

The Social Construction of Feminine Beauty

“Ambrose Bierce (1958) once wrote, ‘To men a man is but a mind. Who cares what face he carries or what he wears? But woman’s body is the woman.’ Despite the societal changes achieved since Bierce’s time, his statement remains true.” (Saltzberg & Chrisler)

“In recent decades the beauty ideal has combined such opposite traits as erotic sophistication with naïve innocence, delicate grace with muscular athleticism, and thin bodies with large breasts.” (Saltzberg & Chrisler)

Beauty as internalization (beauty standards are learned)

Beauty as externalization (beauty is done)

Beauty as objectivation (beauty is an institution that acts on us)

Beauty is connected to social control (ugliness is punished)

Beauty is connected to stratification (beauty is stratified by race, class, gender, etc.; other resources are stratified by beauty)

Beauty is justified by institutionalized ideologies

Ford and Beach's (1951) study of "primitive" societies found no universal standards of "sexual allure" among women.

Body trait	Number of societies that admire trait
Slim body build	5
Medium body build	5
Plump body build	13
Narrow pelvis and slim hips	1
Broad pelvis and wide hips	6
Small ankles	3
Shapely calves	5
Upright, hemispherical breasts	2
Long and pendulous breasts	2
Large breasts	9
Large clitoris	1
Elongated labia majora	8

Source: Hatfield & Sprecher. 1986. *Mirror, Mirror*. SUNY Press.