

Mirror, Mirror

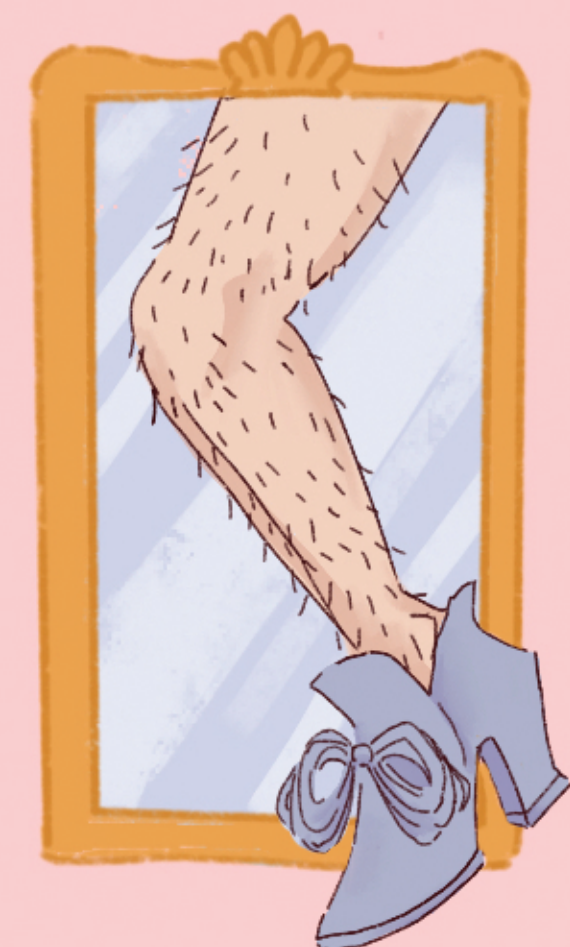


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In Ancient Greece, unibrows were considered a sign of beauty and wisdom. Women's unibrows were valued for their natural beauty, but many still used cosmetics to help their eyebrows stand out. On the extreme side, some women would glue goat hair between their brows to achieve a unibrow. Married women tended to leave their eyebrows alone, while single women would apply makeup. This trend of unibrows could also be seen in Iran's Qajar dynasty, when male and female beauty standards were similar. Women and men alike desired thick eyebrows and moustaches.



Throughout many cultures and eras, body types which we now consider "overweight" were glamorized as they represented prosperity and fertility. Separating themselves from thin, malnourished peasants, elites saw body fat as an exhibition of their bountiful wealth. During the Renaissance and Baroque eras, most portraits featured rolls, double chins and full stomachs. This ideal directed fashion trends of the time toward voluminous garments to imply an attractive, ample figure. Society's celebration of fatness died out in the 1800s when industrial expansion commodified food, excess weight traded the connotation of wealth for that of inactivity.



The beard tax was instated by Tsar Peter the Great as a part of his efforts to "Europeanize" Russia, or make it comply with Western European cultural standards. The beard tax incentivized men to shave. Before, beards were considered godly under the Russian Church, causing resistance to the tax. People who had beards but didn't carry proof of paying the tax were forcibly and publicly shaved by police. Today, this seems ludicrous, but when Russia was vying for the same power as the West, these reforms were seen as necessary. The beard tax was ineffective since few Russians were willing to shave, and Catherine the Great repealed it in 1772.



Throughout the 19th century, tuberculosis, also known as "consumption," became increasingly common, killing millions of people. Weight loss, pale skin and red cheeks were symptoms of the sickness that became associated with attractiveness. Artists and writers romanticized the disease, changing how the public perceived the otherwise devastating illness. Soon, women began to powder their faces and use chemicals to appear pale and "consumed," as well as corseting their waists to look sickly thin. As people began to understand how serious, contagious and deadly tuberculosis was, the consumed look died away.



