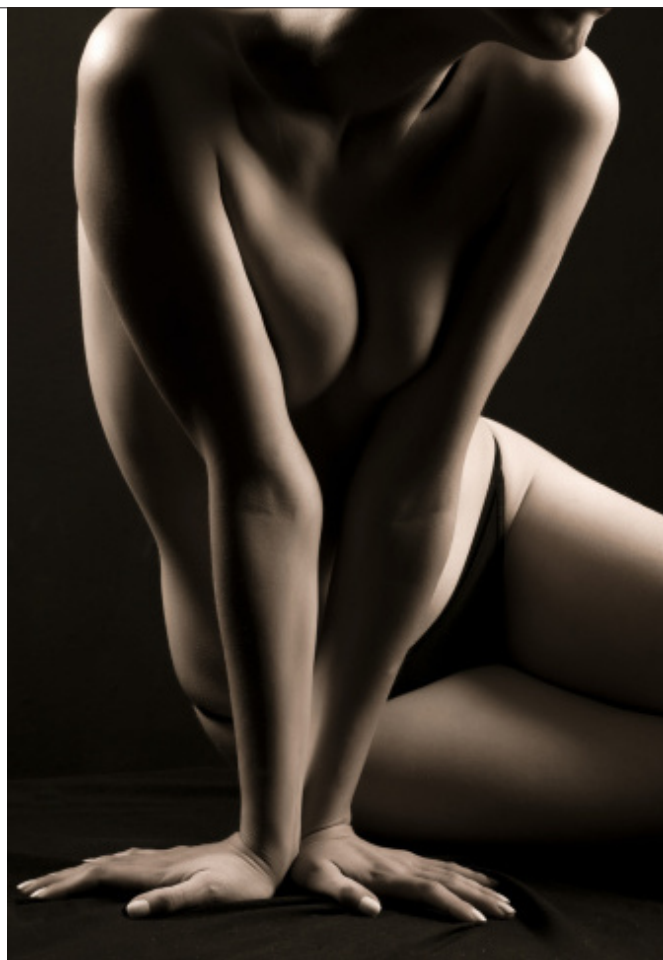


# THE *(real)* TRUTH ABOUT BEAUTY

ATTRACTIVENESS *does* MATTER. SO, DISCOVER THE SECRETS OF DANCING LIKE EVERYONE'S WATCHING WHILE STILL GROOVING TO YOUR OWN RHYTHM.

by Amanda Castleman



**S**UN FINALLY GLAZES THE SEA, after winter's grizzle, and cherry blossoms ruffle in the breeze. I text my pal, a 48-year-old single woman: "Let's walk five miles along the marina." "Will haul my big bottom over there," she taps back. "Must get smaller ... need a boyfriend :)."

I protest, of course, in the way of good friends the world over: "Your curves rock, honey! The right man will love 'em."

I'm right. And I'm wrong. I hate that.

Experts suggest that men unconsciously gravitate toward hourglass figures and other signs of feminine fertility such as big eyes, flowing hair, and symmetrical faces. And they're not the only ones who pay attention to attractiveness. Women also smile more at cute babies and consider handsome colleagues — of either gender — smarter, Stanford professor Deborah L. Rhode points out in her 2010 best-seller *The Beauty Bias*. She writes that unattractive Americans receive lower damage awards and weaker performance reviews. They're more likely to be single and underpaid. "Beauty may be only skin deep," she notes, "but that is deep enough to confer an unsettling array of advantages."

In short, packaging distracts us humans. Intellectually, we recognize the full sweep of women's allure: the kaleidoscope of wisdom, humor, bravery and generosity, plus the sexiness of ambitions achieved and a gazillion other traits. We cheer along the underdog heroine, because her big heart and plucky spirit can — and should — win the day.

Then we obsess about Shakira's hips and Michelle Obama's arms. We compare our bikini-worthiness to race car driver Danica Patrick's. And oh how we envy the confidence of actress Helen Mirren, a 66-year-old still celebrated for shucking her clothes on-screen ...

But why are we worrying about all this in 2011? Shouldn't we get over Natalie Portman's porcelain-doll face long

enough to praise her Harvard degree — not to mention her scientific papers on enzymes and child development?

## → CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Like it or not, our bodies influence status, sexuality, self-identity, and social encounters. Despite all our women's lib and meditation about inner beauty, humans remain hard-wired for Felina, not femstaches. Anyone who bucks the trend should be prepared to ride out the reverb, from wooing, to the workplace, to places of worship.

Beauty *does* matter. So what are you gonna do about it?

Today, nutrition, leisure, and medicine give affluent people unprecedented control over their appearance. Biology

*Pretty has its price — and its perks.*

may govern the landscape, but modern women get to program the GPS ... any darn way we please: from dyes to diets, veneers to vaginoplasty, Botox to breast reduction, to just not bothering.

