

kosmetikos*

By Steve Herman

BEAUTY BY DARWIN

*But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamped, and want loves majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph...
I am determined to prove a villain...¹*

Just when creationism has returned to the educational forefront in the heartland of America, Darwin has surfaced in the beauty press. Richard III, at least in Shakespeare's incarnation, knew that his lack of physical attractiveness was not going to help him with the ladies. An extensive academic research program has recently set out to prove what

Richard, and most of the rest of us, always assumed—it helps to look good. Evolution has been evoked to explain a multitude of advantages for attractive individuals, from being treated preferentially as infants to finding sex partners to career advancement. Looking beautiful has been shown to involve more than well, looking beautiful.

A long running column in this publication was entitled

Bassin on Beauty Biz. At the time it was logical to equate the cosmetic industry with the Beauty Biz. We now see the business of beauty as far more than just cosmetics. It is rather a vast conglomerate where cosmetics walk hand in hand with the clothing industry, plastic surgery and physical fitness centers. Are these multi-billion dollar enterprises built on fads, or the deepest instincts promoting the survival of our species?

Health and beauty resonate so strongly together that they could be two aspects of a single all-embracing concept. Developing the connection of Darwinian evolution to the ideal of human beauty has become a promi-

Steve Herman is Director R&D of AFF International. He has 28 years experience in the industry, primarily in fragrance application. He serves as an Adjunct Professor in the FDU Masters in Cosmetic Science program, and has been active in numerous capacities with the SCC. He may be reached by phone, (973) 244-5880, or by e-mail at GCISteve@aol.com.

*Greek kosmEtikos, skilled in adornment or decorating.

nent scholarly discipline. "A Question of Beauty: Is It Good for You?" asks *The New York Times*, headline of its report on the health/beauty issue². A popular book, Nancy Etcoff's *Survival of the Prettiest*³, has brought the subject to the masses in a thorough and accessible form.

The *Survival of the Prettiest* is popularized science, with nary an acronym until page 20. There we meet SSSM, the "Standard Social Science Model." Dr. Etcoff and her colleagues have established the scientific foundations of the book's premises elsewhere, in the technical literature of evolutionary psychology.

Some of the scope of Dr.

Etcoff's prior

research can be seen in the references^{4,5,6}.

Another source mentioned in the *Times* article, Michael Kalick, is also cited^{7,8}. They are offered as a starting point for those wishing to pursue the subject in more depth. (Note to readers who actually look at the references: the amygdala is an almond shaped component of the brain's limbic system, implicated in emotion, learning and memory, and epilepsy⁹; prosopagnosia is a visual problem arising after cerebral damage in which a patient cannot identify familiar faces¹⁰.)

Darwin himself contributed a seminal work on facial expressions¹¹. This is a field where one can ask such questions as: why is a smile so universal in meaning? Most human behavior is learned, but a facial expression this uniformly interpreted around the world must be hard-wired in the brain by evolution.

Etcoff and Magee⁴ studied the response to a continuous spectrum of facial expression, encompassing pairs such as angry-sad, angry-



Nancy Etcoff, author of the book *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*.

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afraid, happy-sad, surprised-afraid, etc. With computer generated changes in equal increments, discrimination is greatest where the boundaries are crossed between emotions. For example, a change from one happy expression to another is less noticeable than an equivalent change from happy to sad. Our brains have evolved to transform the facial expressions of others into the nearest associated basic emotion.

Early explorers, coming upon primitive tribes, often considered them visually unappealing. The reverse was also true, with the tribesmen thinking the explorers ugly and otherwise offensive. The commonality of

Key points for The Evolution of Beauty

- ⊙ Beauty is more than skin deep.
- ⊙ Modern evolutionary psychology has uncovered a deep connection between appearance and survival.
- ⊙ Cosmetics are part of a profound human need to be attractive.

both groups was their desire to be attractive to others of their own group. Thus a primitive woman may have seemed unattractive to the explorer, but she was nevertheless adorned with jewelry, clothing accessories, and perhaps local cosmetic concoctions. She obviously considered herself worthy of beautifying articles. The individuals within each group obviously have a shared set of values for appearance, and do not spare time, effort or expense to look their best.

Cosmetics have been discovered in southern Africa that are 40,000 years old. Body color precedes by ten thousand years the use of color in art. Smooth skin and healthy teeth and nails advertise the individual as young and fertile—a prime reproductive machine. Women's makeup imitates the blushing appearance of first love. Current cosmetic users want to not only look young, but to actually be functionally young with the aid of active ingredients such as AHAs. (If you don't have the time to read the entire *Survival of the Prettiest*, try Chapter 4, "Cover Me.")

The essence of Etcoff's book might be well represented by the following excerpt:

"Our minds evolved by natural selection to solve problems crucial to our survival and reproduction. To find the sight of potentially fertile and healthy mates beautiful and the sight of helpless infants irresistibly cute is adaptive...Beauty is one of the ways life perpetuates itself, and love of beauty is deeply rooted in our biology" (Etcoff, p. 234).

The cosmetic industry has stressed the functional aspect of its products for many years. The active ingredients are trumpeted from the rooftops. We forget that cosmetics were always intended primarily to beautify and adorn. Cleopatra never thought about cell renewal. Helen of Troy was innocent of concerns over TEWL. Research in psychology and the evolution of our species now demonstrate the profound importance of looking good. Cosmetics can take pride in its contribution to attractive appearance, helping to ensure the success, indeed the very survival, of humanity. ■

References

Thanks to Doctors Etcoff and Kalick for making references available for this column.

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