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Women Who Painted

Nineteenth-century women who painted, who made visible what others condemned or concealed, left few traces for posterity. While they commented often upon dress and hair, Victorian women wrote only occasionally about their use of cosmetics in diaries and letters. Still, these fragments offer some insight into what it meant to wear makeup conspicuously at a time when Americans looked askance at the painted face. Even as the moral aesthetic continued to govern beautifying practices, a small but growing number of women backed the use of visible cosmetics. These painted women followed another logic of the self and appearance that presaged our modern usage of cosmetics.

Ellen Ruggles Strong was one such woman. In the mid-nineteenth century, she enjoyed the diversions of New York high society as wife of civic leader George Templeton Strong. When he founded the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War, Ellen, like many women of her social class, volunteered to do hospital relief work. She caught the eye of diarist Maria Lydig Daly, who caustically described Ellen's greater commitment to fashion than to nursing: "They say very kindly and charitably that Mrs. George Strong went down with rouge pot, crinoline,

and maid to attend to the wounded and came home having washed the faces of seven men." Attending a reception, she observed Ellen "painted like a wanton . . . with a huge bouquet sent her by one of her little *beaux,* without her husband." Not long after, she again met Ellen Strong at a party, "painted as usual, looking, as Temple Prime said, however, very pretty and very young looking. 'It is well done,' said he. 'I can't see it.' " Daly's acid reply: "Put on your glasses and thank Providence you are near-sighted, then."[1]

Daly held to the traditional view of cosmetics as mask and deplored this display of female hypocrisy and vanity, especially at a moment that called for selfless duty. The rouge pot betrayed the simple, truthful appearance that all women ought to desire. George Templeton Strong, in contrast, had nothing to say about his wife's cosmetic practices in his diaries, nor would he have recognized the painted wanton sketched by Daly. "What must he think? What can he mean by thus leaving her so much to herself?" Daly had wondered. Although warned by friends that Ellen Ruggles was "fashionable" and "artificial," George Templeton Strong could see her only as the model of angelic, dependent womanhood—"poor, little Ellen in her ignorance and simplicity," "a noble little girl."[2]

As one of the fashionable elite women condemned by Victorian moralists, Ellen Strong skated the thin line between ill-repute and a measure of autonomy. It was an artful performance. The dutiful wife appeared at hospitals and charity events, gave up waltzing because her husband disapproved, and "turned away her eyes from beholding vanity" when the couple went to Tiffany's. When left to herself, however, Ellen played the fast woman in a world of fashion, seductive young men, parties, and pleasures. Her beauty secrets, unseen by men yet visible to women, undermined the ideal of natural beauty, and with it, a fixed sense of self.[3]

The strain between female appearance and identity—that women are not what they seem—is, as we have seen, age-old, but this tension deepened substantially in the latter half of the nineteenth century. One manifestation was the anxious response to the feminist movement, the

warning that women would "unsex" themselves by making public demands for equality with men. Another surfaced in the uneasiness about urban life, where strangers mingled on the streets. Cautionary tales circulated about prostitutes disguised as shoppers, saleswomen posing as ladies, and light-skinned "octaroons" passing into white society. Advice books gave bachelors hints on how to tell the authentic beauty from the fake. "The Venuses and the viragoes," complained one writer, "have all been concealed in a maze of crinoline and whalebone, cotton, powder and paint."[4]

At the same time, another language of the body began to be spoken. In a society in which appearances were fluid and social rank unstable, the question of how to represent oneself was a pressing one. Strategies of appearance—dressing for effect, striking a pose—became ever more important. As writer N. P. Willis observed, "Some of us know better than others how to put on the best look."[5] For some women, cosmetics use was less a deception, a false face, than a dramatic performance of the self in a culture increasingly oriented to display, spectatorship, and consumption.

The ideal face, defined by pale skin and blushing cheeks, remained remarkably constant for most of the nineteenth century. Fashion generally upheld this ideal. Nevertheless, the antebellum image of natural, transparent beauty briefly gave way to a more theatrical and artificial look among the affluent in the Civil War era. Confederate partisan Emma Holmes complained bitterly about the "rebellious" girls in Charleston's high society, who defied their parents, danced as their brothers died, and painted their faces. Young Sallie Bull and Lilly DeSaussure, she declared, "have taken to *rouging* & Sallie won't submit even to her grandfather's control."[6] Wealthy New York trendsetters wore large bustles and deep décolletage, wove flowers and birds into their curls, and, when a burlesque troupe called the "British Blondes" became a popular sensation in 1868, bleached their hair to a golden hue. For a short time, these women applied rouge, white paint, and eye

makeup to complement such extreme styles, but they quickly returned to a more "natural" look.[7]