1200 - 323 BCE

500 - 1400

1300 - 1800

1600 - 1750

1698 - 1772

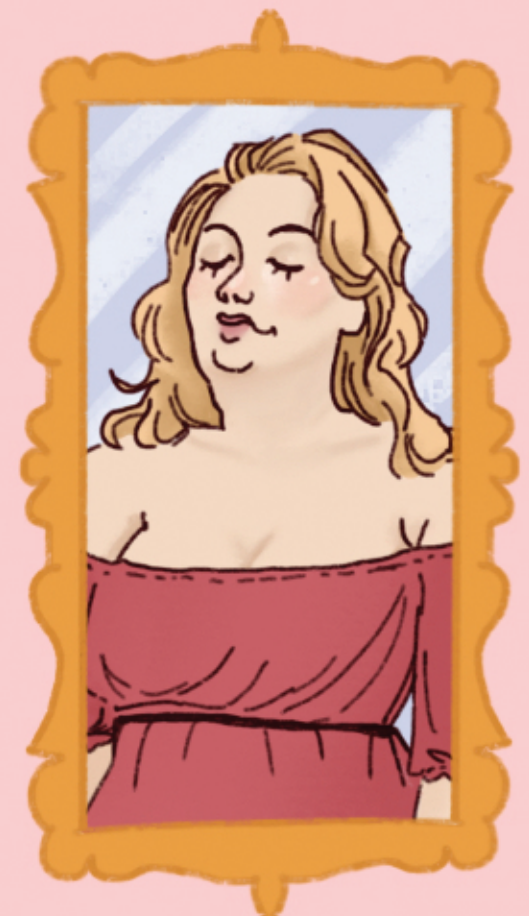
1837-1901

1882 - 1901

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In medieval times, it was considered "wrong" for women to have body hair. With this idea emerged the fear that having too much hair would harm women's chances of marriage and fertility, leading to the trend of having high foreheads to seem like they had less hair. To achieve this look, which connoted purity and innocence, women would pluck their eyebrows and hairlines. The trend continued into the Renaissance period, with Queen Elizabeth plucking her own eyebrows to have a larger forehead. People at the time also believed this look made women look more intelligent.



Today, men in heels are considered absurd, but heels were originally created for men. Men's heels hit their stylistic stride in Baroque-era France. High heels implied a high status, following in the image of elites like King Louis XIV. At 5'4, Louis embraced the height boost just as much as the colorful, ornate aesthetics of the heel. The trend burnt out quickly, though – the French Revolution's eat-the-rich attitude made the aristocratic look deeply unpopular, which meant heels had to say au revoir! Heels have made a comeback since the 18th century for women, making them a living example of fluidity in gender roles.



During the Victorian Era, the advent of cheap manufacturing led to a variety of new, accessible clothing. Men wore coats, suits and trousers while women strove for tiny waists and large skirts. Corsets, a tight undergarment worn on the upper body, squeezed women's bodies to be desirably small. In 1857, Alexander Douglas invented the bustle, a cushion at the back of a dress that supported large skirts. However, this garment inhibited mobility; women had trouble even sitting or walking. This impracticality, along with a growing movement for female independence, ended the trend as the century came to a close.



Finally, in 2024, we see more "realistic" models and body positivity movements increase acceptance. The lack of one defined look doesn't mean freedom from pressure. Social media fractures our concept of beauty with new terms each day. "Boy vs. Girl pretty," "cantal tilt," "visual weight" – it's hard to keep up when each niche finds something different attractive. Photoshop and filters, like the infamous "bold glamour" or even the subtle Tiktok beauty filter, change the way people look completely, changing face shape, skin tone and texture, etc. While we've broadened our idea of beauty, social media hashtags constitute new insecurities.



What do you think contributes to beauty standards in the modern day?

"Famous people [can] contribute to beauty standards ... people want to be like [them], so they copy [the] way they act or their clothing."

Macklin Berg (10)



Do you think you've seen societal beauty standards change?

"Yes, and I think it's because of fast fashion and social media ... I think there's [been] a lot of trends ... like, a certain body. For example, Marilyn Monroe was popular [at] one time. Now it's Kim Kardashian."

Emily Peng (11)



Do you think beauty standards disproportionately affect any group?

"Women, teenagers ... I think the idea that women's value is in their youth and that people shouldn't age is especially harmful [and] prevalent for women as they get older."

Maya Patnaik (12)

You can lookmax all you want, but at the end of the day, our society's idols are ever-changing and will never consider any one body to be timeless. Indeed, almost every possible feature or insecurity of yours has probably been accepted or even idealized, so it's best not to be too focused on superficial qualities. After all, beauty is in the eye of the beholder!