Beautiful and ugly, moral and immoral

Physical appearance is one's personal calling card, and "beauty is power!" newspaper ads of the 1930s declared. But the view of what type of body is beautiful has varied greatly depending on the place and the era. It's even possible for multiple aesthetic canons to co-exist in one and the same country. What is considered beautiful and pleasing in a given culture reflects the dominant aesthetic views and worldview. Ideals of beauty serve as boundary markers in society, distinguishing people and groups from one another. At the same time various ornamentation practices give people the possibility to modify their appearance and make it easier to belong to a group. While aesthetic ideals put pressure on the individual, they also offer the possibility to forge one's own identity.

The most common means of body ornamentation and modification is clothing. Clothing and accessories can highlight and accentuate certain parts of the body and conceal others, or hide defects or give the body a totally new form. For example, a woman could attain an hourglass figure using a corset, although sometimes at the cost of her health, while a tournure emphasised the posterior. Farm girls' slender waists were highlighted by a belt tied around the midsection, while a slight bulge below under the belt was considered comely. Capacious woollen stockings padded with strips of clothing wrapped around the legs or flax tow stuffed in a stocking leg gave farm women a robust look to their legs that was considered attractive.

Alongside aesthetic values and fashions, clothing was also affected by moral standards. Clothes protect the body not only from natural forces but, especially important, also shield it from the eyes of others, especially those of the opposite sex. It is important to avoid underdressing, although the views of what is sufficient attire have varied. Baring too much skin can be an affront to good manners and morals. For example, in the late 19th century, it was not considered proper for ladies to go out of the house without wearing a hat and gloves. Only occasionally could an ankle flash from under a long dress. Corsets, which gave the body a certain

Baroness Constance Alexandra Natalie von Ungern-Sternberg with a tournure, ca 1870. National Archives of Estonia. RA, EAA.1674.3.1171.2

A corset purchased in 1905, worn in "church and at parties, you couldn't do work in it". Estonian National Museum. ERM A 578:245, Sindi.

Plump thighs were considered comely for women in Estonia. Women's stockings. Paistu Parish, 19th century. Estonian National Museum. ERM 5793.

A modern facial massage roller from the 1920s. Estonian National Museum.

shape, also had a moral significance showing the woman's moral rectitude; ditching the corset was seen as a sign of disreputability. Sartorial standards for peasants were looser, especially in a work setting. Moral opprobrium was levelled at the wearing of clothing, accessories or fashions usually associated with the opposite sex. Examples include trousers for women, and women's hair that was too short, or in the case of men, too long.

By the 1920s, body ideals for men and women had changed substantially. The hourglass figure achieved through corsets was supplanted by a more slender, youthful figure. The new 'natural' form emphasised straight lines and a slender body image, which unfortunately was not fully compatible with curvaceousness. To meet standards of beauty, an ample bosom had to be concealed with brassieres, until shapely curves came into fashion again.

The corset was supposed to be replaced by the women's own muscles. In the 1920s and 1930s, Estonian women were encouraged to do moderate physical training to stress their personal responsibility for their body. Through exercises, even a more homely individual could become fetching. One had to take care of one's physique, develop a nice posture and gait, which also promoted general health needed for child-bearing. Women were persuaded that, with strong will, they could work wonders with their bodies, although they were also expected to remain feminine looking.

In the 1920s, women's clothing became more revealing. As hemlines rose, women's legs increasingly became objects of both admiration from men as well as the target of criticism. An attractive leg could be neither too stout or nor too twiggy. Newspapers promoted ideas of what the proportions of the perfect leg were, sometimes even providing exact measurements. Beautiful bodies were on display at beaches in the 1920s and 1930s, where bathers tested the limits of permissiveness. Women's swimsuits became skimpier and exposed the legs, back and cleavage, finally the midriff as well, leaving few ways to conceal the body's shortcomings. In sports and at the beach, women also started wearing trousers, which became broadly accepted in other places only in the 1960s.

The ideal for a respectable, well-off male in the 19th century was typically quite rotund. A leaner and more muscular ideal started emerging toward the end of the century. As society modernised, there was increasing concern about men being 'overcivilised' and physically soft, and so fitness was seen as a perfect antidote for this trend. Physical training was intended as a hedge against the ills of a sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy conditions of modern life, warding off weakness, fatigue and neurasthenia.

At the turn of the 20th century, public appearances by strongmen and a few strongwomen at fairs and circuses became popular. Legendary figures like

Ed. Hansum electric curlers, 1930s.
Estonian National Museum. ERM A 712:26.

Shaving accessories belonging to Karla Kruusalu (1922–2008). Karla would shave at the kitchen table prior to taking a sauna. He used a razor all his life and shaved in front of the mirror, applying soap lather he prepared in a cup. From time to time he had to replace his brushes. While he was given an electric razor as a gift, he did not like it and passed it on to his son-in-law. Estonian National Museum. ERM A 1056:3–5.

Ad poster for Estonian professional strongwoman Maria Loorberg (1881–1922), who performed as Loors. Estonian Sport and Olympic Museum. ESM Fp 37:112 A 67.

Georg Hackenschmidt, Georg Lurich, and Aleksander Aberg were joined by hundreds of local celebrities. These figures were seen as the forerunners of body builders. In the Soviet Union, gymnastics were in disfavour or even prohibited – bodybuilding and communism didn't go together well so for years it was a half-underground pursuit. Yet a hypermuscular body did not become the universal male ideal. As the standard of living rose and anti-obesity propaganda increased, many men began favouring a less beefy look.