For most American women, these cosmetic fads and fashions meant little. But the aesthetic of natural beauty imposed its own demands, paradoxically compelling women to use white powder and even apply "washes" and masking paints to achieve the desired look. Indeed, skin whiteners remained the most popular cosmetic throughout the nineteenth century. Women ranked white powder—typically ground starch, rice, or chalk—most acceptable on sanitary and practical grounds. Especially in the West and South, women used powder to protect the skin from the climate, prevent tanning, and reduce perspiration and shine. Even so, powdering went beyond hygiene. Concealing ruddiness, sweat, and exertion, it produced the proper pale shade of leisured gentility. "The ladies have strange ways of adding to their charms," Englishwoman Frances Trollope wrote during her antebellum travels in America. "They powder themselves immoderately, face, neck, and arms, with pulverised starch; the effect is indescribably disagreeable by day-light, and not very favourable at any time." Certainly many women viewed powdering as an unhealthy evil, a practice that blocked the pores but stimulated vanity. As late as 1900 in many Midwestern towns, only daring young women poured "some of the coarse grained powder into paper envelopes" and secretly applied it at dances. Still, beauty adviser Marie Mott Gage noted, powdering was akin to "charity balls, church fairs, corsets, décolleté gowns and other follies," often criticized but "so dear to the popular heart."[8]

Other skin lighteners, closer in definition to paints, also supported the aesthetic ideal. Known generically as lily white, white wash, and "white cosmetic," these products were used by some women irrespective of class and age. In 1879, Jessie Benton Frémont admired the "fresh *clean* faces of the girls & women" in New York and Boston, in contrast to the women who "powder & daub" in San Francisco and Prescott, Arizona. In the West, she wrote, "it is quite funny to see that smeared smooth white face, & red wrists emerging from one button pale gloves. But the creme de lis [a whitening paste] is sure to be on."

Even a widow in her sixties might be a customer: Ariadne Bennard purchased three or four bottles of lily white annually from an apothecary in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.[9]

Women applying dangerous lead-based whitening lotions like Bloom of Youth began to appear in medical case records after the Civil War. These women were often wage earners who had begun the practice as teenagers or young adults. Going to great lengths to conceal their cosmetics use, they initially were diagnosed with hysteria or reproductive disorders, the usual suspects in Victorian women's ailments. Only after repeated questioning, their condition worsening, would they admit the truth. Some may have fallen for patent cosmetic advertising, with its appealing images of fashion and high society, but most offered explanations grounded in the exigencies of their daily life. An umbrella maker stated a simple desire "to take the shine off the skin." Some used white paint specifically to improve their chances at work: A ballet dancer applied a lead-based wash supplied by her dance company; a milliner painted to look refined when she met her patrons; a young Irish-born copyist used different powders and pastes, applying them to her neck and shoulders when going to work. The white face, purged of the exertions of labor, simultaneously asserted bourgeois refinement and racial privilege.[10]

The use of powders and skin whiteners among African Americans received notice by the black press as early as the 1850s. The *Anglo-American Magazine* criticized African Americans who appeared with painted faces, lips "puckered up and drawn in," the hair "sleeked over and pressed under, or cut off so short that it can't curl." It decried the emulation of white beauty standards: "Beautiful black and brown faces by the application of rouge and lily white are made to assume unnatural tints, like the vivid hue of painted corpses." How common such practices had become, and among which groups of African Americans, is unknown. It may be that some black devotees of white powder were not so much emulating as parodying the style of white elites—making up the face and hair to complement the exuberant, "high-style" dress that black dandies and their lady friends wore.[11]

Crane and Co. advertisement addressed to African Americans, in The Colored American Magazine, *1903.*

Still, the aesthetic dimension of racism—gradations of skin color, textures of hair—shaped work opportunities, marriage chances, and social life, giving advantages to those with lighter complexions and straighter locks. Early dealers in face bleach certainly exploited this prejudice in the 1880s and 1890s: One pledged that a "black skin remover" would yield a "peach-like complexion"; another vowed to "gradually turn the skin of a black person five or six shades lighter"; a third claimed that "the Negro need not complain any longer of black skin." In reality, those products often caused blotches on the skin and sometimes permanent injury.[12]

Advertising appeals to African Americans offer a telling contrast to the promotional pamphlets and trade cards distributed at large. Addressed implicitly to white women, the latter promoted preparations to cover up blemishes, bleach freckles, and whiten the skin, all the while proclaiming their products' naturalness. Advertisements do not necessarily or directly mirror popular attitudes, but in this case, they seem to have touched upon a common cultural practice. Women might purchase a skin whitener that covered and colored the skin and simultaneously disclaim its status *as* paint. For women of European descent, whitening could be absorbed within acceptable skincare routines and assimilated into the ruling beauty ideal, the natural

Hagan's Magnolia Balm trade card, late nineteenth century, addressed to white consumers.

face of white genteel womanhood—although, as Jessie Benton Frémont testified, one glance at the hands could undo this careful effort to naturalize artifice. For African Americans, the fiction was impossible: Whitening cosmetics, touted as cures for "disabling" African features, reinforced a racialized aesthetic through a makeover that appeared anything but natural.

