

Analyzing Human Adornment

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When we think about what distinguishes our species, we might come up with religion, morality, and art. On some such basis I have written a book titled *The Artful Species*. But there is room for doubt. There are many atheists, people motivated exclusively by self-interest, and cultural philistines. More plausible as a universal and ancient behavior is our propensity to adorn ourselves, our possessions, and our social environment. We are the species that puts feathers in its hair and daisy-chains around its neck, that paints its pots with patterns.

The full-blown ascetic has no truck with adornment. But she is rare. Because she is like a person who starves herself to death for the sake of a political cause, or who adopts celibacy despite being sexually attracted to others, she must constantly fight to subdue what comes from deep within her, strive to make her unusual life-choice second nature.

So let's look at the idea that we are the decorating (adorning, ornamenting – I use these notions interchangeably) species. Doing so involves traversing a very broad territory: evolutionary history, archaeology, ethology, anthropology, psychology, and cultural history, not to mention contemporary issues concerning beauty aids and fashion.

Adornments aim at aesthetic enhancement. Here's a very rough attempt at a very rough definition: To adorn something is (1) (a) to intend to make it aesthetically special (b) by making it (more) beautiful or sublime, (c) to succeed in this to some degree, and (d) to receive audience uptake of the attempt and of the success OR is (2) (e) to follow a conventionalized, socially accepted practice (f) that originated in (1)-type adornment. (2) is there to acknowledge that the hotel reception desk is decorated by the vase of flowers, even if the display happens to be thoughtlessly created and is unappreciated by the guests checking in.

While adornments aim at aesthetic enhancement, this need not be their sole or even primary function. The General's braid is primarily a marker of rank.

Are other species decorators? Well, they do things that look analogous. Satin Bowerbirds not only construct bowers (in their case, a walled dancing platform) but also they "paint" the walls with blue berry juice. Some birds and fish add non-structural items to their nests.

In many cases there must be doubt that these species have intentions at the required level and specificity, or even that they have an aesthetic sense at all. Darwin thought that female creatures, even insects, choose their mates on aesthetic grounds, but that conflates finding the appearance of something attractive with finding it beautiful or sublime. The peacock is not adorning himself by growing his tail and the peahen's response to the tail is one of sexual arousal rather than of contemplative aesthetic admiration. (The beautiful can go with the sexually attractive for us, but we should be very wary of inferring from the peahen's sexual response that it is based on an aesthetic judgment.)

Were we the first decorators? Our species, *Homo sapiens*, descended in Africa about 300,000 years ago from *Homo heidelbergensis* and our Neanderthal cousins, *Homo neanderthalensis*, descended in Europe, also from *Homo heidelbergensis*, about 400,000 years ago. In their construction of handaxes from about 500,000 years ago, *Homo heidelbergensis* displayed what looks like an aesthetic sensibility by making a minority of axes in which symmetry and other features were apparently of more interest than functionality. If we inherited our aesthetic sense from them, it's likely Neanderthals did as well. And if the aesthetic sense is presupposed by adorning practices in the way I have suggested, it's possible that Neanderthals were also decorators.

Like us, they collected ochre for more than 200,000 years and favored the brightest reds. Ochre can serve many functions but it does lend itself to the decorative marking of bodies or things. Shells painted with ochre by Neanderthals are dated to 50,000 years ago and their perforated shells are older. There are Neanderthal handprints and stencils, as well as some animal depictions, in caves. Highly suggestive is a necklace of interlocking eagle talons dated to 120,000 years ago. Neanderthal use of bones, claws, and feathers of large raptors, which again is suggestive of ritual and possibly of ornamental behaviors, was both sustained and geographically widespread. And the floor of a cave in Gibraltar used by Neanderthals has deeply incised patterns.

Neanderthals became extinct about 35,000 years ago. From 10–5,000 years before this we overlapped with them in Europe. Most of the behaviors described above fall in the period 120–40,000 years ago, so prior to contact. It's very likely, then, that Neanderthals were decorators, that this did not depend on their copying us, and that they might even have adopted decoration before we did. Nevertheless, the European archeological record in the time of our overlap with Neanderthals and subsequently shows that we were obsessed with decoration and, by comparison, they were not.

Were we always decorators? Fifty years ago this might have been doubted. It was then thought that a change to our brains 40–20,000 years ago in Europe led to the kind of cultural explosion in symbolic thinking that made us "psychologically modern" and led to religion, morality, art (remember them), and decoration. But subsequent discoveries from much earlier times in Asia and more particularly in Middle Stone Age Africa have debunked this view. It no longer appears that there was a light-bulb moment. Probably, we were psychologically modern when we became anatomically modern, and were decorators on a modest scale more or less from the outset.

