

# The Truth About Beauty

It's the same in the eye of every beholder

Virginia Postrel

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## FYI

Virginia Postrel writes widely about culture, commerce, and design. She is the author of *The Substance of Style* (2003), which explores the increasing role that aesthetics and design are playing in a consumer society. Postrel has also written on economics for the *New York Times* and culture for *Atlantic Monthly*. In "The Truth About Beauty," an essay that appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in March 2007, Postrel raises serious questions about the consequences of Dove's much-admired Campaign for Real Beauty described in a press release on pages 426-427.

Cosmetics makers have always sold "hope in a jar"—creams and potions that promise youth, beauty, sex appeal, and even love for the women who use them. Over the last few years, the marketers at Dove have added some new-and-improved enticements. They're now promising self-esteem and cultural transformation. Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty," declares a press release, is "a global effort that is intended to serve as a starting point for societal change and act as a catalyst for widening the definition and discussion of beauty." Along with its thigh-firming creams, self-tanners, and hair conditioners, Dove is peddling the crowd-pleasing notions that beauty is a media creation, that recognizing plural forms of beauty is the same as declaring every woman beautiful, and that self-esteem means ignoring imperfections.

Dove won widespread acclaim in June 2005 when it rolled out its thigh-firming cream with billboards of attractive but variously sized "real women" frolicking in their underwear. It advertised its hair-care products by showing hundreds of women in identical platinum-blond wigs—described as "the kind of hair found in magazines"—tossing off those artificial manes and cel-

ebrating their real (perfectly styled, colored, and conditioned) hair. It ran print ads that featured atypical models, including a plump brunette and a ninety-five-year-old, and invited readers to choose between pejorative and complimentary adjectives: "Wrinkled or wonderful?" "Oversized or outstanding?" The public and press got the point, and Dove got attention. Oprah covered the story, and so did the *Today* show. Dove's campaign, wrote *Advertising Age*, "undermines the basic proposition of decades of beauty-care advertising by telling women—and young girls—they're beautiful just the way they are."

Last fall, Dove extended its image building with a successful bit of viral marketing: a seventy-five-second online video called *Evolution*. Created by Ogilvy & Mather, the video is a close-up of a seemingly ordinary woman, shot in harsh lighting that calls attention to her uneven skin tone, slightly lopsided eyes, and dull, flat hair. In twenty seconds of time-lapse video, makeup artists and hair stylists turn her into a wide-eyed, big-haired beauty with sculpted cheeks and perfect skin. It's *Extreme Makeover* without the surgical gore.

But that's only the beginning. Next comes the digital transformation, as a designer points-and-clicks on the model's photo, giving her a longer, slimmer neck, a slightly narrower upper face, fuller lips, bigger eyes, and more space between her eyebrows and eyes. The perfected image rises to fill a billboard advertising a fictitious line of makeup. Fade to black, with the message "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted." The video has attracted more than 3 million YouTube views. It also appears on Dove's campaignforrealbeauty.com Web site, where it concludes, "Every girl deserves to feel beautiful just the way she is."

Every girl certainly wants to, which explains the popularity of Dove's campaign. There's only one problem: Beauty exists, and it's unevenly distributed. Our eyes and brains pretty consistently like some human forms better than others. Shown photos of strangers,

even babies look longer at the faces adults rank the best-looking. Whether you prefer Nicole Kidman to Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lopez to Halle Berry, or Queen Latifah to Kate Moss may be a matter of taste, but rare is the beholder who would declare Holly Hunter or Whoopi Goldberg—neither of whom is homely—more beautiful than any of these women.

For similar reasons, we still thrill to the centuries-old bust of Nefertiti, the Venus de Milo, and the exquisite faces painted by Leonardo and Botticelli. Greta Garbo's acting style seems stilted today, but her face transcends time. We know beauty when we see it, and our reactions are remarkably consistent. Beauty is not just a social construct, and not every girl is beautiful just the way she is.

Take Dove's *Evolution* video. The digital transformation is fascinating because it magically makes a beautiful woman more striking. Her face's new geometry triggers an immediate, visceral response—and the video's storytelling impact is dependent on that predictable reaction. The video makes its point about artifice only because most people find the manipulated face more beautiful than the natural one.

In *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*, Nancy Etcoff, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School, reported on experiments that let people rate faces and digitally “breed” ever-more-attractive composite generations. The results for female faces look a lot like the finished product in the Dove video: “thinner jaws, larger eyes relative to the size of their faces, and shorter distances between their mouths and chins” in one case, and “fuller lips, a less robust jaw, a smaller nose and smaller chin than the population average” in another. These features, wrote Etcoff, “exaggerate the ways that adult female faces differ from adult male faces. They also exaggerate the youthfulness of the face.” More than youth, the full lips and small jaws of beautiful women reflect relatively high levels of female hormones and low levels of male hormones—indicating greater fertility—according to psychologist Victor Johnston, who did some of these experiments.

