in harmony with the greater racial darkness of the southerner, but the variations fluctuate within a narrow range; the extremely dark type is always excluded, and so it would seem probable is the extremely fair type, for blue eyes have not, on the whole, been considered to form part of the admired type.

If we turn to England no serious modification of this conclusion is called for. Beauty is still fair. Indeed, the very word "fair" in England itself means beautiful. That in the seventeenth century it was generally held essential that beauty should be blonde is indicated by a passage in the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, where Burton argues that "golden hair was ever in great account," and quotes many examples from classic and more modern literature. That this remains the case is sufficiently evidenced by the fact that the ballet and chorus on the English stage wear yellow wigs, and the heroine of the stage is blonde, while the female villain of melodrama is a brunette.

While, however, this admiration of fairness as a mark of beauty unquestionably prevails in England, I do not think it can be said—as it probably can be said of the neighboring and closely allied country of France—that the most beautiful women belong to the fairest group of the community. In most parts of Europe, the coarse and unbeautiful plebeian type tends to be very dark; in England it tends to be very fair. England is, however, somewhat fairer generally than most parts of Europe; so that, while it may be said that a very beautiful woman in France or in Spain may belong to the blondest section of the community, a very beautiful woman in England, even though of the same degree of blondness as her Continental sister, will not belong to the extremely blonde section of the English community. It thus comes about that when we are in northern France we find that gray eyes, a very fair but yet unfreckled complexion, brown hair, finely molded features, and highly sensitive facial expression combine to constitute a type which is more beautiful than any other we meet in France, and it belongs to the fairest section of the French population. When we cross over to England, however, unless we go to a so-called "Celtic" district, it is hopeless to seek among the blondest section of the community for any such beautiful and refined type. The English beautiful woman, though she may still be fair, is by no means very fair, and from the English standpoint she may even sometimes appear somewhat dark. In determining what I call the index of pigmentation—or degree of darkness of the eyes and hair—of different groups in the National Portrait Gallery I found that the "famous beauties" (my own personal criterion of beauty not being taken into account) were somewhat nearer to the dark than to the light end of the scale. If we consider, at random, individual instances of famous English beauties they are not extremely fair. Lady Venetia Stanley, in the early seventeenth century, who became the wife of Sir Kenelm Digby, was somewhat dark, with brown hair and eyebrows. Mrs. Overall, a little later in the same century, a Lancashire woman, the wife of the Dean of St. Paul's, was, says

Aubrey, “the greatest beauty in her time in England,” though very wanton, with “the loveliest eyes that were ever seen”; if we may trust a ballad given by Aubrey she was dark with black hair. The Gunnings, the famous beauties of the eighteenth century, were not extremely fair, and Lady Hamilton, the most characteristic type of English beauty, had blue, brown-flecked eyes and dark chestnut hair. Coloration is only one of the elements of beauty, though an important one. Other things being equal, the most blonde is most beautiful; but it so happens that among the races of Great Britain the other things are very frequently not equal, and that, notwithstanding a conviction ingrained in the language, with us the fairest of women is not always the “fairest.” So magical, however, is the effect of brilliant coloring that it serves to keep alive in popular opinion an unqualified belief in the universal European creed of the beauty of blondness.

We have seen that underlying the conception of beauty, more especially as it manifests itself in woman to man, are to be found at least three fundamental elements: First there is the general beauty of the species...then there is the beauty due to the full development or even exaggeration of the sexual and more especially the secondary sexual characters; and last there is the beauty due to the complete embodiment of the particular racial or national type. To make the analysis fairly complete must be added at least one other factor: the influence of individual taste. Every individual, at all events in civilization, within certain narrow limits, builds up a feminine ideal of his own, in part on the basis of his own special organization and its demands, in part on the actual accidental attractions he has experienced. It is unnecessary to emphasize the existence of this factor, which has always to be taken into account in every consideration of sexual selection in civilized man. But its variations are numerous and in impassioned lovers it may even lead to the idealization of features which are in reality the reverse of beautiful. It may be said of man a man, as d’Annunzio says of the hero of his *Trionfo della Morte* in relation to the woman he loves, that “he felt himself bound to her by the real qualities of her body, and not only by those which were most beautiful, but specially by *those which were least beautiful*” (the novelist italicizes these words), so that his attention was fixed upon her defects, and emphasized them, thus arousing within himself an impetuous state of desire. Without invoking defects, however, there are endless personal variations which may all be said to come within the limits of possible beauty or charm. “There are not two women,” as Stanz remarks, “who in exactly the same way stroke back a rebellious lock from their brows, no two who hold the hand in greeting in exactly the same way, no two who gather up their skirts as they walk with exactly the same movement.” Among the multitude of minute differences-which yet can be seen and felt-the beholder is variously attracted or repelled according to his own individual idiosyncrasy, and the operations of sexual selection are effected accordingly.

Another factor in the constitution of the ideal of beauty, but one perhaps exclusively found under civilized conditions, is the love of the unusual, the remote, the exotic. It is commonly stated that rarity is admired in beauty. This is not strictly true, except as regards combinations and characters which vary only in a very slight degree from the generally admired type. “*Jucundum nihil est quod non reficit varietas*,” according to the saying of Publilius Syrus. The greater nervous restlessness and sensibility of civilization heightens this tendency, which is not infrequently found also among men of artistic genius. One may refer, for instance, to Baudelaire’s profound admiration for the mulatto type of beauty. In every great centre of civilization the national ideal of beauty tends to be somewhat modified in exotic directions, and foreign ideals, as well as foreign

fashions, become preferred to those that are native. It is significant of this tendency that when, a few years since, an enterprising Parisian journal hung in its *salle* the portraits of one hundred and thirty-one actresses, etc., and invited the votes of the public by ballot as to the most beautiful of them, not one of the three women who came out at the head of the poll was French. A dancer of Belgian origin (Cleo de Merode) was by far at the head with over 3000 votes, followed by an American from San Francisco (Sybil Sanderson), and then a Polish woman.

—Excerpt from Martin Gardner ed. *Great Essays in Science* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), pp53-71.