The idealization of the "natural" face occurred, ironically, within a middle class beginning to define itself through consumption. Other places in which private and public intertwined—the clothed body, the well-furnished parlor—were accepted, indeed celebrated, as sites of commodity culture. The face, however, was deemed outside fashion, a sign of true identity, even as it served a highly contrived self-presentation, in which artifice shaped the body to a fashionable silhouette and clothing was often exuberantly ornamental.[13]

It was women like Ellen Strong and the Bloom of Youth consumers who upended the conventional meaning of *paint* as an unnatural mask. They saw the face not as a transparent window into inner beauty, but as an image of their own making, an integral part of their own daily performances. Their perspective came to seem more credible and accurate in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when several long-term developments—new urban sites of consumption and display, a flourishing fashion economy, the spread of image-making technologies, and a nascent culture of celebrity—changed how Americans perceived the face.

Seeing and being seen took on greater cultural importance in the late-nineteenth-century city. Middle-class women enjoyed a new round of social activities: They strolled the streets, went shopping, attended matinees, and ate out. For those with little money to spend, "just looking" was a pleasant diversion. As historian William Leach shows, a new class of merchants prodded consumers to picture themselves in a world of consumer goods and stylish looks. While browsing wares for sale, women saw well-dressed manikins, gazed at themselves in plate glass windows and mirrors, and took note of each other's appearances.[14]

Beyond the city too, fashion sense flourished. Dressmakers, milliners, and seamstresses catered to an accelerating demand for stylish clothing. Women's magazines, fashion dolls, and paper patterns spread Parisian fashions to middle-class women throughout the United States. Working-class women sewed their own smart outfits, remodeled castoffs, or bought at secondhand shops. The lure of looking touched even country women. In an 1885 story by Zona Gale, one character described viewing the fashion plates hanging in the dressmaker's window: "It made a kind of nice thing to do on the way home from the grocery, hot forenoons—draw up there on the shady side . . . an' look at Lyddy's plates, an' choose—like you was goin' to get one." Protean, emphasizing the surface and the novel, fashion altered attitudes toward the body and self-presentation.[15]

It may be that earlier in the century, American women and men had

only a hazy apprehension of their facial qualities. When itinerant painter James Guild offered a young girl a portrait in exchange for washing his shirt, it "looked more like a strangle[d] cat than it did like her," but he "told her it looked like her and she believed it." Diary entries and letters relied on well-worn and indefinite figures of speech to describe beauty—"a charming mingling of the rose & lily"—that could be visualized in any number of ways. Many people owned mirrors, but their quality was uneven. When Maria Lydig Daly stayed overnight in a room with a bad looking glass, she "looked so old and ugly that I felt distressed," and was relieved to return home to her familiar mirror. "How few of us have a perfect idea how we look, or who we resemble, or look like," photographer H. J. Rodgers observed, "we look differently in as many mirrors as we may choose to scrutinize." Portraits commissioned by wealthy Americans, painted by artists versed in a visual language that expressed beauty, character, and social role, tended to idealize and flatter. The less affluent hired itinerant painters to render their likenesses, but these portraits merely conveyed general facial features and hair style and used personal possessions—a tool, a book—to represent the sitter's individuality. When it came to the celebrated beauties of the period, art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes, there was a "frequent dissonance between written accounts and the visual record." Diarist Emma Holmes was "dreadfully disappointed" when she finally met Mary Withers, the "far famed beauty." Withers had "by no means a beautiful complexion," complained Holmes; "it was ordinary and I expected an extraordinary one, from all the praises bestowed on it."[16]

Over the course of the nineteenth century, mirrors, fashion plates, printed engravings, and chromolithographs streamed into Americans' lives, but it was the advent of photography in 1839 that most changed how people knew their appearances. At first photographs were treated as articles of memory and contemplation, readily incorporated into the Victorian cult of sentimentality. But new techniques and formats quickly made photographs cheap and widely available. In the 1860s, the carte-de-visite craze struck middle-class Americans, who traded

and collected each other's card-sized portraits. At the same time, the ferrotype or tintype became the "picture for the million." Farmers, artisans, and working women earning a modest income purchased miniature "gem" tintypes, a dozen for a dime or quarter. Thus the photograph rapidly found a place in family and social life—in parlor albums, on jewelry, and as postcards and calling cards.[17]