Estonians' ancestors put a premium on natural beauty, emphasised with whatever means were at hand. The peasantry took a dim view of makeup even in the early 20th century. In the 1920s, after the war had devastated people's minds and bodies, youthfulness became particularly extolled, youthfulness and an appealing face was seen as the key to happiness and professional and romantic success. Cosmetic products became widely available and more accepted, along with increasing emphasises on nature's endowment not being enough. In beauty sections of newspapers, readers were told that modern makeup could make women look like their full-grown daughters.

In the 19th century, a milk-white complexion was considered attractive, but then suntanned skin came into fashion. Cosmetics firms in the 1920s and 1930s started advertising bronzing creams rather than lightening products. Magazines also advertised more personal care products for men from the 1930s on, mainly shaving creams and hair care accessories. Yet everyday facial and body care for men has become the norm only in the last decades.

Attitudes to body hair have varied over the years. Hair, eyebrows, eyelashes and beards are accepted and are grown and sculpted. Yet there is more of a push to rid oneself of 'undesirable' hair, which can include pubic hair and armpit hair, leg and arm hair, and conspicuous nose and ear hair. The same is true for hair that bucks expectations, such as women having hair on areas of the body more associated with men – such conditions have even been associated with hygiene, morals and intellectual capacity. Many women consider pressure to remove facial and leg hair a foolish social norm, yet follow its dictates anyway, feeling that their reputation is at stake. On the other hand, too little hair can cause problems for men.

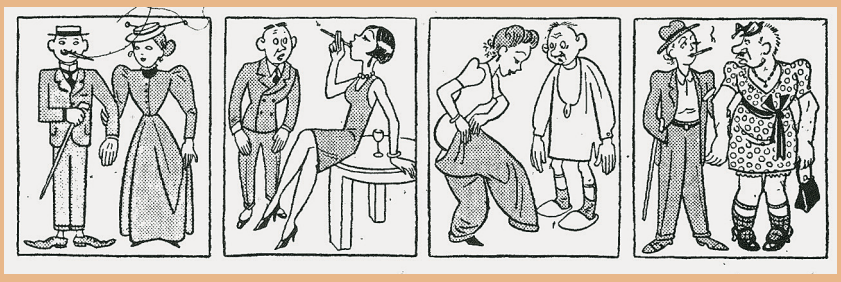
In Western culture, a tattooed body was long considered provocative. It was seen as a sign of belonging to a foreign culture, as a criminal affiliation, or it could signal that one was a sailor or soldier or a member of an alternative subculture. Over 20 years, tattoos have made a transformation from stigma to a totally normal way of adorning the body. Today, technology even allows existing images to be re-tattooed or removed. There is no such thing as "forever ruined skin".

A person's smell is something unique, intimate and personal, akin to an invisible but yet boundlessly important part of the body. The smell of a person's body

The Palm brothers, sportsmen from Tartu, 1911.
Estonian Sport and Olympic Museum. ESM F 20:325 C 21.

Women gymnasts from Kalev sport society, 1933/34.
Estonian Sport and Olympic Museum. ESM F 26:79 album.

Bathers at Tallinn's Pirita Beach, 1920s. Photograph by Karl Akel.
Estonian History Museum AM 12854:226 F 5496:226.
In the post-World War One era, many mixed beaches were opened where men and women mingled. The contemporary beach culture also drew criticism, for example Ants Laikmaa commented: "I have lived abroad for years and seen the local beaches but I have never seen such [...] teeming as disgustingly stands out in Pirita: all this careless, unappealing slouching and lazing around, young men pulling young women this way and that among the strolling crowds, women's legs and arms waved in the air – this is not appropriate for a public bathing beach such as our Pirita." (*Päevaleht*, 14 August 1929).



Progress.
1) In the old days it was easy to tell the difference between men and women based on external characteristics.
2) Then women started adopting men's customs: first, cigarettes …
3) … then they put on men's trousers.
4) And in future, if we want to tell them apart, men will have no option but to don a skirt.
Cartoon in the Tallinna Post newspaper, 18 August 1939.

Tattooed prisoner at Tallinn Central Prison, 1992.
National Archives of Estonia. EFA.204.0.262514.

Perfume vending machine, 1958. Used in the Faculty of Economics at the University of Tartu. University of Tartu Museum. ÜAM 1740:1 Aj.

can be almost imperceptible or stifling, seductive or repellent. The Western idea of what a 'good' smell is has changed dramatically over time. Smell is not only a sensory perception (i.e. a personal feeling); it is also a social and cultural phenomenon that evolves apace with fashions, styles and standards. In the early 20th century, lavender water and delicate eau de cologne were almost the only fragrances that most women were willing to use. Today modern society is largely deodorised, with artificial smells gaining ground. In the recent past, though, it was often possible to distinguish a Soviet person from a Western tourist by smell, as strange as that might seem. Today the smell of perspiration is not considered seemly in polite society, and is accepted only in certain situations such as sport.

Today people worry constantly about their appearance and level of physical fitness, and exercise and diet are an important part of their daily lives. The social space around us is saturated with images of the ideal body and advertisements for goods and services said to achieve it. Yet the body-positive movement has also gained momentum in recent decades, emphasising the right of all people to feel comfortable with their body regardless of what it is like. In a democratic society, it is considered important not to stigmatise or ostracise people who do not conform to the predominant body idea or people with special needs.