

**100 000 YEARS OF
BEAUTY**



MODERNITY / GLOBALISATION

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emancipated beauty

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For a proto-feminist philosopher like Simone de Beauvoir, 'emancipated beauty' would not have been a contradiction in terms.

For Beauvoir, in order to be truly free every woman must attain economic independence (no reliance upon a man, even if she loves him), gain the right to vote (with all accompanying legal rights), be motivated by passion for her work and strive for freedom by way of an individual life project. She must labour against society's oppressive conditioning of 'women' – the 'second sex' as compared to men. But these goals need not exclude women's participation in self-beautifying rituals in order to appear attractive to potential partners, male or female. In addressing the absurdity of the choice of appearing either smart and ugly or else dumb and pretty, Beauvoir summed up the situation: 'Misogynists have often reproached intellectual women for "neglecting themselves"; but they have also preached this doctrine to them: if you wish to be our equals, stop using makeup and nail polish.' Her response is simple: 'This piece of advice is nonsensical. Precisely because the concept of femininity is artificially shaped by custom and fashion, it is imposed upon each woman from without; she can be transformed gradually so that her canons of propriety approach those adopted by the males: at the seashore – and often elsewhere – trousers have become feminine. That changes nothing fundamental in the matter: the individual is still not free to do as she pleases in shaping the concept of femininity. The woman who does not conform devaluates herself sexually and hence socially, since sexual values are an integral feature of society. One does not acquire virile attributes by rejecting feminine attributes...'

Thus Beauvoir's theory, combining liberation and equality with beauty and femininity, defies the long-standing and constrictive dichotomy that says women must choose one or the other. Beauvoir's most famous phrase, 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman', entails a life-long struggle against cultural, religious and philosophical norms of inequality and the restrictive ideals of beauty those norms have imposed since the days of Aristotle and Confucius. On Beauvoir's view, one can be both free from oppression and beautiful, but one must uncompromisingly shun the route of dependence upon a man, even if for some women this may seem easier and 'natural'. Women, particularly between the ages of eighteen and thirty, must focus on building self-confidence in order to become free. Emancipated beauty does not sit idly by;

We Can Do It!



she grows by doing and improving her self. In many ways these goals match the classical philosophical values of virtue and character, qualities denied to women for centuries. It is not coincidental that this picture of women's emancipation mirrors recent history. Not until women entered the workforce at the end of the nineteenth century during the industrial revolution did they earn sufficient wages both to gain independence from the constrictions of marriage and concurrently to work towards suffrage and full representation under the law.

In the early twentieth century, conservatives skilfully used appeals to beauty to halt women's march towards equality. To combat the education of girls, they argued that learning would lead them astray from their biological and 'natural' role – to incarnate beauty and be chaste, faithful and devoted wives and mothers. The suffragettes who demanded the same rights as men were routinely caricatured in newspapers and on postcards as large, mannish-looking women wearing glasses. Worse, they were stigmatised as repellent aberrations who traduced the ideals of beauty and femininity by abandoning their offspring. Newspapers depicted their husbands as alone at home, surrounded by crying children, while the women were out selfishly demanding the right to vote.

In response to this anti-feminist propaganda, the British organisers of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU, 1906–14) promoted a more positive, compelling and attractive image of woman as guardian and educator, whose vote would benefit all oppressed women and children. Fashion also played an important role. The WSPU adopted a combination of colours, purple, white and green – called the 'regimental colours' – for embroidered silk banners, hats, sashes worn around the waist, shawls and jewellery, which formed the uniform for parades and big demonstrations. As the first political organisation to use fashion to underpin a social movement, the WSPU won women to 'the cause'. Combining politics and pragmatism, the militants never gave up their distinctive dress throughout the long fight for their rights. The right to vote did not impact personal relationships or domestic life, and it was never intended to prevent women from being attractive.

There is no better portrayal of the active woman freed from the constraints of the household than the poster depicting Rosie the Riveter, the symbol of millions of women invited to do 'men's work' for the war effort while men were away serving their country in the Second World War. Once gainfully employed outside the home, it was difficult for these women to return after the war to the dull routine of domestic life. A new form of beauty appeared, expressing the inner qualities of strength, patriotism, hard work and determination, similar to what was called 'virtue' in Classical times. Rosie's beauty had nothing to do with flirtatious smiles or downcast eyes, and went well beyond surface appearance. She flexes her muscles to show that she can do it! Her beauty is manifested in her actions and determination – in line, had she but known it, with Beauvoir's opinion: there is nothing passive about beauty.

Several decades later trousers became standard and women were able to dress like men, making inroads in the worlds of business, law, education and medicine, without sacrificing either beauty or comfort. Free to dress as they choose, now they increasingly occupy positions of power and influence. Sports stars like the Williams sisters prove that today ideal beauty combines strength and talent, in a return to Beauvoir's message of balance between the intellectual and the physical, the liberation of woman and her stylish appearance. ■