Americans went to the photography studio ready for a performance, as historian Alan Trachtenberg aptly describes it, "the making of oneself over into a social image." They appeared dressed in their Sunday clothes, laden with jewelry, primed to hold a pose or expression. Elite photographers Southworth and Hawes hired fashion advisers to guide female patrons "in arranging their dress and drapery"; for the ordinary studio, leaflets entitled "Pretty Faces" and the like instructed the photographer how to "answer all vexatious questions put to you by your sitters."[18]

What most vexed the public was that the photograph revealed the face and body with a degree of detail and precision never before seen. Its realism raised questions about the body and identity: Did photography capture only surface appearances, or did it represent the inner self? As the photograph became a popular commodity, it made beauty a more problematic category. What had once been a matter more for the imagination and the mirror was now externally fixed on the photographic plate. Believed to be factual, photographs measured the distance between idealized representations and real faces. Many photographers applauded this failure to flatter; others adopted painterly techniques of lighting and pose in the interest of offering a more penetrating—and pleasing—likeness.

From the sitters' perspective, however, the photograph pulled in another direction, toward a critical assessment of appearance itself. The pictorial truth could be quite painful, and patrons leaving the photographer's studio often looked dismayed. A Massachusetts woman recalled her experience before the camera: "After various sittings most unsatisfactory—one with the mouth too large, another with the expression too grave, a third presenting an affected style, with a kind of contraction

very unnatural about the lips—I shook my head and turned disgusted away." In these "permanent mirrors," wrote an amateur photographer, "our self-love does not always permit us to look with pleasure."[19]

In response, sitters often demanded retouched or tinted pictures. Photographers ridiculed customers who would "not care to have their own faces enamelled" but insisted on a "highly-retouched fraud which represents them as marble." They developed techniques to apply colored powder, often ladies' rouge, to negatives and prints, so that "the coarse skin texture, the pimple and freckle blemishes were converted into fine, soft complexions." Artistic photographers delicately colored the entire picture—face, clothing, and background—to create the illusion of nature. But in the cheap photograph factories, employees rubbed just a blush of red pigment on the cheeks and gold flecks on the jewelry, with the image otherwise untouched. This convention was artifice that revealed itself—a bit of color to signify the living person.[20]

If retouching and tinting lessened the gap between self-image and the camera eye, so did cosmetics. American women who ordinarily shunned paint requested it at photographers' studios. "All kinds of powders and cosmetics were brought into play, until sitters did not think they were being properly treated if their faces and hair were not powdered until they looked like a ghastly mockery of the clown in a pantomime," photographer Henry Peach Robinson complained. At a cheap studio on the Bowery, where clerks and shopgirls came to be photographed on Sundays, the owner observed, "I have known colored ladies to sit for tintypes and they ask me why I didn't put a little more rouge on their cheeks." H. J. Rodgers's manual of photography reveals explicitly how image making intensified attention to the face and, for women, justified cosmetics use. Rodgers viewed male sitters simply as character "types"—such as the "rough," the gentleman, and the dandy—but believed that photography could capture each woman's unique beauty. His manual offered ample advice to women on clothing styles, colors, and how to compose expression. Despite his advocacy of nature and hygiene, Rodgers nonetheless concluded his book with page after page of cosmetics recipes.[21]

As new visual technologies began to standardize female appearance, those standards became increasingly defined by actresses and professional beauties—no longer seen as women of questionable morality, but rather as celebrities and stars. Although Americans had been enchanted by such performers as Jenny Lind and Fanny Kemble in the antebellum period, women achieved new prominence on the stage after 1860. Many were players in serious drama, but the most visible and controversial performed in burlesques and variety shows that combined sexual display with comic dialogue. Such stars as Adah Menken and Lydia Thompson brought to the American theater a new kind of performance that blurred the line between scripted roles and stage personae based on their real lives. Their novel self-presentation included bleached hair and even paint, inspiring the most daring women to emulate them.[22]

Objects of a budding cult of celebrity, actresses and professional beauties were viewed, talked about, and incorporated visually into Americans' private lives. As early as the 1860s, observers noted the rising "commercial value of the human face." Photographs of the prominent flooded the market—not only generals, politicians, and ministers, but thespians, ballet dancers, and burlesque stars. Pictures of actresses in and out of their stage roles appeared in urban shop windows, mail-order catalogues, and theater doorways. Middle-class Americans often placed these images in their personal albums, often on the same pages as photographs of family and friends.[23]

Making faces into "pictures for the public gaze" involved the frank use of makeup commonly used in the theater. Actresses' photographs display smooth and flawless skin, as well as the use of eyeliner and lip pencil. By the 1880s, Lillie Langtry, Adelina Patti, and other performers appeared in cosmetics advertisements, in testimonials, and even as product brand names. Makeup slowly began to cross from the stage into everyday life. Women wore paints for amateur theatricals, coming-out parties, and balls. Even women who ordinarily shunned powder might coat their skin with liquid whiting to appear as statues in *tableaux vivants.* Beauty manuals distinguished between daytime activ-

ity and the evening "play-world," when women might justifiably apply violet-tinted powder or beauty cream tagged a "gas-light cosmetic." The spread of electric lighting in cities after 1890, considered "fearfully trying to even the best of skins," warranted rouge. But even in daylight, as women promenaded the streets, looked in shop windows, socialized in public, and scrutinized one another, a number found reason to apply powder and paint.[24]

Hunter's Invisible Face Powder trade card, featuring actress Lillie Langtry.

