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# What Makes Her Beautiful?

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Feminine Beauty  
Standards in  
Renaissance Italy

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## Introduction

The word beautiful can apply to almost anything, tangible or intangible; a person, a building, a landscape, a work of art, a piece of literature, an emotion. But rarely does one inquire as to what this really means, and further why the standards for determining beauty are what they are. The expression “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” suggests that there is a level of subjectivity in the perception of what is beautiful, which in turn allows the opportunity for anyone or anything, no matter who or what it is, to be construed as a thing of beauty. For the purposes of this exploration, the scope of “beauty” has been narrowed to the physical appearance of a person, specifically, a woman. While it is true that there is and always has been a level of subjectivity and preference with regard to the perception of beauty, the lens through which beauty is judged is determined by a number of social, economic, political and cultural factors. To this end, beauty is not “in the eye of the beholder” as the meaning of that expression is understood, but rather is dominated by a comparison to an ideal that is largely a social construction.

To discover the underlying explanations of beauty standards, I have selected the women of Renaissance Italy as a case study. This choice was

made most importantly because the body of research, literature and artwork from that time period is extensive and covers all areas of this investigation including standards of beauty, culture, society, politics and economics. Additionally, despite the expansive time frame, the Italian Renaissance maintained a certain level of continuity in its values and ideals. The scope is further narrowed to the upper classes of Renaissance Italy as the peasantry and lower classes changed little from the medieval period. Rather it was the elites who truly experienced and created the cultural changes, fine arts, philosophy and literature of the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup>

This capstone is broken into four main sections. First, there is a brief overview of the Italian Renaissance and the principle themes that defined it. Second is a more in-depth discussion of a woman's role within the period and the different aspects of life including the family, politics and religion. Next is a look at the physical appearance ideal for those women. This section initially examines what the standards consisted of and the supporting evidence followed by a discussion of how each aspect of the beauty standard stems from the roles of women or the overarching Renaissance culture previously discussed. Finally, there is a section on the achievement of these standards by "methods of beauty modification"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, Elizabeth S., and Thomas V. Cohen. *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001, p. 3-4

<sup>2</sup>Callaghan, Karen A, ed. *Ideals of Feminine Beauty: Philosophical and Cultural Dimensions*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994, p. 27

as well as the merits of natural beauty as opposed to beauty achieved by such modifications.

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### **The Italian Renaissance: A Brief Overview**

The term “Italian Renaissance” refers to a period of approximately 250 years spanning from around 1350 to 1600 CE that was defined by a cultural movement based on the return of classical ideals. While the exact time frame is contested by different historians, it is widely accepted that it followed the Medieval period and that the end of the Renaissance began with the Catholic Reformation at the conclusion of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Though there existed regional differences, there was still a significant level of continuity throughout Italy at the time.

The overarching theme, and that which spurred the name “Renaissance” which means “rebirth” in French, was the rebirth of the classical ideals from the “Golden Ages” of the Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. These were reflected in a new philosophy that was later referred to as “humanism.” Humanism placed great importance on the well rounded education of the individual and also viewed the human as a rational being.<sup>4</sup> It has been defined as “a cultural and intellectual

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen, 4

<sup>4</sup> Hale, J.R, Ed. *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Italian Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 171

movement of the Renaissance that emphasized secular concerns as a result of the rediscovery and study of the literature, art, and civilization of ancient Greece and Rome.”<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the Italian Renaissance has been divided into two main eras; the Early Renaissance and the High Renaissance that followed. Over time, studies, art and philosophy continued to evolve. Perhaps the most oft cited of the Humanists of the Early Renaissance was Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch, who lived from 1304-1374.<sup>6</sup> He has been called “the father of Humanism” and some of his more famous works include his poetry and extensive letter writing, much of which was published during the Renaissance. His work had tremendous influence on fellow writers, artists and on the perception of feminine beauty.

When the Italian Renaissance is referred to, one of the first things to come to mind is the tremendous achievements in the arts, both visual and literary. Many kinds of visual art including painting, architecture and sculpture throughout the Renaissance were crafted by some of the most revered artists of all time. The Early Renaissance boasted the work of Donatello, Botticelli and Ghiberti. The “High Renaissance” so named as it was considered to be the height of culture, produced the more legendary Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and others. With regard to the

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<sup>5</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.

