Anytting for Beauty

Women have a long history of willing to do anything for beauty. Wearing neck rings, corsets, foot binding, and getting breast implants are just a few of the ways through which women try to make themselves look beautiful. All of these practices come at a physical and monetary cost, but they have the same purpose: it is to make women more beautiful and sexually attractive. The beautifying practices exist in different cultures across times throughout the world.

The Padaung women of Myanmar place stacked rows of metal rings around their necks and often keep them for life. The more rings a woman has on her neck, the more affluent and desirable she is. The rings are fixed to the Padaung girl’s neck when she is five or six years old. New rings are added every few years, and they elongate the girl’s neck. By the time the girl marries, her neck may be twelve inches long. The rings support her neck and deform the vertebrae as well as atrophy the neck muscles. Removal of the rings causes excruciating pain and possible suffocation since the woman cannot support her head. If the removal does take place, it is usually done as a punishment for adultery. Despite this, the practice of wearing neck rings continues in Myanmar to this day (Myanmar Tourist Bureau).

The United States also has its share of beauty-enhancing practices. In the 19th century, women would not leave their homes without wearing corsets. The corset was an undergarment reinforced with steel or whalebone and cinched tightly around the waist until it was a man-pleasing eighteen inches round. A girl would begin to wear a corset when she was about seven
years old. The steel or whalebone corset began to shape the child’s body, so that when she reached marriageable age, she had the perfect size waist, which means the prospective husband could put his hands around it (White).

Like the Pudnagh neck ring wearer, the long-term corset wearer would develop serious physical problems. Usually they were gastrointestinal because of the constriction of the waist area. Often liver and kidney displacement occurred as well as respiratory distress, uterine prolapses, muscle and spine deformation along with swelling of extremities (White). Luckily for women, the corset-wearing fashion lost favor in the 1920’s, but the beautifying practices in the United States did not end with it.

In modern times, the attainment of beauty can come through the scalpel of the plastic surgeon. Today more than ever, elective plastic surgery to beautify is done in various forms: liposuction, face lifts, chemical peels, or implants. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons in 1999, 80% of these surgeries were performed on women and most of them involved breast implants (Plastic Surgery Information Service). Breast augmentation involves having a slit done under the breast and a saline-filled sack inserted between the pectoral muscle and the breast. The sack increases the breast size, firms it, and lifts the breast up to give it a more sensual look. The same as the other beautifying practices, breast implant surgery has its share of pain and health risks. Some of them include hardening or dissolution of the implant, infection, and loss of sensation (Plastic Surgery Information Service).

In ancient China, women made themselves more beautiful by foot binding, which like breast implants, was a painful and debilitating practice. It began in the 5th century, and in the following two hundred years became rampant among all classes of women. The goal of foot binding was to stop the growth of feet since small feet were viewed as sexually attractive. Thus,
It became necessary for Chinese women to bind their feet in order to find husbands and achieve a good life.

The process of foot binding was very painful and started when a girl was four to six years old. The procedure involved folding tightly the smaller four toes under toward the ball of the foot. A ten-feet long and two-inch wide silk cloth was wrapped from the top of the foot around the folded toes and then around the heel. The tight binding brought the heel and ball of the foot together like the bending of a bow, which eventually led to the breaking of the instep of the foot.

Once the binding was complete, the girl was forced to walk and begin the process of breaking her toes and instep, a very painful practice that lasted for at least two years. She continued to wear bindings for ten years, so the feet would not re-position themselves to their natural shape.

During this time, the girl would embroider her own shoes which were then sent to a prospective husband by way of a matchmaker, so he could judge her skill with a needle as well as the size of her feet (Jackson 35).

John Fairbank writes that, “The small feet was called a ‘golden lily’ (chihlien) and was much celebrated in poems and essays by male enthusiasts” (287). A Sung poet, Su Tung-p’o, who lived in 1036-1101, wrote this about a Chinese woman who is considered socially and cosmically fitted through foot binding:

Anointed with fragrance, she takes lotus steps;
Though often sad, she steps with swift lightness.
She dances like the wind, leaving no physical trace.
Another weathily but happily tries on the palace style,
But feels such distress when she tries to walk! (Fairbank 287)
All these beautifying practices helped women to attain a better position in society through marriage and consequently better life. That's why, "When the anti-footbinding movement began at the end of the 19th century, many mothers, and daughters too, stubbornly clung to it to avoid the public shame of having large feet" (Fairbank 290). To this day, women continue practices that make them more attractive to men. They need not be as drastic as foot binding, but making the foot look more attractive through wearing the bird-beak pointed stiletto shoe, or a five-inch high platform are designed to elevate the leg and make it more sexually appealing to men. Are such shoes safe, or comfortable? No one asks.

I recently interviewed a co-worker who had breast augmentation performed two years ago, and she stated, "I have never felt more confident and beautiful in my life. I wish I could have done this procedure years ago" (Twillegen). She regarded the pain and expense as well worth the results. It is for these reasons that women will continue to do almost anything for beauty.
Works Cited


Plastic Surgery Information Service. News Room. 27 April 2006


Wong, Connie. "1,000 years of Foot Binding." 18 April 2006


Works Consulted

