

Biological Beauty - A look at culture and time through 3 photographs

By Karen Elzinga



(Fig 1)

Artist unknown. n.d. photograph.

<http://voiceofglobalummah.blogspot.com.au/2011/08/voice-of-global-ummah-volume-198-august.html> (accessed March 27, 2012).



(Fig 2).

Artist unknown. n.d. Kate Moss. <http://heroinchic.tumblr.com/post/3186804012/heroin-chic> (accessed March 29, 2012).



(Fig 3).

Artist unknown. n.d. Marilyn Monroe. <http://remembermarilynmonroe.blogspot.com.au/>
(accessed March 29, 2012).

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It is all too easy and perhaps shallow and egotistical; to suggest that biological beauty is simply how beautiful someone or something is considered by the majority. It appears that biological beauty even in its purest form maybe subject to culture, place, time, fashion, wealth, religion, popularity, and social status. So, is biological beauty a reference in essence to perception and how one perceives beauty to be, as someone who is born beautiful, or is it a case of fashion of the period and cultural predisposition, dictating who inherits the tag of most desired, most beautiful. Three images have been carefully selected by artists unknown to showcase how culture, time and fashion can alter perceptions of what biological beauty is, and how the popularity of even status outside ones celebrity fame, can interfere and take over from the limitations and short comings of a mere photograph. The complexities of not only the selected images are on show to be viewed and admired, but also discovery into the real lives of these selected women, and how they are predestined into a life where life mimics art, not just for them but for the majority who want to emulate them. Photo context will be put under the microscope in order to compare and contrast how these three images all relate to

biological beauty in their own significant way, from clothing portrayed, to body positioning, message content and audience objectivity.

In essence biological beauty is the symmetry of physical dimensions that would appeal across cultural divides, for example a study conducted at the University of Louisville, found when subjects were shown pictures from various ethnic groups including white, Asian and Latino nationalities based in 13 countries, that those rated as the most attractive were those with the most precise facial and body symmetry (Feng, 2002). This finding was disputed however by John Manning a representative from England's University of Liverpool, who suggested that more conclusive studies needed to be done to study cross cultural views especially in relation to Westernized societies, and traditional non Westernized thinking about the essence of biological beauty. He stated that more emphasis and consideration into past and present cultural traditions such as Chinese preferring small feet, and how some African tribes enjoyed the insertion of disks to their lip regions, needed to be explored more extensively in order to provide a more balanced conclusion (Feng, 2002).

This would certainly apply in instances where cultural desire takes away from biological beauty from the Westernized view of thinking, for instance in the image of the African woman (Fig 1) the cultural norm is for women to be fat. Mauritania a desert rich terrain, holds dear a tradition that entertains the notion that big is best, big is beautiful, where women having layers of fat and stretch marks are considered to be the sexiest and most desired women. The belief that has accumulated centuries of thinking, and previously thought to be on the decline, has in fact been resurrected in recent years to be the height of popularity. The tradition steams from belief that having fat livestock was a sign of great wealth, so it was not a stretch to believe also that fat wives were proof that men could provide copious amounts of food, in order to keep their women in such a gorged and enlarged state. Even in the dry drought prone region, when famine engulfed the lives of many due to inadequate food

supplies, if wives were big it was a sure sign of the husband's wealth and social status. If women were seen as being too skinny, they would be taken to fat farms where they would be force fed, and made to put on copious amounts of weight to fit the ideal sentiment of beauty, so is that born biological beauty or culturally influenced and enforced biological beauty? (Haworth, 2011)

In Western society it is the complete opposite, the image of Kate Moss (Fig 2) in comparison to the African woman (Fig 1) shows a waif like figure, small busted, no hips, thin face and overall thinly defined appearance. Whilst men of Mauritania and indeed indigenous men of Peru's Southeast, prefer woman with high (WHR's) waist to hip ratios, it would appear that it is not only Western society who do not share their sentiments (Singh, 2002).

Devendra Singh an evolutionary psychologist discovered a universal preference by the majority of people she studied. She found that people had a significant preference for women with low weight ratio's. The study showcased that men in general found women with a thin waist and broad hips attractive, even regardless of the woman's weight. A magic number was placed on the body shape with 0.7 (WHR) being recorded as the perfect universal female body waist measurement (Singh, 2002). Iconic woman in history bore the ratio drenching men with their beauty, thus adding to the culture and fashion of what heralded an era of idolized women such as Audrey Hepborn, Venus De Milo and of course Marilyn Monroe. History tells us that this attraction to thin waists is certainly not new, with historical references consistently speaking of the attribute in numerous Chinese and English literatures (Gottschall, 2008).

What is profoundly interesting is that these 3 images, where ever they are photographed in the world, be it past or present time, all of these women are considered beautiful, so is it wrong for society to draw conclusions so superciliously about some ones level of beauty,

when they maybe completely unaware of what is deemed biologically beautiful in a different culture or country. Men idolizing Marilyn Monroe may look upon the African woman (Fig 1) with distain and disgust at her obesity, and may never be able to consider her remotely biologically gifted; in fact the reaction and opinion of her may well be seen as ugly, unsightly and unattractive. Within Western culture, it would appear that even Marilyn Monroe a curvy and rounded 36-23-37, and envisaged as one of the world most adorned and beautiful women, would be seen by today's modern scornful society as being overweight (Popsugar, 2007). Marilyn will always remain a striking woman as (Fig 3) suggests, but how would she compare in today's modern time when in comparison to Kate Moss's persona in (Fig 2), would society would prefer Marilyn, the curvy, sexy, alluring image of a girl attempting to project a wholesome healthy lifestyle by being photographed with a fresh bottle of milk, and cracking eggs into her glass, or a waif of a girl who clothes are torn, hair dishevelled and ratty, portraying the image of an unhealthy lifestyle warrant the affections and desires of viewers. Sure, times and fashions have changed and artists have certainly influenced those changes with photographs spread across magazines of women scantily clad, and in certain magazines naked and provocative images are expected and common place, so does that indicate a need to define and restrict biological beauty determination to the confines of "era".