<sup>6</sup> Hale, 246

written word, the invention and proliferation of the printing press facilitated the spread of ideas and literature across Italy and Europe which in turn lent itself to the continuity seen within the Italian Renaissance despite the large physical area it covered. This also meant that Italy became an increasingly literate state and had one of the most significant printing industrial bases.<sup>7</sup>

Changes in social institutions at the time allowed for these artistic and intellectual developments to thrive. A re-balancing of power between the Church and the monarchies of city-states had a major impact on the formation of Humanism and the Renaissance as a whole. The Italian Renaissance began as their relationship was in flux. While much of Italy at that time was rural, the cultural centers of the Renaissance were located in concentrated urban areas.<sup>8</sup> The political system that formed was not conducive to unity by any means as it was based upon independent city-states, each with its own unique form of government and power. By the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the most significant of these states were Florence, Venice, Milan and Naples as well as the Papal State centered in Rome. Each of these cities maintained its own characteristics and slight deviations, but overall shared the same basic cultural changes which the Renaissance brought.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most importantly to this study, there is the question of the social class system. As mentioned previously, for the

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<sup>7</sup> Hale, 268

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, 7

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11

purposes of this exploration, it is most pertinent to look at urban society as the rural peasantry was affected to a significantly lesser extent by the cultural changes taking place. The social hierarchy in the urban setting ran the gamut from wealthy elites down to servants and beggars. At the top of the social ladder was the old aristocracy that originated from the nobility of the medieval era. Their actual political power varied by state. Also grouped at the top or near the top of the urban hierarchy are what were known as patricians who “emerged from the coalescence of these two groups: noble and mercantile.”<sup>10</sup> This class might be akin to what one would call the “new rich” today. They gained political clout and wealth through various commerce and business ventures. Their political gain occurred in the cities in which they resided and took part in strategic marriage arrangements for the advancement of the family. Many in the patrician class were Humanists and contributed greatly to the Renaissance by supporting artists and new technologies. Below the noble and patrician classes were a variety of other classes including merchants, businessmen, professionals and bureaucrats, artisans and servants. Courtiers were princes who increasingly took over states and created small monarchies. Often they would establish a princely court which went beyond the security responsibilities such a court might have in the medieval era and

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<sup>10</sup> Cohen, 27

gained a new cultural element that participated in the arts and social changes that came with the Italian Renaissance.<sup>11</sup>

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### **Women in the Italian Renaissance**

Now one must place women within these institutions to better understand the expectations imposed upon them. This section will primarily deal with behavioral expectations of women in different roles as well as how they were regarded on a general level. As is the case in many historical areas, women were subjugated to men and were nearly always regarded as subordinate. These conditions certainly varied between urban centers, but they all carried the same basic undertone of a patriarchal society.

The general standard for behavior for women was known as the concept of “decorum” which was essential for all women with any status to display in order to be viewed favorably. Simply put, a woman had a certain set of expectations of proper behavior. Decorum itself has religious roots. In Christianity, there are two conflicting examples of

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<sup>11</sup> Cohen, 30



women. The first is Eve and the second is Mary. The concept of Eve was used to explain the subordination of women from a religious standpoint.

To begin with, Eve was created by God from the rib of Adam, and thus was lesser than the man. Next, Eve is the one who brought on original sin by giving into the temptation from the serpent and then tempting Adam to sin against God. In this light, women were seen as immoral temptresses not to be trusted. Menstruation and child birth were seen as the perpetual punishment afforded to women as a result of their inherent sinfulness.

The second important image of a woman within Christianity, Mary, is quite the opposite. Mary was virginal, without sin, feared the Lord, and brought the Messiah to the people. This was meant to be the example for women to follow and from this example came the decorum most women tried to exemplify. They sought and were expected to appear moral and virginal, attend religious services, and understand their place as being lesser than men.<sup>12</sup>

Mary was not the only example to follow. Young women were also well versed in the lives of female saints and used them as models of moral living. There were various methods of instruction and guidance for women to follow this model.