A fundamental and far-reaching change was taking place: the heightened importance of image making and performance in everyday life. Photographic and stage techniques of making up and posing introduced external and standardized models of beauty that challenged the "natural" ideal. For some advice writers, social life itself had become a performance that called for makeup, but only if used, paradoxically, to enact the part of one's true, natural self. Thus a woman whose pallor resulted from illness might legitimately apply rouge. So could a young girl if "its use originates in an innocent desire to please," but the "old campaigner," who reddened her cheeks to trick a man into marriage, remained a "painted Jezebel." Although some women adhered to these rules, others vested self-portrayal with a degree of choice, play, and pleasure. The idea that a woman could remake her face—and that being natural was itself a pose—found its embodiment in Julian Eltinge, a female impersonator. In the early twentieth century Eltinge won acclaim playing fashionable and genteel debutantes onstage. So convincing was his portrayal that he issued a beauty

magazine and sold his own cosmetics line, offering "a chance for every woman to be as beautiful as Julian Eltinge"![25]

Women's growing interest in beauty products coincided with their new sense of identity as consumers. Women had long bought and bartered goods, but around 1900 a new, self-conscious notion of the woman consumer emerged. Women's magazines and advertisers inducted their female readers into a world of brand-name products and smart shopping, while department stores created a feminine paradise of abundance, pleasure, and service. Home economists and reformers, such as the National Consumers League, proposed a contrasting image—the rational consumer with a social conscience—but they, too, bolstered the view that consumption was integral to women's role.[26]

Many, however, were not yet ready to endorse the idea that women should buy their way to beauty. Cosmetics sales grew only incrementally between 1870 and 1900. Although they accelerated thereafter, as late as 1916, according to a trade estimate, only one in five Americans used toilet preparations of any sort, and per capita expenditures were a mere fifty cents. Many retailers remained nonplussed by beauty preparations. The mail-order Zion City General Store, whose "profits [were] used for God," excluded cosmetics entirely; another catalog company sandwiched its Sur-Pur Face Powder for "ladies of culture and refinement" inconspicuously between livestock remedies, patent medicines, and harnesses. Some retailers issued advertising pamphlets that juxtaposed brand-name cosmetics with beautifying recipes, identifying women simultaneously with home production and market consumption.[27]

Women's magazines and the women's pages of city newspapers, appearing after the 1890s, also took an ambiguous position on the traffic in beauty aids and advice. Except for skin creams and lotions, cosmetics were not widely advertised in national magazines, unlike convenience foods and soaps. Editorial advice pushed homemade preparations and discouraged the use of makeup. *Ladies' Home Journal* columnist Ruth Ashmore told "Anxious," for instance, that face pow-

der roughened the skin but was acceptable if used "to take away the disagreeable gloss." She recommended girls improve their general health and use such homemade remedies as buttermilk or almond meal for the complexion. Such advice against the tide of commerce was, however, unable to stanch the flood of readers' queries about beauty aids and makeup. The *Baltimore Sun,* for instance, ran over a dozen letters each Sunday from women who wanted to rid their face of freckles, fill out their cheeks, or darken the eyebrows. Some could not afford to buy the products they desired and asked for a comparable formula to mix at home; others wanted a recipe to take to the drugstore, to be compounded and purchased there.[28]

There were other signs of the growing importance of beautifying in the consumer-goods market. Druggists continued to compound their own cold creams and lotions, but such large wholesale drug suppliers as W. H. Schiefellin and McKesson & Robbins offered dozens of brand-name cosmetics, foreign and domestic. By the turn of the century, one wholesaler sold fifty different brands of cream, as many American-made powders and skin preparations, and eleven brands of cosmetique. Retail druggists began to see profit in promoting beauty aids to the healthy as well as filling prescriptions for the sick. They embraced modern methods of selling, highlighting packaging, free samples, island displays, and show windows.[29]

