

Face it: Beauty matters to most beholders

by Lisa Reicosky

Posted Jan. 11 on a People magazine Web site was the headline: "Were You a Real-Life Ugly Betty?"

The "were" of the headline implies the magazine is looking for past "Ugly Bettys," but the few short paragraphs afterward leave a different impression.

"Do you know what it feels like to be smart, hardworking, and completely underrated because of the way you look? ...

"People is looking for real-life 'Ugly Bettys,' who, like the character America Ferrara plays on the popular TV show, are 'an ordinary girl - a slightly plump plain-Jane,' as ABC puts it. ..."

Were you? Are you? The magazine must have felt a twinge of rudeness because the request ends on an oddly upbeat note: "And remember, ugly is the new beautiful!"

BEAUTY'S FACE - Our notions of what we consider attractive may be rooted in our DNA. CNS Illustration by Scott Adrian Hinton. To which Peoria, Ill.-based sculptor Preston Jackson says, "I have never seen a so-called ugly person in my life."

Jackson might be that rare human totally unburdened by notions of what beauty is.

In People magazine lingo, "ordinary," "slightly plump" and "plain-Jane" - singularly "average" adjectives - flatten into an unsightly "ugly." Elsewhere on the Web site, People explores bikini-ready diets, a Brazilian model's death from anorexia-related complications, a 12-year-old who underwent liposuction, former supermodel Christie Brinkley's fabulous new look after a divorce scandal and Tyra Banks, another ex-supermodel, defending herself in the wake of tabloid charges that, at 5 feet 11 inches and 160 pounds, she's let herself get too fat.

What to make of the appearance of a national obsession with appearance?

Is it any wonder more and increasingly more of us pump billions annually into health clubs, hair salons, Botox injections and expensive surgeries like breast lifts and liposuction, strictly for cosmetic reasons?

Lori Daniels, an antiques dealer-turned-artist, recalls, at 8 or 9, how she thought she'd be beautiful if she were thin. By her 20s, she thought beauty equalled thin and blond.

By her late 40s, she had had an eye-lift, a face-lift and an arm-lift.

"Your face is like the door to a house," she says. "First impressions are really important."

Decades of psychological research on perceptions and consequences of physical beauty back her up.

Frank McAndrew, a psychology professor at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., points to numerous studies that suggest people considered physically attractive get better treatment, starting at birth.

Mothers bond more readily with cute babies. Handsome men earn more money. Landlords are more likely to rent to people they deem attractive. One study found people judged better looking, on average, lived longer. Another found that candidates who appeared to look more competent than their opponents were more likely to win congressional races.

Even attractive burglars tend to get shorter sentences when convicted of the crime. And in the case of rape victims, according to an old study, the more attractive the victim, the longer the sentence.

It boils down to what researchers call "the halo effect," a tendency to bestow outwardly beautiful people with inwardly beautiful characteristics.

"This plays out in all kinds of subtle ways," McAndrew says.

The research that has influenced him most is well documented. Babies, given a choice, will focus on more attractive faces over less attractive faces.

In McAndrew's view, based on evolutionary psychological studies around the world, views about beauty are not set by culture and media as much as they are hard-wired into our DNA.

"That's not to say the media doesn't carry it to extremes," he adds. "But I think that impact is overblown. If that was true, you'd find standards of beauty are very different from place to place and that standards would be different throughout history."

Instead, researchers have found that notions of beauty are built on set codes, so to speak, often found in nature or relating to natural desires to carry on the species. For instance, both men and women considered attractive - regardless of culture, history or ethnicity - have more symmetrical features, a trait also true of animals.

While ideal body sizes for women might change with the times, waist-to-hip ratios of the ideal have remained constant through different cultures and history. Tallness with broad shoulders and upper body strength is a defining standard of male attractiveness that never changes, McAndrew notes.

"To cut to the core, what we find beautiful are things that signal that people are healthy and fertile," he says. "Clear skin, a pretty face, symmetrical features indicate someone is healthy and free of diseases and parasites."

Ironically, Jackson, the sculptor who has never seen a "so-called ugly" face, is drawn to a distinctly asymmetrical view, the profile, when he's sculpting a face.

Daniels says her artistic pursuits have broadened her concept of beauty.

And what if someone doesn't have those visual cues to go by?

Carol Warren, president of the board of Peoria Area Blind People's Center, uses her ears, her imagination and, if she knows someone well, her sense of touch to gauge physical beauty.

"I know a lot about voices, tone, inflection," she says. "Music makes a difference, too. I can imagine

somebody looking a lot better when the music's nice."

It would be interesting, McAndrew says, to do a comparative study of how blind people judge beauty using voices to research projects that have shown people can reliably judge attractiveness over the telephone.

As for the media images, he points out that even "Ugly Betty" isn't really ugly.

"And the Tyra Banks thing, I'm not sure what that's about - she still looks pretty good to me."

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