Left to their own devices, prehistoric humans lived about 25 to 30 years — not nearly long enough to worry about their LinkedIn profile pictures. So like most folks, I'll take nurture over nature. Why not trim or tweak or calorie count, just the same as any other self-improvement? Especially when pretty packaging might help advance other goals, such as that promotion or retirement to Provence?

We stalk beauty ... and really knuckle into the task, too, spending \$200 billion worldwide each year growing prettier, shinier and shapelier. American ladies spend a lifetime average of \$449,127 each for beauty products, a study published in *Newsweek* revealed. Five percent of that sticker shock is from manis and pedis. The body registers 10 percent of

that, without even ringing up invasive procedures such as liposuction (\$2,803) or breast augmentation (\$3,541), two of women's greatest elective-surgery hits. Eyelid surgery, tummy tucks, and nose reshaping also top the charts, according to a 2010 report by The American Society

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*Cha-ching!*

So many beauty-seekers shun the knife and try to control the fork instead. Our

country tips the scales at 68 percent overweight or obese, says the National Center for Health Statistics. And it bothers us intensely — enough that half the people surveyed online would trade a year of life to be slender, says Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity.

Luckily, the Garden State knows how to handle dangerous curves — and not just hairpin turns in the Wantage Foot-hills. Its main ethnic groups include Italians, Latinos, Germans, Indians and African-Americans, plus a plentiful spicing of Pacific Islanders. In such a lush gene pool blossomed the first Miss America pageant: Atlantic City, 1921. Forty-seven years later, feminists converged there and attacked the contest's "chauvinism, commercialization of beauty, racism and oppression of women." No bras were, in fact, harmed in the making of these points. Protestors simply tossed undergarments into a "Freedom Trash Can," along with girdles, curlers, tweezers, and

high-heeled shoes. The beauty brouhaha has continued in more recent times, from anti-pornography crusader and Camden native Andrea Dworkin to the over-roomed manhunters of The Style Network's reality-TV show *Jerseylicious*.

Where to start with such a wide spectrum?

→ MAKE YOUR OWN LUCK

South Orange resident Georgiana Hart prefers “natural things first ... choices that are both happy and healthy,” such as exercise, eating well, and not smoking. At 70, the nurse practitioner still line dances in her junior high school graduation skirt and just hiked Peru's arduous, five-day Salkantay Trek. But she admits to “a little vanity” — Lasik when cataracts threatened, and plastic surgery on her lower face. “I just didn't like that I looked so much older than I felt,” she says.

Following in the footsteps of women like Hart, the baby boomers have been

rewriting how we view bodies, and aging, and aging bodies. Ewing-based plastic surgeon Gary A. Tuma notes: “More than ever, people are expected to actively do things to continue projecting a younger appearance.” Shows like *Dr. 90210* and

Our reinventions can — and should — be as endlessly varied and delightful as the beauty we were born with.

