Introduction

In 1938 the cosmetics firm Volupté introduced two new lipsticks. *Mademoiselle* magazine explained that one was for "girls who lean toward pale-lacquered nails, quiet smart clothes and tiny strands of pearls," the other "for the girl who loves exciting clothes, pins a strass [paste] pin big as a saucer to her dress, and likes to be just a leetle bit shocking." One had a "soft mat finish" while the other covered the lips "with a gleaming lustre." The names of these lipsticks were Lady and Hussy. As *Mademoiselle* put it, "Each of these two categories being as much a matter of mood as a matter of fact, we leave you to decide which you prefer to be."[1]

The assumptions behind this promotion are arresting. For nineteenth-century Americans, lady and hussy were polar opposites—the best and worst of womanhood—and the presence or absence of cosmetics marked the divide. Reddened cheeks and darkened eyelids were signs of female vice, and the "painted woman" provoked disgust and censure from the virtuous. But by the 1930s, lady and hussy had become "types" and "moods." Female identities once fixed by parentage, class position, social etiquette, and sexual codes were now

released from small swiveling cylinders. Where "paint" implied a concealing mask, the term "makeup," in common usage by the 1920s, connoted a medium of self-expression in a consumer society where identity had become a purchasable style. Women could choose the look of gentlewoman or prostitute—and apparently Hussy outsold Lady five to one!

Lady and Hussy lipsticks mark a sea change, not only in the meaning of cosmetics, but in conceptions of women's appearance and identity. How did this fundamental transformation take place? How did a sign of disrepute become the daily routine of millions? And how did a "kitchen physic," as homemade cosmetics were once called, become a mass market industry?

Small objects sometimes possess great moral force, and the usual answers to these questions have been charged with disapproval and criticism. Cosmetics have been condemned as symptomatic of all that is wrong in modern consumer society: Their producers create false needs, manipulate fears and desires, and elevate superficiality over substance, all to sell overpriced goods that do not deliver on their promises. Today the most formidable judgments about cosmetics often come from feminists who, since the 1960s, have argued that powerful male-dominated consumer industries and mass media have been a leading cause of women's oppression. In this view, the beauty industry has added to, even to some extent supplanted, the legal and economic discriminations that have for so long subordinated women. Manufactured images of ideal beauty and supermodel glamour have come to dominate women's consciousness. And the act of beautifying, though it seems enticing and freely chosen, is really compulsory work, so narcissistic, time-consuming, and absorbing as to limit women's achievements.[2]

To many critics, the story begins and ends there. But this view is partial and, in many respects, wrong. For one thing, this business for women was largely built *by* women. In the early stages of the developing cosmetics industry, from the 1890s to the 1920s, women formulated and organized "beauty culture" to a remarkable extent. The very notion

of femininity, emphasizing women's innate taste for beauty, opened opportunities for women in this business, even as it restricted them elsewhere. And women seized their chances, becoming entrepreneurs, inventors, manufacturers, distributors, and promoters. Handicapped in pursuing standard business practices, they resourcefully founded salons, beauty schools, correspondence courses, and mail-order companies; they pioneered in the development of modern franchising and direct-sales marketing strategies. The beauty trade they developed did not depend upon advertising as its impetus. Rather, it capitalized on patterns of women's social life—their old customs of visiting, conversation, and religious observance, as well as their new presence in shops, clubs, and theaters.

Strikingly, many of the most successful entrepreneurs were immigrant, working-class, or black women. Coming from poor, socially marginal backgrounds, they played a surprisingly central role in redefining mainstream ideals of beauty and femininity in the twentieth century. Focusing new attention on the face and figure, they made the pursuit of beauty visible and respectable. In many ways, they set the stage for Madison Avenue, whose narrowly drawn images of flawless beauty bombard us today. But before the rise of the mass market, these early businesswomen served up a variety of visions of womanly beauty. Elizabeth Arden was a Canadian immigrant and "working girl" who remade herself into a symbol of haute femininity; she carved a "class market" for cosmetics by catering to the social prestige and power of wealthy and upwardly mobile white women. In contrast, such black entrepreneurs as Madam C. J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone promoted a form of beauty culture entwined in the everyday lives of poor African-American women. They consciously created job opportunities for women, addressed the politics of appearance, and committed their profits to their community. Indeed, the history of these businesswomen flatly contradicts the view that the beauty industry worked only *against* women's interests.

