
Aileen Ribeiro, Professor Emeritus of the History of Dress from the Courtauld Institute, London has written extensively on costume and fashion in Western society from the seventeenth century to the present day with a specific focus on dress in art. In this book, Ribeiro departs from the study of costume to focus on the use of cosmetics on the female face in art, and how make-up has celebrated and enhanced the idea of beauty over time. She specifically clarifies that this book is not a comprehensive survey, but focuses on selective works of art and writings on beauty from the Western tradition of the Renaissance to the start of World War II.

First, Ribeiro discusses definitions of beauty, which she points out are very difficult to pin down. She also delineates the differences between ideal and real beauty. For example, in the Renaissance, writings on beauty focused upon a spiritual ideal based on virtue, yet with the rise of the individual and the ideas of humanism, real women became concerned with presenting themselves, and cosmetics were used to enhance their appearance. The complex terminology of make-up is also explored as with the term "paint " which from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries was a negative one that referred to often poisonous mineral substances applied to the face as opposed to the term "cosmetics" which helped the health and general appearance of the skin and hair.

In the eighteenth century "the toilette," or act of making-up and dressing, became important to women of the upper classes, and women embraced the artifice of make-up. With the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a return to the simplicity of appearance and a more subtle use of make-up. The nineteenth century saw the wider democratization of cosmetics, and towards end of the nineteenth century, make-up became legitimized for women to use to enhance their appearance. From the early twentieth century to the start of World War II, make-up was used by women to beautify and thus empower themselves, and the beauty industry flourished. Concluding, Ribeiro makes the point that contemporary critics have challenged the idea of women’s use of make-up as a positive thing, which rather feeds into the culture of beauty as commodity that the modern beauty industry promotes.

With the accompaniment of a wide variety of visual examples from paintings, fashion plates, caricatures, and advertisements, Ribeiro draws a lively and comprehensive narrative of the how the role of cosmetics in the lives of women changed throughout the history of Western society. An extensive bibliography is also included. This book would enhance any library collection (academic or public) that has books on art and fashion.

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