Druggists remained the primary distributors of beauty preparations, but other retail outlets boosted cosmetics sales. For the affluent consumer, department stores brought beauty secrets into a new urban setting of publicity and spectacle. At first merchants played down these commodities, jumbling a small array of powders, lily whites, and beautifiers with fancy goods and sundries. The most prescient, however, believing that toiletries put women in a spending mood, started to place cosmetics front and center on the main selling floor. A Macy's executive proudly told perfume manufacturers in 1909 that department stores intentionally "lured" women "to the counters by playing on their senses of smell." At the lower end of the market, new chain drugstores and variety stores aggressively pushed bargain brands and private-

A sample envelope for Tetlow's Gossamer, a popular commercial face powder whose sales pitch emphasized innocent flirtation.

label cosmetics. Rural and small-town customers could buy beauty products from door-to-door and mail-order firms. As early as 1897 Sears offered its own line of cosmetics, including rouge, eyebrow pencil, and face powder, along with such brands as Harriet Hubbard Ayer, Pozzoni, and Tetlow.[30]

Cosmetics entrepreneurs also detected a budding demand among African Americans. Inventors began to patent hot irons and straightening tongs, while peddlers hawked hair growers, wigs, pressing oils, and complexion creams. One firm, based in the drugstore trade, had sold an ordinary ox-marrow pomade to white customers for years when "one day a young colored woman came in and purchased a dozen bottles." This triggered a "great discovery," "like finding a nugget of gold":

> We asked her: "What are you going to do with so much?" She replied, "It makes my hair long, soft and easy to comb, and I am getting it for my friends." We then said, "Tell us all about it and we will give you a dozen extra bottles." She then told of the merits of our pomade when applied to the hair of colored people.

The company began to canvass in black communities, started a word-of-mouth publicity campaign, and advertised extensively in black newspapers. Another established patent medicine company, Brooklyn-based E. Thomas Lyon, promoted the hair tonic Kaitheron to African Americans with a pamphlet called *What Colored People Say* and an *Afro-American Almanac*.[31]

Many firms selling to black women originated in such places as

Richmond, Louisville, and Memphis, cities of the upper South with sizable black commercial districts, growing numbers of African-American migrants, and nascent chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturing. In Richmond, for instance, Henry Schnurman developed Hartona in 1893, Thomas Beard Crane followed in 1898 with Wonderful Face Bleach, and Rilas Gathright manufactured a number of products under different names by 1900, including a "magnetic comb," O-zo-no hair preparations and deodorant, and Imperial Whitener. All of these companies developed a wide mail-order trade, and their ads could be found in black newspapers across the country.[32]

In the early years of the twentieth century, women who wore rouge and powder without shame sparked a new outburst of public notice and debate. Once "the painted face was the bold, brazen sign of the woman's character and calling," wrote a woman to the *Baltimore Sun* in 1912, but "now women and young girls of respectable society are seen on our streets and fashionable promenade with painted faces."[33] Painted women had escaped the seamy neighborhoods of vice, and urban Americans now found the once familiar sign of female iniquity harder to read.

The women most stigmatized by their use of makeup—prostitutes—were no longer so easily identified by it. Traditionally, women who became prostitutes abandoned their corsets, put on loose fitting robes, and made up their faces to advertise their trade. A reformed prostitute, telling her story of brothel life, however, said she had refused to apply makeup—"I had to draw a line somewhere"—rouge and eye paint being the most potent sign of her fall. A prostitute's appearance also depended on her place within an intricate vice economy and on the vagaries of urban policing. Streetwalkers wore makeup to attract the glances of likely customers, but some shunned it to avoid scrutiny from the cop on the beat. The "street girls" of Syracuse, a 1913 investigation found, "dress quietly, and use but little paint or powder." Even brothel dwellers, sheltered within a house, used different elements of contemporary fashion and style to signal their occupation and sense of

group identity. Some wore short skirts and boots; others—usually high-priced courtesans—often imitated ladies of fashion and spent extravagantly on modistes, hairdressers, and perfume. Turn-of-the-century prostitutes wore kohl on their eyes when they posed for New Orleans photographer E. J. Bellocq, but a delivery boy in the Storyville brothels pinpointed a finer distinction between the worlds of vice and virtue: "Prostitutes wore night-time makeup at the wrong time of day."[34]

It was not only prostitutes whose appearances confused. Cosmetics had long been associated with "fast" and "sporting" women. Neither prostitutes nor performers, these women enjoyed the city's underworld as pleasure seekers, their bold dress and free-and-easy manners conspicuous in dance houses, concert halls, and cafés. At various moments in the nineteenth century, some women tested the limits of bourgeois propriety by wearing fashions that referenced this demimonde. Makeup was an especially plastic aesthetic form—easily heightened, toned down, or washed off to register one's place within different social circles. As more and more women entered into the expanding realm of urban commercial nightlife, they made elements of this racy public style their own.