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, David Alan, ed. *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de'Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 26

*“Christian good manners... derived from a culture and practice with a very long history that accelerated during the Renaissance and the early modern era, prompted by the appearance and spread of texts dealing specifically with education and etiquette no longer directed exclusively at ecclesiastical and court elites but at a wider public thanks to vernacular translations spread by the press.”<sup>13</sup>*

In such places as Florence where the rules of decorum were especially strict, women were also expected to attend religious services that included sermons directed at females on a regular basis.<sup>14</sup>

This led directly into the expectations of women as wives and mothers and with it laws of inheritance, ownership and women's rights. Women were used as alliance building tools between families. Once married, their main task was to produce as many heirs as possible to solidify the relationships between families and thus increase their power and clout within a given city-state. Property laws and women's rights were again something that varied greatly between regions. Some, as was the case in Florence, were far stricter than others.

Princely courts were yet another arena in which women had a specific role and expectations to fulfill. In addition to what is usually

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<sup>13</sup> Panizza, Letizia, ed. *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*. Oxford: Information Press, 2000, p. 77

<sup>14</sup> Brown, 36

expected of a woman including acting with appropriate decorum and being a good wife and mother, women at the court were expected to have additional skills. They were expected to be educated in music, literature, to be able to carry on intelligent conversation and able to act with grace at all times while making it look easy.<sup>15</sup>

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### **The Beauty Standard**

The next step is to determine what the actual standard of beauty was for women of this age. These can be determined by examining a number of different factors. Media that display or describe beauty include artwork, letters, poetry and literature. When examining an art piece from the era, it can be easy to pick out commonalities in style. However, in a lot of literature of the time, descriptions of physical beauty are often intermixed with discussions of intangible beauty like the beauty of the soul or of morals. It can be difficult to separate out the purely physical dimensions. Among others, Petrarch has been seen as the front runner in defining what beauty meant in the Italian Renaissance. The following are the most

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<sup>15</sup> Rogers, Mary, and Paola Tinagli. *Women in Italy, 1350-1650 : ideals and realities : a sourcebook*. Manchester U Pr Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 234-35

pronounced ideals common at the time, followed by any supporting evidence and inquiry into the origin of that ideal.

Perhaps one of the most straightforward elements of beauty was the skin. Pale and undamaged skin was considered the most beautiful for women. This does not just pertain to the face; the standard covers the whole body, especially those areas that are visible on a daily basis such as the neck and the hands. Damage can mean anything from a darker complexion from sun exposure to callused hands. One of the main reasons behind this standard is economic. This damage signified someone who had to work outdoors in the sun or perform manual labor of some kind, both of which are unbecoming of a lady and are characteristic of the poor. The rich aristocracy would never engage in such activity and since it has always seemed more ideal to be of a wealthier class, pale and undamaged skin evolved over time to signify beauty. These women were often paler than their male counterparts who spent more of their time out of doors and thus the men “were often charmed by the whiter skin of a “fairer” sex”<sup>16</sup> that provided a visual difference between masculine and feminine. The fairer the skin of the woman, the more feminine she appeared.

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<sup>16</sup> Cohen, 84

Evidence of this standard is found in both art and literature. In 1541, Agnolo Firenzuola, a Tuscan novelist wrote on female beauty in *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne*. He writes:

*“The cheeks should be pale yet radiant [candide], being features which possess a certain luminosity, like ivory, as well as whiteness: white alone does not imply shining like snow. The cheeks, therefore, to be called beautiful, should have a shining pallor, while the breast should be merely white.”<sup>17</sup>*

This is also evidenced in art. For example, if one were to examine portraits of ‘beautiful’ women throughout the span of the Italian Renaissance, very few if any display a woman with a dark complexion. Below are two examples of portraits painted over 50 years apart in different regions of Italy. The first is *Portrait of a Lady in Yellow* by Alessio Baldovinetti c. 1445-55 (fig.1). This painting is characteristic of the Early Renaissance when the profile painting was common. This did not change until later in the Renaissance. The second painting was painted c. 1505-7 by Raphael and is entitled *Portrait of Maddalena Doni* (fig. 2). It is recognizable as a piece from the High Renaissance because of the shift to the  $\frac{3}{4}$  pose. Despite the stylistic differences in the paintings, the skin

