

The Female Beautiful Face

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As a facial plastic surgeon practicing in New York City, I have followed the evolution of the female face over decades in the beauty media—mainly, fashion and culture magazines like *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Glamour* in close relationship with the television and movie industries—and how that evolution has contributed to a contemporary standard of female beauty. The casual observer may have the misimpression that the beautiful female face is static or constant. In fact, change is the constant, and having a historical understanding of change in facial beauty and how quickly or slowly it has occurred provides a context for discussion with patients about what permanent facial change is possible, not possible, or inappropriate when they present for aesthetic procedures with a portfolio of beautiful faces clipped or printed from the media for reference. Here I briefly review the evolution of female beauty and its implications for aesthetic medicine.

Hollywood screen stars defined female beauty in America in the first half of the 20th century, when actresses like Lillian Gish, Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson, and Greta Garbo in the 1920s; Marlene Dietrich and Jean Harlow in the 1930s; Lauren Bacall in the 1940s; and Audrey Hepburn in the early 1950s were the symbols and the epitome of beauty. No one today seeking aesthetic surgery in my practice asks to look like these movie stars, but they are worth mentioning as a baseline for trends in female beauty that continue today. Besides being talented and beautiful, these Hollywood stars were handpicked by a small group of studio executives whose vision defined the era's collective concept of beauty, and their images appeared frequently on the covers of movie magazines like *Motion Picture Classics* and *Photoplay*. In the early 20th century, these and other women's interest magazines like *Vogue* often rendered women as graphic illustrations in idyllic or phantasmagoric settings. As history progressed into the late 1950s, magazine cover illustrations became more realistic and were interspersed with photography, but the photography was heavily slanted toward then-contemporary fashion; the models' faces were not the center of attraction.

That changed in the mid-1960s when the cover girl began her reign. There was a definite "look" to the beautiful face that trended across the covers of most major women's interest magazines during the second half of the 1960s, personified by Twiggy (model Lesley Hornby Lawson) on the cover of *Vogue* in 1967. Hers was a gamine heart-shaped face, with big, deep-set, sculpted upper lid eyes, a small, narrow chin, and a small, upturned nose. Twiggy's international success as a model suggested a near-universal standard of beauty, but in reality her image and the beautiful face of any cover girl are selected by the editors of women's



Twiggy (Lesley Hornby Lawson) on a 1967 French *Vogue* cover. She was declared The Face of 1966 and Woman of the Year 1967 by the British press and was featured on an iconic *Vogue* cover in the United States the same year. Her facial features epitomized cover girl standards of beauty in the 1960s. Source: Historic magazine cover from voguegraphy.wordpress.com.

interest magazines, principals of modeling agencies, art directors at advertising agencies, clients seeking product representation, and photographers who hire the models. It was and is a tight group of beauty deciders.

Throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s, cover girls' faces had consistent features: high eyebrows, deep-set eyes, and always the smallish, slightly elevated nose. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the "look" began to change. The cover girls' eyebrows lowered, the upper eyelids appeared less sculpted and deep, the nose became longer, and the lips became fuller. This shift in beauty held steady until early in the 1990s, when an off look appeared. Exaggerated features, with disproportionately large lips and noses on faces with an almost angry look, became popular. While not ubiquitous, the look appeared often enough to indicate a momentary trend. Someone with "beauty authority" decided it was beautiful, but for only a short time.



A *Vogue* cover of 1990 featuring Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Tatjana Patitz, Christy Turlington, and Cindy Crawford. By mid-decade these and several other “supermodel” women would rise in influence to dominate every women’s magazine cover. Source: Historic magazine cover from Amazon.com.

In 1992, an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, “[The Big Tweeze](#),” documented a sudden shift. The eyebrows of the beautiful woman took a leap upward, mimicking the movie glamour of the 1940s and 1950s. From 1992 through 1995, the high-arched brow was combined with the ingénue appearance of a waif-like youthful face featuring larger lips, big eyes, and small jaw.