What about the women who bought and used beauty products? Cosmetics have often figured in the old stereotype of women as vain and

foolish, a stereotype contemporary critics too often reinforce. How could a rational being eat arsenic to improve her complexion, spread hormones on her face, believe promises of a wrinkle-free future, and pay exorbitant prices for an ounce of prevention?

Answering these questions requires us to listen more closely to women's own voices and to consider how *they* understood beautifying in their own lives. Remarkably, women from across the country, from different social classes and racial-ethnic groups, enthusiastically embraced cosmetics—especially makeup—in the early twentieth century. This acceptance was no mere fad or fashion, but a larger change in the way women perceived their identities and displayed them on the face and body. For some, cosmetics use quickly became a self-diminishing habit: Women reported as early as the 1930s that advertising and social pressures to be attractive lowered their self-esteem. Others, however, boldly applied their lipsticks in public and asserted their right to self-creation through the "makeover" of self-image.

Today the possibility of transformation through cosmetics is often belittled as a delusion, "hope in a jar" that only masks the fact of women's oppression. In truth, women knew then—as they do now—precisely what they were buying. Again and again they reported their delight in beautifying—in the sensuous creams and tiny compacts, the riot of colors, the mastery of makeup skills, the touch of hands, the sharing of knowledge and advice. Indeed, the pleasures of fantasy and desire were an integral part of the product—and these included not only dreams of romance and marriage, but also the modern yearning to take part in public life.

Beauty culture, then, should be understood not only as a type of commerce but as a system of meaning that helped women navigate the changing conditions of modern social experience. "Modernity" is, to be sure, a slippery concept. It describes the paradoxical effects of an urban, capitalist order—its rationalized work, bureaucracy, and efficiency, on the one hand, its fleeting encounters, self-consciousness, and continuous novelty, on the other. Women's rendezvous with modernity brought them into a public realm that was not always welcoming.[3]

Their changing status as workers, citizens, consumers, and pleasure seekers was acknowledged cosmetically: During the nineteenth century, the "public woman" was a painted prostitute; by its end, women from all walks of life were "going public": Women crowded onto trolleys, promenaded the streets, frequented the theaters, and shopped in the new palaces of consumption. They found jobs not only in the traditional work of domestic service, sewing, and farming, but also in offices, stores, and other urban occupations that required new kinds of face-to-face interactions. A new "marriage market" substituted dating for courtship, and the dance hall for the front porch; a new sense of sexual freedom emerged.

For women experiencing these social changes, the act of beautifying often became a lightning rod for larger conflicts over female autonomy and social roles. Among white women, for example, popular concern centered on the morality of visible makeup—rouge, lipstick, mascara, and eye shadow. In the black community, beauty culture was explicitly a political issue, long before the contemporary feminist movement made it so. Skin whiteners and hair straighteners were the tokens in a heated debate: Against charges of white emulation and self-loathing, many black women invoked their rights to social participation and cultural legitimacy precisely through their use of beauty aids.

Still, for all the efforts to fix the meaning of cosmetics in relation to beauty standards, ideals of femininity, profit-making, and politics, the significance of these substances remains elusive. What do women declare when they "put on a face"? Is making up an act of deception, a confirmation of "natural" female identity, a self-conscious "put-on"? By the light of today's TV shopping channels, as celebrities hawk their cosmetic lines, it may seem that the promise of beauty is nothing but a commercial myth that binds women to its costly pursuit. Critics are not wrong to address the power of corporations, advertisers, and mass media to foster and profit from this myth. But they have overlooked the web of intimate rituals, social relationships, and female institutions that gave form to American beauty culture. Over the decades, mothers

and daughters have taught each other about cosmetics, cliques have formed around looks, women have shared their beauty secrets and, in the process, created intimacy. Not only tools of deception and illusion, then, these little jars tell a rich history of women's ambition, pleasure, and community.