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<sup>17</sup> Rogers and Tinagli, 29

tone remains the same. The complexion in the cheeks as well as the whiteness of the breast described by Firenzuola is also seen in these paintings and many more like them.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

While there is some variation in the various styles of hair that present an ideal, there remains a constant, the color blonde. A probable explanation for this standard was that the humanists of the day revered writings and art from classical times describing various goddesses and that those goddesses, Venus, the goddess of love, in particular had golden colored hair. Firenzuola says that “hair, as those have written about it explain, should be fine and blond, now resembling gold, now honey, now shining as the bright rays of the sun, wavy, thick and long.”<sup>18</sup> Petrarch’s

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<sup>18</sup> Rogers and Tinagli, 29

descriptions of Laura, his ideal also mentions golden hair. Blonde hair is mentioned again and again in verse and letters of the scholars and writers of the Italian Renaissance. Evidence of this ideal is also definitely present in many works of art. The issue of hair style is not so clear cut. Classical descriptions of what beauty is in terms of hair appears to be the dominant factor influencing the preferences of the Renaissance authors. Federigo Luigini, an author from Northern Italy, notes that:

*“Virgil, describing the meeting between Venus and her pious son Aeneas, who did not know where he was, gave her locks which were loosened and blown out by the wind. However, he then made Camilla’s tied back, and also Dido’s. Hence one gathers that both styles can make a woman seem beautiful.”*<sup>19</sup>

In this instance, it appears that no regard is paid to preference, but rather complete deference has gone to the writings of antiquity. Both types of hair styles are seen in Renaissance artwork. Figures 1 and 2 above feature the golden hair color so prized. Below is an example of a Venetian painting that probably does not depict a real person, but rather an ideal (fig. 3). Blonde curly and loose hair is featured as an illustration of the ideal from antiquity and reinforced by the then contemporary literature.

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<sup>19</sup> Rogers and Tinagli, 32



Fig. 3 – Bartolomeo Veneto, *Portrait of a Lady*, c. 15

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### Methods of Beauty Modification

No one was born with all of these traits naturally, so the women of the period would resort to various methods of achieving that ideal in an alternate way. Guides and instructions on how to achieve certain effects began to be widely produced and distributed and listed everything from cosmetics to hair potions.

To begin with, not all women were born with naturally pale and luminous complexions and additionally, those who were not elite members of the aristocracy were prone to more sun exposure that caused skin damage. Some modest means for protecting the skin on the face and neck were wide brimmed hats to shield the face.<sup>20</sup> There were also a number of “treatments” detailed in various instruction manuals on beauty achievement. There were several different methods to improve the skin which ranged over a wide spectrum from completely harmless to

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<sup>20</sup> Cohen, 235



dangerously toxic.<sup>21</sup> For example, one treatment consisted of rubbing quick silver on the face to make it shine. Another was lead based and slowly poisoned the woman as it seeped through her skin.<sup>22</sup> There were even instances in which face powder contained arsenic. The Makeup was often thick and mask-like and drew a lot of criticism from those who felt that wearing makeup was a sin.<sup>23</sup>

There were processes and concoctions to style and color hair as well. To achieve the desired blond color, women would make a bleaching



Fig. 4

agent and put it in their hair and then sit out in the sun for hours at a time, being careful to avoid too much sun contact with the skin. Fig 4 is an illustration of a special hat that may have been used just for that purpose.<sup>24</sup> Chemicals and irons were used to straighten or curl the hair.

## Conclusion

<sup>21</sup> Phillippy, 6-7

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Cohen, 235

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 235

The characteristics that define beauty in a Renaissance Italy setting had their roots in antiquity and were brought to the forefront by humanist scholars, writers and artists. The way that the general public perceived beauty was not an active choice they made, but rather it was made for them by the scholars, writers and artists at the time who borrowed and idealized images from the Classical period. In other instances, such as is the case with the desirability of fair skin, both economics (the desire to be perceived as wealthy and thus beautiful), and culture (adding another level of difference between the sexes) were at play in creating the ideal.

If examined closely, this can be applied to any place in any time period by simply analyzing the context of a culture or group of people and uncovering the lens through which we perceive what is beautiful.

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