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## Beauty is pain – but is it torture? Women’s Museum of California exhibit explores that question

by [LUCIA VITI](#)

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Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but is it synonymous with pain? Torture?

The Women’s Museum of California’s current exhibit, *Beauty or Torture: Society’s Demand of Perfection Examined*, showcases a woman’s quest for beauty. Focused on 19th and 20th century beauty trends, the Liberty Station venue highlights “what people of their time found aesthetically and socially valuable,” while inviting women to experience their “own deeply personal journey in pursuit of her own ideal.”



Featuring “weird” beauty trends that paralleled social climates, the exhibit questions, “How far would you go to achieve your ideal of beauty?” Posters, pictures, vintage clothing and beauty paraphernalia explore the “evolution of the impossible standards of beauty.” Methods to alter one’s appearance are “dwarfed only by the myriad of objects that have been created to do so.”

Victoria De La Torre, Ph.D., noted speaker and professor of American Women in History, toured the exhibit, acknowledging that “beauty is pain.” Historically destined for marriage, women conform to an ideal of what’s beautiful driven by marketing, advertising, and a celebrity onslaught, “all fueled by money and men.”

“And yes, it’s painful,” she said. “It’s very painful. Women suffer to be beautiful. And men decide what’s beautiful. It’s not enough to look good. We – all of the above – want you to look better. There’s nothing wrong with being attractive. But the obsession, in its extreme historical context, dates back to men who defined a woman’s role in society, what they should look like, wear and pursue. And non-conformers were labeled abhorrent deviants.”

Clothing, including corsets and wire skirts along with makeup and hair products, stilettos and decades of poster advertisements line the halls. Clothing to say the very least, constricted women in what De La Torre described as a “narrow public and private sphere as defined by men.”

“A woman’s restrictive clothing was symbolic of their restricted lives,” she explained. “Really big, wire caged skirts – caged crinolines – made it impossible for women to do anything, which was the point.”

In 1850, crinoline was introduced as a fabric – horsehair, cotton and linen – to support wide skirts. Steel-hooped, cage-crinolines replaced the stiff fabric in 1865. Extending skirts to a six-yard circumference, crinolines were hazardous. Thousands of women were engulfed in flames caught from candles or open fireplaces or killed under carriage wheels, by moving machinery, severe weather or any obstacle that bound the skirt immovable.

Corsets, an undergarment, added insult to injury. Between the 1820s and 1830s, whale-boned bodices – corsets – introduced metal eyelet holes that allowed tight lacing waistlines to wispy, 16-18-inch hourglass shapes. Over time, tight laced corsets misaligned the ribs and spine, displaced internal organs and rendered the abdomen motionless, which compromised breathing and proper digestion. Medical Books warned of the maladies caused by tight lacing corsets. In 1890, The Lancet published an article titled “Death from Tight Lacing.”

“Corsets were torturous,” said De La Torre. “Corsets perforated lungs and caused women to faint. Fainting couches suggested that women were so frail, they were unable to handle bad news. But the corsets were so tight, women literally couldn’t breathe properly, so they fainted. And yet, women wore corsets from pre-puberty until the day they died. Young girls – ages 10 and 11 – were taken inside from their years of free play, confined to the household, corseted and dressed in the day’s fashion, like miniature adults.”

Corsets and sweeping skirts were outed by Flapper dresses in the 1920s. Flapper dresses gave women an androgynous shape, designed in direct rebellion to corsets and caged crinoline skirting.

The exhibit follows suit with hair of the 19th and 20th centuries.

“Can you imagine the ingredients that were used in hair dyes?” asked De La Torre. “18th century women wore huge, powdered wigs with models inserted as decorations. The headdresses were big enough for rats to nest and lay eggs. Of course, without suspicion. So women wore baby rats on their heads and skirts that didn’t fit through doors because that’s what the court said was beautiful.”

The exhibit also includes a “Toilet Mask” for skin bleaching as well as makeup enhancements.

“Complexion had to be white, white, white,” said De La Torre. “Women never went out without an umbrella. And makeup! My favorite dates back to the Egyptians – makeup was made from fermented alligator poop. The Egyptians and Romans wore crazy concoctions to enhance their eyes, smooth their faces and hide their age.”

De La Torre spoke of how the media “loves to Pigeon hole feminists who don’t wear makeup as nonconformists” while Hollywood does nothing but conform.

“Beauty historically differed between cultures, but today’s makeup and color ideal is homogeneous,” she said. “Just watch an award’s show. Everyone – everyone – is wearing the same color of the year.”

De La Torre underscored the importance of money stemming from the cosmetic industry. More than \$16 billion – “with a B” – was spent on cosmetic surgery in 2016.

