



Historically Speaking

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Lotions, Potions, and Perfumes



What's happening?

Members of our critique group, modestly called the 'Super Duper Critique Group', continue to be active in their writing activities.

One I want to recognize in this entry is Amy McGarry. She has been the front page contributor to the Huckleberry Press for some time now. I have found her articles informative, amusing, and engaging. She has published two books, *I Am Farang* and *Culture Clash*.

The Huckleberry Press is a free paper available at many locations in Eastern Washington. It really is worth your time to pick one up and check it out.

The wearing of cosmetics and perfumes by both men and women goes back a very long way indeed as the ancients were just as keen as anyone to improve their appearance as quickly and as easily as possible using all manner of powders, creams, lotions, and liquids. Written and pictorial records combine with remains of the materials themselves to reveal how the ancients not only improved their looks and smell but also tried to cure such irritating challenges to one's vanity as baldness, grey hairs and wrinkles. In many ancient cultures, cosmetics and perfumes also had a close connection with religion and rituals, especially the burial of the dead.

The Greeks were partial to a bit of make-up and, indeed, it is their word *kosmetika* which gives us our 'cosmetics.' The Greek term had a rather different application as it really referred to those preparations which protected hair, face, and teeth. Greek perfumes, meanwhile are known to have been in use since at least the Middle Bronze Age (14th-13th century BCE) and are first mentioned in literature in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer, written in the 8th century BCE. All manner of plants, flowers, spices, and fragrant woods from myrrh to oregano were infused in oil. As oil was used as the base, most perfumes were a thick paste and so a special fine spoon-like implement was needed to extract it from the small bottles it was kept in. As with cosmetics, perfumes were used for pleasure, seduction, as a status symbol and in rituals (especially burial).

Rouge for the cheeks, whitener to make the skin paler and black eyeliner and eye shadow were all used by Greek women. Men, with the exception of some men who played the passive role in homosexual relationships, did not wear make-up. Hair dye may have been used by both sexes, and there were two basic types: one made hair darker and used such dyes as those extracted from leeches left to rot in wine for 40 days and the other type made hair lighter and used a mixture which contained beechwood ash and goat fat.

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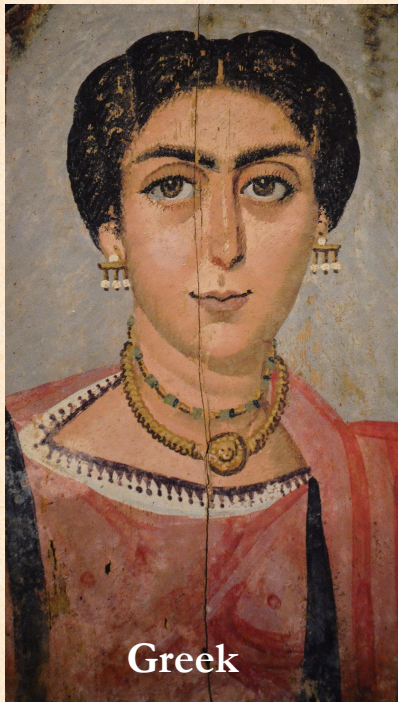
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Rouge was made from red ochre as in Egypt or from a dye extracted from a type of lichen. Eyeliner and eyebrow paint was made from a kohl powder which contained soot, antimony, saffron or ash. Ash of all kinds was seen as a terribly useful substance and was used to clean teeth. As nowadays, it seems that the more exotic the ingredients of a cosmetic were, the more likely it was to succeed. Thus such weird and wonderful substances as snail ash was applied to remove freckles, grease from sheep's wool was made into a face cream, and the excrement of lizards was rubbed into skin blemishes and wrinkles.

The ancient Egyptians were big on cleanliness and appearance as the purity of the body and soul had religious implications. This then was a culture where both men and women of all classes were keen to look their best, even when they died. In addition, the Egyptians made a clear link between cosmetics and the divine. For example, priests during religious rituals often anointed statues of gods with scented oils and even applied make-up to them. Such was the demand for these cosmetic products some temples produced their own,

notably at Karnak where scented oil was manufactured and wall inscriptions show several different recipes.



Greek



Egyptian

Another indication of the importance of cosmetics to the Egyptians was their inclusion in those goods traded internationally along with finely carved examples of the common tools for their application. Such items are sometimes listed in surviving records like the 14th-century BCE Amarna Letters. Another important source of information on ancient Mediterranean cosmetics has been the Uluburun shipwreck (1330-1300 BCE) which had in its varied cargo many plants and resins which would have been used to produce perfumes. Finally, there are visual records which clearly show the colours and on which parts of the face, in particular, make-up was applied. There are even depictions in art of people applying cosmetics such as a young woman applying paint to her lips (as in the 12th-century BCE Turin 'Erotic' papyrus.)

Cosmetics were prepared in ancient Egypt using a wide range of materials. The eyeliner and eye shadow so famously worn by such figures as Tutankhamun and Nefertiti was made by grinding minerals like green malachite and black galena. The slate palettes used to create the paste have been found in many tombs dating right back to the Predynastic Period (c. 6000 - c. 3150 BCE). Another cosmetic not uncommon in graves is a red ochre and vegetable mix used for blushing the cheeks - its use in practice can be seen on portraits of Queen Nefertari (d. c. 1255 BCE) on the walls of her tomb. Cosmetics were not only for beautifying, but some had a medicinal value such as moisturisers made from fats and oils or those lotions and unctions using natron and ash which were intended to cleanse the skin. Research on the lead-based eye paint so beloved by the Egyptians has revealed that it has a definite effect on the body's immune system and both reduces the effects and risk of many eye complaints. Finally, there were other cosmetic applications which had more ambitious effects like pastes to repel insects, cure baldness, reverse greying hair or smooth out wrinkles.

Adapted from World History Encyclopedia (www.worldhistory.org)