

READING 2

Fashion: The Art of Looks

A The enormous and fascinating variety of clothing may express a person's status or social position. Several hundred years ago in Europe, Japan, and China, there were many highly detailed sumptuary laws – that is, strict regulations concerning how each social class could dress. In Europe, for example, only royal families could wear fur, purple silk, or gold cloth. In Japan, a farmer could breed silkworms, but he couldn't wear silk. In many societies, a lack of clothing indicated an absence of status. In ancient Egypt, for instance, children – who had no social status – wore no clothes until they were about twelve. These days, in most societies (especially in the West), rank or status is exhibited through regulation of dress only in the military, where the appearance or absence of certain metal buttons or stars signifies the dividing line between ranks. With the exception of the military, the divisions between different classes of society are becoming less clear. People in a café in Paris, for example, might include both working-class people and members of the highest society, but how can you tell the difference when many people dress in a similar way?

Note: Sumptuary laws were strict regulations in the 13th to 15th centuries that prevented excessive spending on clothing, food, and other consumer goods. The law also dictated how people were dressed and behaved in society.

B Three common types of body decoration are mehndi or henna, tattooing, and scarification.

Mehndi is the art of applying dye (usually dark orange or dark brown) to the skin of women in India, Islamic cultures, and Africa. The dye comes from the henna plant and is applied in a beautiful design that varies from culture to culture – fine, thin lines in India and large flower patterns in the Arab world, for example. A tattoo is also a design or mark made with a kind of dye (usually dark blue); however, unlike henna, it is put into a cut in the skin. In scarification – found mainly in Africa – dirt or ashes are put into the cuts instead of dye; the result is a design that is unique to the person's tribe. Three lines on each side of a man's face identify him as a member of the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria, for example. A complex geometric design on a woman's body identifies her as Mursi (from Ethiopia) and also makes her more beautiful in the eyes of her people. In the 1990s, tattooing became popular among youth in urban Western societies. Unlike people in tribal cultures, these young people had no tradition of tattooing, except among sailors and criminals. To these young people, the tattoos were beautiful and were sometimes also a sign of rebellion against older, more conservative, people in the culture. These days, tattooing has become common and is usually not symbolic of rebellion.

C In some societies, women overeat to become plump because large women are considered beautiful, while skinny women are regarded as unattractive. A woman's plumpness is also an indication of her family's wealth. In other societies, by contrast, a fat person is considered unattractive, so men and women watch what they eat and work out. In many parts of the world, people lie in the sun for hours to darken their skin, while in other places light, soft skin is seen as attractive. People with gray hair often dye it black, whereas those with naturally dark hair often change its color to blond, green or purple.

D In most modern cultures, many people visit a dentist regularly for both hygiene and beauty. They use toothpaste and dental floss daily to keep their teeth clean. They may have their teeth straightened, whitened, and crowned to make them more attractive to others in their culture. However, attractive has had quite a different meaning in the past and in some cultures today. In the past, in Japan, it was the custom for women to blacken, not whiten, the teeth. People in some areas of Africa and central Australia have the custom of filing the teeth to sharp points. Among the Makololo people of Malawi, the women wear a very large ring – a pelele – in their upper lip. As their chief once explained about peleles: "They are the only beautiful things women have. Men have beards. Women have none. What kind of person would she be without the pelele? She would not be a woman at all." While some people in modern urban societies think of tribal lip rings as unattractive and even "disgusting," other people – in Tokyo or New York or Rome – might choose to wear a small lip ring or to pierce their tongue and wear a stud through the hole.

E Body paint or face paint is used mostly by men in preliterate societies (societies that do not have written language) in order to attract good health or to ward off disease. Anthropologists explain that the men see this body painting as a form of "magic" protection against the dangers of the world outside the village, especially when they go hunting or fighting. When it is used as warpaint, they use it as a way of frightening the enemy, recognising members of their own group rather than the enemy, and giving them a sense of identity and belonging to the group. Women in these societies have less need of body or face paint because they usually stay within the village. Women in Victorian society in England were not supposed to wear makeup that was visible. During the 19th century, women in England and the United States often wore little or no makeup as they were encouraged to be pale and natural. In modern societies, however, women often use cosmetics as a way of expressing themselves.

Skim each paragraph and compare with your ideas in 3. Then correct and write the sentences that are false.

1. Several hundred years ago members of different social groups had to dress differently.
2. Silk, fur, gold, and cloth were status symbols.
3. It is still easy to tell the difference in terms of status from the way people are dressed.
4. Henna was used to create beautiful designs on the skin of women in Europe and Africa.
5. Designs made with cuts and dye were used as identity marks for different tribes in Africa.
6. Views on beauty vary from culture to culture.
7. White teeth have always been considered a sign of beauty all over the world.
8. Body paint and face paint have always been used by women more than by men.