“What’s the first thing you see when you walk into a department store?” she asked. “Rows and rows of makeup and creams. The message? You’re never okay the way you are. You always, always have to better. The standards of beauty may change over time, but there’s always a standard. And if you don’t meet those standards, we can help with makeup and fashion. Can you imagine if \$16 billion was spent on hunger or getting kids out of poverty?”

De La Torre believes that today, more women rally against makeup companies for animal testing while sidestepping arguments against the abrasive, toxic and harmful chemicals that are added to its products.

According to De La Torre, in order to understand the exhibit’s 1950 magazine advertisements, a resource for the latest fashions and trends, one needs to understand the women of the 1940s.

World War II liberated women. Despite centuries of suppression for being inferior and incapable of working outside of the home, women of the ’40s entered the work force in droves. Replacing their male counterparts fighting overseas, they welded ships, built airplanes, served as test-pilots, mechanics and fulfilled civilian positions. They joined the military and even played major league baseball. Economically independent, women opened checking accounts, a historical first. But when the war ended, so did the jobs.

“For centuries, women were told that they couldn’t function as doctors, lawyers or mechanics because their brains were smaller,” said De La Torre. “Brains were measured as scientific justification for the inferiority of women. And overworked brains gave way to bearing deformed and sick children. But in the 1940s, women were needed for more than their uterus. Think of the freedom they enjoyed!”

De La Torre described the ’50s as the punishment decade following the deliverance of the ’40s. Beauty devices, makeup and clothing again reinforced the idea that women served but one role, predestined by God and nature, to be a wife and mother. Fashion magazines barraged women with a plethora of advertisements including “jar-packed” sanitized tapeworms for weight loss, Lysol infused douches and deodorants that insured women the avoidance of being “dumb” by not hiding their odor.

“The 1950s socialized women into understanding their role of getting married by standards of fashion and beauty,” continued De La Torre. “And in order to get married, you had to be pretty. Be the woman he married, they’d advertise. If not, you’ll scare your husband away. But most importantly if you don’t look this way all of the time, he’s going to leave you for someone else.”

Feminists emerging in the latter part of the ’60s and early ’70s gave way to a movement that remains today. Women cut their long hair, threw away makeup and burned girdles and curlers in bonfires to symbolize the death of traditional womanhood. Feminists demanded career and salary equality. Aprons were set ablaze at a Mother’s Day rally with chants of “Rights Not Roses.”

“Feminism is a big deal,” said De La Torre. “Feminism defines an ideal of social, economic and political equality with men. And yet, mythologies regarding the word continue to survive. Feminism doesn’t mean that you hate men. Feminism pursues equality. To be looked at as a human, not a woman. To include, not cut,

half of the population from contributing to society.”

The exhibit's most accurate example of a woman's willingness to subject herself to sheer torture is the six-inch stiletto. Long term consequences from wearing stilettos read like a ghastly horror story. Stilettos constrict feet and overload joints, causing ligament and nerve damage. Ankles are distorted, calves shorten and toes are restricted. Shortened calves cause lower back pain, spinal misalignment and muscle fatigue. Sprinkle in arthritis, bunions, joint pain, the possibility of fractures, and an increased risk of osteoarthritis, and therein lies a recipe for chronic pain.

“You can't do anything in stilettos,” added De La Torre. “And again, that's the point.”

The exhibit's modern days samples of popular beauty include photographs of Kate Moss and Kim Kardashian. De La Torre left no truth stone unturned.

“Kate Moss looks like a junkie and Kim Kardashian made her family multi-gazillionaires with a sex tap,” she said. “We need a social revolution to undo those who do nothing but perpetuate the inferior status of women.”

Perusing the exhibit, *Beauty or Torture: Society's Demand of Perfection Examined* is truly thought-provoking. While I believe that society's pressure for women to look a certain way is as ever-present as the makeup, creams, lotions, potions, hair products and plastic surgery parading to do so, the ideal for beauty is as suffocating as you make it.

For some, beauty is torture. For others, beauty is life. *Beauty or Torture* reminds us that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. For me, women who feel beautiful are beautiful. While fashion is status and trend setters strive to lay claim to fame, beauty – real beauty, comes from within.

Women's Museum of California

What: *Beauty or Torture: Society's Demand of Perfection Examined* exhibit runs through Jan. 28

Museum hours: Wednesday to Sunday noon to 4 p.m.

Where: 2730 Historic Decatur Road, Suite 103

Info: 619-233-7963, [info@womensmuseumca.org](mailto:info@womensmuseumca.org).

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