More generally, evolutionary psychologists suggest that the features we see as beautiful—including indicators of good health like smooth skin and symmetry—have been

rewarded through countless generations of competition for mates. The same evolutionary pressures, this research suggests, have biologically programmed human minds to perceive these features as beautiful. “Some scientists believe that our beauty detectors are really detectors for the combination of youth and femininity,” wrote Etcoff. Whether the beauty we detect arises from nature or artifice doesn't change that visceral reflex.

Perhaps surprisingly, Etcoff herself advised Dove on several rounds of survey research and helped the company create workshops for girls. Dove touts her involvement (and her doctorate and Harvard affiliation) in its publicity materials. She sees the campaign as a useful corrective. Media images, Etcoff notes in an e-mail, are often so rarefied that “they change our ideas about what people look like and what normal looks like . . . Our brains did not

evolve with media, and many people see more media images of women than actual women. The contrast effect makes even the most beautiful non-model look less attractive; it produces a new ‘normal.’”

Dove began its campaign by recognizing the diverse manifestations of universally beautiful patterns. The “real women” pictured in the thigh-cream billboards may not have looked like supermodels, but they were all

young, with symmetrical faces, feminine features, great skin, white teeth, and hourglass shapes. Even the most zaftig had relatively flat stomachs and clearly defined waists. These pretty women were not a random sample of the population. Dove diversified the portrait of beauty without abandoning the concept altogether.

But the campaign didn't stop there. Dove is defining itself as the brand that loves regular women—and regular women, by definition, are not extraordinarily beautiful. The company can't afford a precise definition of *real beauty* that might exclude half the population—not a good strategy for selling mass-market consumer products. So the campaign leaves real beauty ambiguous, enabling the viewers to fill in the concept with their own desires. Some take real beauty to mean “nature untouched” and interpret the *Evolution* video as suggesting that uncannily beautiful faces are not merely rare but nonexistent. Others emphasize the importance of character and personality. Real beauty comes from the

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**The current focus of the Campaign for Real Beauty is aimed at raising the self-esteem of girls and young women through the Dove Self-Esteem Fund.**

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inside, not physical appearance. And *Advertising Age's* interpretation is common: that Dove is reminding women that "they're beautiful just the way they are."

Another Dove ad, focusing on girls' insecurities about their looks, concludes, "Every girl deserves to feel good about herself and see how beautiful she really is." Here, Dove is encouraging the myth that physical beauty is a false concept, and, at the same time, falsely equating beauty with goodness and self-worth. If you don't see perfection in the mirror, it suggests, you've been duped by the media and suffer from low self-esteem.

But adult women have a more realistic view. "Only two percent of women describe themselves as beautiful" trumpets the headline of Dove's press release. Contrary to what the company wants readers to believe, however, that statistic doesn't necessarily represent a crisis of confidence; it may simply reflect the power of the word *beautiful*. Dove's surveys don't ask women if they think they're unattractive or ugly, so it's hard to differentiate between knowing you have flaws, believ-

ing you're acceptably but unimpressively plain, and feeling worthlessly hideous. In another Dove survey, 88 percent of the American women polled said they're at least somewhat satisfied with their face, while 76 percent said they're at least somewhat satisfied with their body. But dissatisfaction is not the same as unhappiness or insecurity.

Like the rest of the genetic lottery, beauty is unfair. Everyone falls short of perfection, but some are luckier than others. Real confidence requires self-knowledge, which includes recognizing one's shortcomings as well as one's strengths. At a recent conference on biological manipulations, I heard a philosopher declare during lunch that she'd never have plastic surgery or even dye her hair. But, she confessed, she'd pay just about anything for fifteen more IQ points. This woman is not insecure about her intelligence, which is far above average; she'd just like to be smarter. Asking women to say they're beautiful is like asking intellectuals to say they're geniuses. Most know they simply don't qualify.

### CONSIDER

- 1 Read Postrel's opening paragraphs carefully. What specific words and phrases signal to you that she may have doubts about Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty? Does Postrel echo any reservations you might have had about the Dove marketing strategy?
- 2 What evidence does Postrel offer for her central claim that beauty exists? Are you convinced by her arguments and citations that there is, indeed, a common and shared concept of beauty? Or do you agree with the Dove campaign that such notions can be broadened and redefined? Discuss the questions with colleagues, drawing on examples beyond those cited in the article.
- 3 Postrel notes that even the so-called "real" women Dove presents exhibit traits commonly associated with traditional notions of beauty: symmetry, feminine features, hourglass shapes, good teeth, and so on. Is Dove's definition of beauty really more inclusive than those it criticizes?

### COMPOSE

- 4 In "The Truth About Beauty," Postrel concludes that adult women may not be as insecure or unsatisfied with their looks as the Dove campaign assumes. But what effects might unrealistic advertising images (or idealized faces and bodies) have on younger women or children? In a short essay, explore the question, drawing on the Dove campaign, Postrel's essay, or other materials you may be familiar with.
- 5 What, if any, consequences might the Dove campaign and Postrel's response have for *men*? Write a short essay to sort out any gender differences (or similarities) when it comes to definitions of physical beauty. For instance, might men react one way to the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty in public and another way in private?