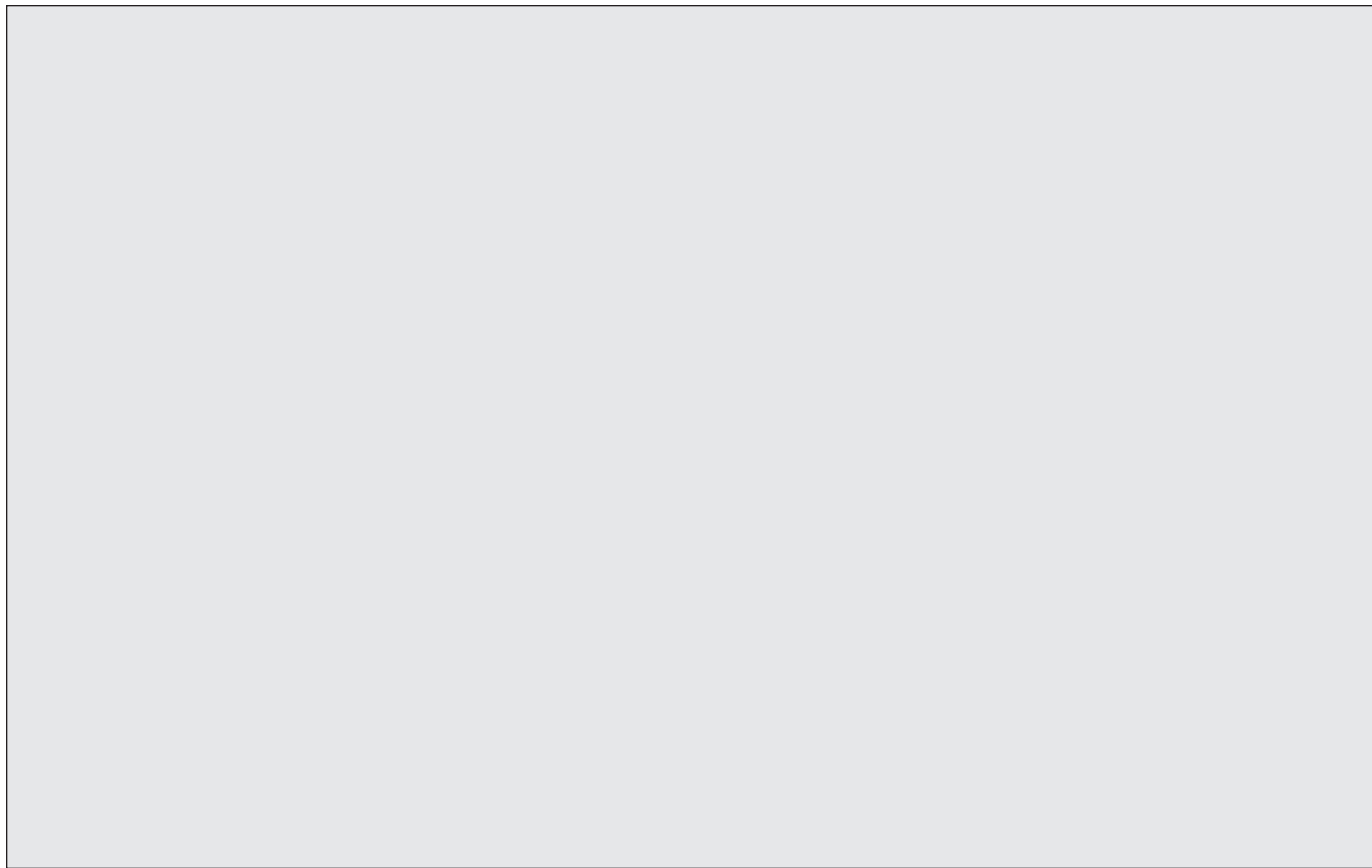
*The Real Housewives* series highlight the possibilities, he says. “The stigma has largely disappeared.”

Nip and tuck has gone mainstream — just another boost alongside antioxidant tea and reading *The Girl with the Dragon*

*Tattoo*. Men, minorities and younger people increasingly turn to cosmetic surgery, though ages 40–54 line up for half of America's annual 13.1 million procedures. At clinics in Chester and Summit, plastic surgeon Larry Weinstein now sees more Hispanics and Asians, due to population shifts. “The owners of a Vietnamese nail parlor — all three sisters — came in recently for breast augmentations. It was their American Dream.”

The boundlessly enthusiastic surgeon also does a lot of mommy makeovers. “We can eliminate that pooch, make the stomach flat again, and restore normal volume to the breasts,” Weinstein says. “It's amazing how much more confidence women have then. Sparkle in the eye. A different type of step.”

Linda, a Morris County homemaker and mother of four daughters, wanted such extra wattage. Now 57, she started cosmetic enhancements at 40. First some face work, like erasing her eyes' dark



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circles, then breast reshaping, followed by liposuction on her knees and upper thighs. “It makes your skin really saggy. So I started working out and have been doing that ever since. Now I’m more toned. My husband was like, ‘Why are you doing this? You’re fine.’ Before the last time he was mad, but he still supported me.”

That final round included a partial facelift, plus a chemical peel that scarred slightly. “Enough is enough. I’ve got to move on,” she says. “I don’t want to look like a freak of nature. I want to age and do it respectfully. I don’t like wrinkles, but I need to accept them after a good battle.”

I envy her serenity from my trenches, as I battle back from thyroid disease to my usual athletic size 8. I cook vegan, slow the red wine to a trickle, and work out one to two hours daily. These habits I’m building could sustain me physically and mentally for decades. Unfortunately, that doesn’t reduce my resentment as I gnaw baby carrots on deadline instead of Doritos. But I want to be strong and lithe again. I want to stand-up paddleboard without worrying about my silhouette. And I really want my bra underwires to stop setting off airport metal detectors.

That’s my road map for feeling more confident. More alive. But others find different directions, from sharper cheekbones to thighs trim enough for this season’s sheer maxi dresses. Every one of us, we’re all right. Nobody’s wrong. I love that. Our reinventions can — and should — be as endlessly varied and delightful as the beauty we were born with.

Pretty has its perks ... and its price. Healthy choices balance those elements — and the bigger picture, too. The careers we carve, homes we build, lives we touch. The things we learn and make and share. The ways we open our hearts.

Because ultimately, those qualities shine longest and brightest ... As women’s rights pioneer Marie Stopes once declared: “You can take no credit for beauty at 16. But if you are beautiful at 60, it will be your soul’s own doing.” \*

