

The history of cosmetics

Humans have always used what we today call cosmetics. For ancient hunter-gatherers, it could mean applying a mixture of mud and urine to their skin, or using the ash from burnt snail shells to colour their faces. Over the millennia, ingredients and production processes for cosmetics have evolved, from small-scale using only natural ingredients, to mass production and the inclusion of synthetics. In today's digital age, product ranges, trends, styles and consumer demands are changing faster than ever.

Here's a look at how cosmetics have developed through the ages.

Ancient Egypt

The Egyptians are considered the first "cosmetologists". Art and hieroglyphics have revealed the civilization's use of tools, which formed the original make-up application kits.

Chemists by nature, Egyptians used vegetable oils and lotions to hide body odour and clean the skin. Charcoal and soot were used as eyeliner to limit eye infection, bring back eyesight and ward off evil spirits.



Ancient Rome

Anti-ageing recipes for wrinkle creams and the use of snail's ashes to treat sun spots arrived. These were inspired by empresses and goddesses including Venus, whose images would adorn bath houses.

Tools such as mirrors, spoons and palettes for preparation, and boxes for storage also became prominent. Cosmetics influenced fashion, religion and law. The "Lex Oppia" law from 189 BC tried to limit cosmetics use and control female appearance in public.

Ancient Greece

"Cosmetics" derives from the Greek word "kosmetikos", meaning harmony and order. Powdered chalk and toxic white lead, "fucus", were used as face paint as porcelain skin signalled wealth and beauty. Honey and olive oil were leading ingredients, along with natural pigments and vegetable dyes including herbs, flowers, fruits and vegetables such as beetroots. Unibrows were a popular favourite with both men and women using a dark powder based substance to connect their brows.



Eastern impact

Around 1000 AD, physician Abulcasis wrote *Al-Tasreef*, a medical encyclopedia containing an entire chapter on cosmetics. Perfumed stocks were identified as an early form of lipstick and deodorant. The Chinese stained their fingernails using beeswax, egg and gum arabic; Japanese Geishas used rice powder and bird droppings to lighten their skin; and the intricate art of mehndi, or henna, was applied to the hands and feet.



Royal influence

Egg whites were applied to create a shiny and healthy glow in Elizabethan times; heavy application during Charles II's reign indicated good health and energy; while Queen Victoria proclaimed the vulgarity and unladylike nature of make-up, causing a departure from its use. Fashion and beauty overlapped, with Venetian ceruse make-up, famed by Madame de Pompadour, celebrated for its flamboyance and vitality.



Social factors

The Roaring Twenties epitomised glamour, prestige and beauty. However, the Second World War saw minimal cosmetics uptake and development due to frugal attitudes and a shortage of provisions.

The silver screen, the growing popularity of photography and the dawn of the "celebrity" combined to make cosmetics an aspirational purchase.

Today

Rising disposable incomes, changing lifestyles, the 'selfie' culture and socially conscious brand adopters have fuelled the birth of niche indie beauty brands that strive to compete with mass-market multinational companies. Global trends such as premiumization, personalization, male grooming, the rise of O2O (online-to-offline) strategies, halal, active ingredients, sustainability and anti-ageing are growing in popularity and grabbing market share. Through automation, robotics and the Internet of Things, shoppers can customise their beauty choices with virtual mirrors, and companies can ease the production process by bringing robot assistants to workforces.

Middle Ages

Skin lightening to imitate high social standing and wealth was common, with wearers experimenting with risky and painful materials and techniques. A high forehead, for example, was a sign of heightened beauty and affluence, prompting women to pluck their hairlines. Church leaders expressed their distaste for cosmetics as it was considered synonymous with prostitution and materialistic ideals, introducing the phrase "the painted lady".

20th Century mass production

High-street names, new items such as flavoured lipsticks and glosses, creative packaging and expensive advertising campaigns pushed scientific formulations and cutting-edge innovations to the masses.

The safety of cosmetics became a prominent concern, amid calls for non-animal alternative testing methods and eco-friendly ingredient selection to replace traditional choices.



The internet age

Companies and customers alike are able to access the latest styles, trends and celebrity looks including volume mascara, exuberant nail colours, blusher textures, long-lasting makeup, multifunctional skin care and liquid eye applications. This creates a new marketing opportunity through advertising, widespread communication, digital magazines and social media engagement.