This begs the question does a woman's context i.e. the environment and how she is portrayed in it have any bearing on how she is seen overall. All women in images 1, 2 and 3, are interestingly posed in similar ways with the left hand side of their bodies similarly figured, yet even though comparisons can be made in that they all have spread legs, is this the artists configuration to gather the attention of men in particular, that the women are saying I'm open to you sexually, or is it the intention of the women posed to be seen in a way that is sexy and desirable. Does a mere picture of women in this context have the power to infiltrate how these woman were and are seen in real life, shaping the relationship of how women are seen

in a broader and more generalized sense, and possibly how biological beauty can be determined by what is deemed “fashionable”.

The African woman (Fig1) forced fed to become large in stature, does she sit to be desirable because she feels beautiful, or does she just sit because she has ill health, or sore joints, or heart trouble, maybe none of these, so does biological beauty live up to all it's cracked up to be. Judging by her puzzled look and demeanour, it suggests to the viewer of this image that her life is beyond being her own, she appears deflated, puzzled, yet again like the Monroe and Moss images, she would still portray desirability to her individual audience of admirers. In a desert terrain where women would be completely covered to protect themselves from blistering heat, here this woman sits, breasts partly exposed, arms exposed in a Muslim culture where this is not customary. Is this how women exude their femineity, their grace, their beauty in a society where magazine articles may well not resinate as they do in Western culture. These images from Africa (Fig1), America (Fig2) and England (Fig3) may well be worlds apart, but maybe closer together then one may first think at first glance.

Kate Moss has been able to build a lucrative and long lasting career as a model based on her iconic heroin chic appeal such as in (fig2), even when found to have been using illicit drugs her popularity only sky rocketed because now the fiction of images such as (Fig 2) had become fact, people seemed to adore her even more with her reported earnings tripling what she made before the drug scandal hit (Vernon, 2006). Again Marilyn Monroe had that same alluring quality after her death as she did in life, that people are still so attracted and drawn to her, perhaps it is the perception of bad girls are more exciting, and have more fun, so society is drawn to that raw and somewhat forbidden appeal. Monroe had a hard life, there was no mention of her father and her mother's mental state meant Marilyn spent her childhood in foster care. She had numerous marriages that all failed, and movies some that flopped yet the wholesome, sex appeal and desirability of her beauty and glamour in images such as (Fig1)

remain despite the fact she had a sordid childhood, a less than perfect life and career, and not to mention a dependence on sleeping pills that took her life in 1962 (Bio true story, n.d).

All women pictured have stories to tell, Marilyn Monroe trying to blank out her tumultuous past by portraying the wholesome clean cut girl, by being placed into a context with milk and eggs in a bed of white crisp linen in an age where this was fashionable, and keeping current with the culture and in particular in a time when good morals were the order of the day. The African woman depicting almost how viewers would believe her to feel inside through her facial expression, but then juxtaposing it by a suggestive and sexy seated position in a possible submissive attempt to be noticed by the men of her culture and time, and Kate Moss, applying what she did in private to her public life, and translating that realism like a badge of honour in her pictures, in a culture and time where drug use is seen as cool.

All 3 images showcase a different level of intensity, but reveal a certain truth that is believable to the viewer. They portray three very different women, the pitied (Fig1) the wholesome (Fig 2) and the destructive (Fig 3), but all come from a place where they are not only applicable and acceptable to their time period, they are also in keeping with the popularity of the cultural perception through their aesthetics and context that the image is photographed.

It is interesting that although ideally these images are advertising desires and sexuality, they are also not designed purely for male entertainment, but are images that are relatable by women. Women understand putting on a face, trying to be someone your not to impress or repel, they understand that these images reveal societies biological beauties, but what many don't entertain is that artists can and do manipulate images and models for entertainment purposes, for shock value and advertising dollars. There is no way advertisers or artists would get away with Marilyn Monroe's image (Fig 2) depicting women today in bed looking so

wholesome and perky, just as Kate Moss's image (Fig 3) could do little for depicting women in the 1950's, when the drug culture was not mainstream, or in Mauritania Africa for that matter, a thin girl representing sexiness when the culture of the region says thin is ugly. The same goes for the obese African woman in image (Fig1) advertisers would not use her for depicting modern desirability of women in a Western society, where thin bodies and fair skin is considered to be attributes most favoured.

So in conclusion do we as a society need to take a step back and say it's okay to be different, that the desire for perfection may not be the mainstream. Understanding three images of three admired body shapes from different cultures and periods of time shows in itself the need for wider debate on what must surely be considered as a limited "normal" depiction of what defines biological beauty as an overall human form. The context of these images defines in essence how the pictured women are not only portrayed in art, but also how they are and were perceived outside of these images as their work persona and personalities ran into real life, which begs the question. Where's the line between what is art personified, and what is real in real life? There is no question people will try to emulate the lives of people seen in glamorous pictures, what these three women from different era's and cultures do, is show us just how tainted we can become by trying to squeeze biological beauty into a one fits all box in a world that has many curved edges.

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