In 1995, the supermodel emerged. A small group of highly paid women—among them Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Christy Turlington, Linda Evangelista, Tatjana Patitz, Claudia Schiffer, and Kate Moss—were declared cover girl royalty. Into 1997, most important fashion magazines displayed at least one of these women on their covers. Then a disquieting look emerged, a facial appearance that ran from blank nonexpression and emaciation to one of almost glaring anger, a look some called “heroin chic,” possibly a reaction to the robust healthy look of the supermodel. It lasted about a year.

In 1998, supermodels nearly disappeared from the magazine covers for unclear reasons. Whether because the “beauty deciders” got tired of the same faces or for economic reasons—one of the supermodels is reported to have said, “I don’t get out of bed for less than \$10,000”—a new paradigm began. The beautiful female face on the important fashion magazine covers was no longer a single look. Physical attractiveness com-

bined with ability, talent, wisdom, and personality became the standard. In other words, the celebrity, mostly in the form of movie stars and entertainers, was back. To this day, the current message seems to be that beauty alone is not enough. Individual attractiveness, even with flaws, combined with talent and personality now defines female beauty. It is as if we have cycled back to the beginning of the 20th century.

The small upturned nose with a deeply curved dorsum was most desirable in the generation that sought rhinoplasty in the 1960s. Patients now want today’s stronger, straighter cover girl nose, so cartilage grafting techniques were introduced to widen and lengthen the nose. Over the years, as cover girls’ brow position relative to the superior orbital rim has moved up and down, surgical procedures followed that allowed repositioning of the periosteum under the brow to place the brow at a new level or allow brow repositioning by directly fixing the brow to frontal galea via an eyelid incision. The sculpted upper lid of the early cover girl evolved to a much fuller lid. Eye lift (blepharoplasty) techniques accommodated this change, leaving much of the upper lid fat in place, repositioning the fat, or grafting fat in the upper lid sulcus. As fuller lips became constant, so lip implants and filler material became a subject of interest at facial plastic surgery meetings. Surgical innovation followed the evolution of American beauty.



Julia Roberts on a 2012 *Vanity Fair* cover. She is typical of the celebrity cover girl who replaced supermodel covers at the end of the 1990s. Facial beauty combined with ability, talent, and personality has again become the standard for cover girl status, mirroring criteria from the early 20th century. Source: Historic magazine cover from Popsugar.com.

For facial plastic surgeons, these slowly evolving trends in facial beauty have special significance. Patients seeking consultation for aesthetic facial change often bring photographs of current cover girls from women's interest magazines. Our task is to explain to patients the relevancy of individual facial proportion. An attractive nose, eyelid, cheekbone, or eyebrow position as seen on a celebrity has relevance only to that particular face. A near exact replication of a celebrity facial feature on a very different face may well be inappropriate.

Rather than focus on cover girl features, a much more productive approach is to understand how the patient is thinking about herself and to match the patient's "inner face" to her outer face. Our patients should understand that we can only do so much. Even a master surgeon is limited by the nature of human anatomy, and most of us are well aware that there is beauty in all faces and that each of us is a "beholder" of beauty. The key question we must ask every patient is, "How do you think this surgery will change your life?" The right answer is, "It won't. I will just feel better about myself." The wrong answer is anything else.

Patients who are well suited for aesthetic facial plastic surgery have a universal contradictory request—"I want to change,

but I don't want to look different." It is a perfect segue into the goals of aesthetic surgery. In congenital and hereditary cases, the goal is to remove the eccentricities and asymmetries of appearance without causing an exaggeration or different perceived abnormality. In facial rejuvenation cases, the goal is to remove the perceived stigma of age without reversing the appearance to an incongruous age or to a look that speaks of obvious plastic surgery.

I will continue to watch magazine covers to see how the beautiful female face evolves. For my patients, whether they seek or receive surgical or nonsurgical procedures, my hope is that when they look into a mirror they see their own individual beautiful face.

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