

# A CIVILIZATION OF BEAUTY

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I have often wondered whether the world's fascination with my ancestors would have evolved into the righteous 'Egyptomania' of the past two centuries without the existence of their beauty practices. Every bust, mask and painting carries the aesthetic weight of depicting beautiful Egyptians - but it was not all vanity. Each component went beyond this, imbuing symbolism, magic and function into their daily routines. The Kosmetikon papyrus, attributed to Cleopatra, and serving as both a cosmetic and medicinal recipe book, is a case in point. The fact that these practices belonged to both men and women underscored their importance to an Egyptian's humanity.

History's favourite woman of intrigue, Cleopatra, bathed in sour donkey milk, an early version of a chemical peel. This milk contained lactic acid, also known as an AHA, a popular exfoliant in modern products.

Exfoliation through hair removal was another method. The ancient Egyptians viewed body hair as a sign of uncleanness, so they either shaved or waxed using a mixture of heated sugar (or honey), lemon and water together, then leaving them to set into a firm, sticky substance. Honey, aloe vera and essential oils were then used to soothe the skin. Protection came in the form of rice bran extract, known for its ability to absorb UV light, and jasmine oil, which aids in repairing DNA damaged by the sun.

Green malachite, traditionally a copper ore, was daubed all over the eyelids up to the brow bone and associated with the magical healing power of Horus. Today, we know it possesses antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties.

For the wealthy, kohl was a mix of galena (a dark mineral containing lead sulphide) or antimony, combined with crushed

pearls, rubies, emeralds, or silver and gold. Kohl, especially when combined with the lining of the lower lid with green malachite, was used to widen the eyes. Spiritually, it protected against the Evil Eye, but medically, it was an ophthalmological saviour. Kohl would absorb UV rays and improve the immune response of the eye's lining. Nowadays, while lead toxicity is a concern, kohl, quite likely, staved off blindness for many. My mother taught me it was essentially illegal to wear makeup without eyeliner, and now I know why.

Ochre (a naturally tinted clay), pomegranate and hibiscus were all used to apply colour to the cheeks and lips. Almond, castor, olive and other oils were used for natural hair. For the men and women who could afford it, wigs were used. Often elaborate, wigs shielded the scalp from the sun, whilst the mesh structure allowed heat to escape. They prevented lice from getting cozy amidst the warmth of a nearby scalp's blood supply. So coveted, hair was listed alongside gold when trading.

The ancient Egyptians taught us that self-presentation was not trivial. Beauty was preservation in this life, as well as the next. Some mummies were buried with their makeup, or had it applied as part of their afterlife preparation: after all, Osiris had to be able to recognize them before beginning his trials of judgement. Though the body was separate from the soul and spirit, they believed that these entities needed a corporeal vessel to return to, or they might be lost. The body was considered a form that needed to last for eternity, and thus it was cared for accordingly. We can clearly see the link between beauty and the desire for immortality in the modern psyche, but for the Egyptians, it was meant more literally. In a land where gold seemed more abundant than dirt, the desire to be seen was hard to resist.

MARIAM ABDALLAH appears courtesy of Select Models.

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