But however indebted to the demimonde, this trend toward painting was part of a historic transformation in feminine appearance affecting women of different classes and cultural backgrounds. Saleswomen, factory hands, middle-class shoppers, and socialites all began to paint, although journalists and commentators pointed especially to society women and working girls as the chief offenders. "Society women now paint" even in "very select circles," read a New York *World* headline as early as 1890. Despite the "tradition that 'making up' is tabooed in the best New York society," stated the reporter, "it is the very best upper-crustdom that puts aside tradition and authority and bedizens itself as much as it pleases." Nodding to trendsetting French women who used visible makeup, some asserted their social leadership within the *haute monde* through cosmetic fashion.[35]

Assertive young working women were also known for their makeup use. Decked out in cheap but fashionable clothes and hats, they wore

switches and "puffs" in their hair, powdered generously, and even rouged their cheeks. For many, being up-to-date included cosmetics, even though they were sometimes sent home for powdering excessively or harassed by men on the streets, who saw them as loose. "Tough girls"—white working-class women thought to be uninhibited and sexually active—especially embraced the theatrical qualities of cosmetics. Urban reformers commented on the "almost universal custom" at dance halls, where young working women stored powder puffs in their stocking tops, pulled them out and flourished them whenever they wished "to attract the attention of a young man."[36]

Women were using makeup to mark any number of differences, asserting worldliness against insularity and sexual desire against chastity. Moving into public life, they staked a claim to public attention, demanded that others look. This was not a fashion dictated by Parisian or other authorities, but a new mode of feminine self-presentation, a tiny yet resonant sign of a larger cultural contest over women's identity.

Still, painted women remained spectacles to a significant extent before World War I, conspicuous among the curiosities and commotion of urban life. "I have seen women going along the street with their cheeks aglow with paint, everyone twisting their necks and looking," one woman observed. Working women were sent home for appearing on the job with an "artificial complexion"; the manager of Macy's fired one rouged saleswoman in 1913 with the comment that "he was not running a theatrical troupe but a department store." Public authorities tried in vain to preserve the older ideal of womanly beauty. In 1915, a Kansas legislator proposed to make it a misdemeanor for women under the age of forty-four to wear cosmetics "for the purpose of creating a false impression." Several years later, policewomen in Newark collared teenage girls at the train stations, "overawed them by a display of their police badges, and forced them to wash rouge and powder from their faces." Juvenile courts granted parental requests to bar their delinquent daughters from making up. In these circumstances, paint still implied sexual enticement and trickery, a false face.[37]

Men in particular maintained these conventional views. Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, observed in 1912 that men continued to see rouge as a mark of sex and sin: "The stigma has never been removed by men, and is not, in their minds, today." Letters to the *Baltimore Sun* from male readers confirm his observation. "Such decorating is the same as an invitation to a flirtation," one man stated flatly. "Every painted or flashily dressed woman is deemed by most strange men to be of questionable character." In an expanding consumer culture, these small goods posed yet another danger. One Evansville, Indiana, man sued for divorce, claiming his wife spent eighteen dollars monthly on cosmetics and perfume; another denied responsibility when his wife charged $1,500 for toiletries on their store account, saying she was "possessed of a passion for such luxuries." The old notion of cosmetics as witchcraft lay just below the surface.[38]

Among women, painting aroused a more ambivalent response. Edward Bok peevishly commented that respectable "women have done a curious thing" by now tolerating painted women they once had shunned. A class of young working women at New York's Cooper Union in 1914 debated the question of artificial beauty and resoundingly voted in favor of it.[39] But when the *Baltimore Sun* ran a contest asking "Should Women Paint?" women answered in the negative by over two to one. The female opponents of makeup essentially reiterated the charges made by men, but with greater urgency, for it was their respectability that painting called into question. Makeup certainly attracted attention, "but not the kind that a good woman wishes bestowed upon her," said one woman. "Maidenly dignity is underestimated 50 per cent by her penciled lashes and over-dyed cheeks and lips," which emboldened men to harass women, observed another. Women's motives for making up also came under scrutiny: When girls posed as mature women or matrons affected a youthful appearance, they both used subterfuge to ensnare men. Most writers agreed that makeup's artifice was ultimately self-deception. "Aids to beauty are only shams," wrote Jessie Barclay. "Everybody can detect them." A number echoed the nineteenth-century ideal that true beauty resulted from "right living

and right thinking." As one letter writer proposed, "Why not be satisfied with ourselves just as we are?"[40]

The champions of paint rejected excessive coloring but condoned the cautious imitation of nature. They too left unchallenged the assumption that women's virtue and beauty were intertwined, but argued from it that women's moral duty to be attractive justified moderate artifice. Women's intentions and authenticity, not makeup itself, determined the harm or innocence of the painted face. As one of the Cooper Union debaters argued, "If you use cosmetics in a nice way they will not detract from your beauty or injure your character."[41]

Here were some very fine distinctions. The *Sun* contest winner, Nicketti McMullen, wrote about the difference between young women and old, contrasting the girl with naturally rosy cheeks who improperly "indulges in artificial aids," and the matron whose color fades with work and time and who legitimately "finds it necessary to rouge." "When painting reveals the application it is disgusting," wrote another entrant, but mimicking nature, enhancing the features, or even recalling a beauty that once existed was acceptable art. One writer went so far as to observe that rouging was an admission of ugliness, and thus enacted honesty, not deception![42]

A few turned away from the older moral aesthetic to reappraise the meaning of paint altogether. "We can't all be born beautiful," observed one woman, and cosmetic aids equalized opportunity in a world where beauty might affect women's fortunes. This had long been true of the marriage market, but now, as they entered the workplace in greater numbers, "women who start out to battle with the world alone will be more successful and demand more respect if they are attractive and well dressed." Thus some women started to uncouple paint and immorality, but could not fully detach themselves from the notion that paint covered up a true self. "As beauty is only skin deep anyhow," wrote one, "cannot paint and powder, false hair and pads hide a true heart and chaste soul?"[43]

Changes in cosmetic products and applications reflected and reinforced the growing use of beauty aids by respectable women, and has-

tened the transformation of paint into makeup. Lily whites, enamels, and vinegar rouge—the traditional white and red colorings in liquid or cream form—continued to be available but were in decline by 1900. As a movement for safer food and drugs arose in the Progressive era, popular outcry over lead, mercury, and other deadly ingredients in cosmetics grew louder, and many of the older "washes" and paints containing them began to disappear from the market.[44]

New face powders and application techniques competed with the older paints and began to supplant them. So-called "invisible" powder had been advertised since the 1860s by such manufacturers as Solon Palmer and Pozzoni. Pure white and bright red-pink remained the most widely available colors, but more natural-looking powders and dry rouges, developed by French perfumers and imitated by American manufacturers, slowly gained a foothold. Cosmetics firms promoted such new tints as "brunette" and "flesh" (cream and light beige shades), intended to harmonize with the complexion. Anthony Overton introduced High-Brown face powder to African Americans around 1900, spurring other companies to sell darker powder shades in the African-American market. Makeup techniques also evolved. Liquid whitener and rouge, usually applied with a sponge, were often quite visible and bright, giving the skin a masklike veneer. In the early twentieth century, such firms as Pond's and Pompeian publicized "vanishing cream" as a transparent base for face powder, which allowed skin tones and facial expression to surface.[45]

Beyond powder and rouge, women often improvised their makeup with preparations sold for other purposes. Cosmetique and mascaro, as it was called, were all-purpose dyes in pomade or cake form, which men applied to graying mustaches and hair along the temples, and women used to tint eyebrows and lashes. Paste rouge was applied to the lips as well as cheeks. Some women apparently adapted theatrical makeup for everyday use—not greasepaints, but lighter-weight, tinted powders, which they toned down and blended for the street, restaurants, or evening parties. When Max Factor opened a professional makeup studio for stage and screen actors in Los Angeles in 1909, or-

dinary women came in to purchase theatrical eye shadow and eyebrow pencil for their home use; Factor began to package these as everyday cosmetics. As women began to buy theatrical preparations, tinted powders, and dry rouge, the notion of paint as unnatural and makeup as mask increasingly gave way to the modern sense of makeup as an expression of self and personality.[46]

A scene of the new urban beauty culture. John Sloan, Hairdresser's Window, *1907.*

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To paint or not to paint? Women pondered the question, with its charged implications for appropriate female behavior and appearance, as the commerce in beauty goods, information, and services swelled. Although some women remained embarrassed consumers or continued to use homemade products, for others, painting the face, once the symbol of the most disreputable form of commerce, was now simply one option among many. In the crescendo of talk and circulation of goods, a public commercial realm devoted to female beautifying had begun to take shape. In the nation's cities, journalist Anne O'Hagan commented, women in their pursuit of beauty could turn to "the Turkish baths, the manicure establishments—almost as thick upon the city street as the saloons; the massage places, the electro therapeutics, the 'don't worry' clubs . . . ; the dermatological institutes; the half of every drug store." It was a confusing world. More and more cosmetics were available on the market, but their production and marketing remained haphazard, a jumbling of goods that invited skepticism, if not outright censure. Patent cosmetics makers, perfumers, and druggists contended over the efficacy of their products; beauty doctors and complexion specialists competed for clients; columnists in magazines and newspapers offered conflicting advice. Still, as O'Hagan observed, slowly "something of a system is being evolved from the hodgepodge."[47] That system, created to a large extent by women themselves, was known as "beauty culture."