What has become clear, however, is that there was no gradual progress toward improvement and sophistication, which is the pattern of development we expect now. Under favorable conditions—a complex function of population, climate, resources, and environmental factors—there was technological and cultural innovation, including in modes of decoration no doubt. This might be sustained over several thousand years at a time, but when the conditions deteriorated everything then could be lost. This snakes-and-ladders pattern was repeated at many times and in many places. If Europe of the Upper Paleolithic provided an important tipping point, this was not the result of some brain mutation but rather the lucky coincidence of conditions suitable for ongoing cumulative social change.

Artifacts can be decorated, but the most interesting (and difficult) case is that of the ornamentation of the human body. Given the appropriate aesthetic motivations and audience uptake, we could argue that extreme body-building, or manipulations such as cranial alteration or foot-binding, result in the body's decoration. On the other hand, aesthetic improvements brought about by, say, minor surgeries and that are supposed to strike others as "natural" will not count as adornments.

Also, we need to distinguish ornamentation of the body from regular bodily maintenance. Brushing my teeth and exercising regularly might produce aesthetic improvements in my appearance, and I might be mindful of these, without these counting as practices of adornment. The difficulty here lies in the relativity—to individuals, peoples, periods, and cultures—of the respective notions. What is adornment in one case might amount to regular bodily

maintenance in another (and to making aesthetically weird, that is, to failed adornment, in a third). Moreover, an adornment might itself require regular upkeep.

What form do bodily decorations take?

Head hair can be styled decoratively and this seems to be a very old practice. Some female figurines (in the period 29–18,000 years ago) show evidence of hair braiding or styling (as well as of bracelets, necklaces, collars, and belts). For example, the ceramic figurine of a woman from Dolní Věstonice (of about 25,000 years ago) shows her either as wearing a close-fitting cap or as having her hair in a helmet-shaped fringe. The woman from Willendorf (of about 25,000 years ago) appears either to be wearing a woven hat or has her hair coiled on top of her head. The woman of Lespugue (again, of about 25,000 years ago) wears a fringe (or bangs) on her forehead and has straight hair hanging down her back. The hair of the woman of Brassempouy (about 25,000 years ago) seems to be braided or beaded.



Venus of Brassempouy, c. 25,000 years old.

Photo by Jean-Gilles Berizzi.

“Ornatrix” is the Latin word for hairdresser. Consider how the hair can be shaped, cut, curled, plaited, beaded, and dyed; it can be grown or shaved into patterns; it can be supplanted by wigs or bulked with hair extensions and other additions (mud, ocher, wax, fat, and so on); it can support combs, tiaras, jewelry, mirrors. An extraordinary variety of hair stylings have been adopted across the world and from ancient times to the present.

Teeth are also widely subject to decorative modification. The practice of doing so dates to at least 12,000 years ago and involved inlaying with precious stone, overlaying with precious metals, and lacquering or staining. Equally ancient is the practice of incising, filing, chipping, or extracting teeth in a wide range of patterns. The Joman people in Japan used such practices 6,500 years ago. Upper-class Mayans in Meso-America filed their teeth and etched designs on them from 2,900 years ago; among other techniques, they applied jade inlays to teeth. Meanwhile, the people of many cultures still sheath or cap their teeth with gold and chipping and filing continues in some places today.

Without going into further detail, here is a list of the forms that bodily adornment takes:

- Clothing and covers, headdresses and masks.
- Jewelry: finger, ear, and neck rings, bangles, necklaces, anklets, medals, pins, etc.).
- Cosmetics and scents, as well as body paint.
- Ear, nose, and lip plugs and plates, along with piercings and labrets.
- Tattoos and scarification (cicatrix, keloids).

Now, many present-day Westerners are repelled by scarification and heavy tattooing, especially of the face. Writing in 1790, Immanuel Kant condemned the full-facial tattoo of Maori men as a disfigurement — in other words, as a defacement — of the naturally noble human face. This no doubt comes from the code of Abrahamic religions that regard us as made in God’s image and thereby as divinely perfect in form. (The Confucian tradition was similarly negative about tattoos, however.) So it was that tattooing and scarring was widely rejected, given only as punishments or to identify criminals and slaves. It might be argued in light of this: such markings are despised and, therefore, could



not be intended as aesthetic improvements—not even of the sublime kind—and could not receive the appropriate appreciation. So, they could not be ornamental. It’s important, then, to be quite clear that many other cultures do not share this body aesthetic. Members of these other cultures regard an unmodified body as incomplete, unfinished, and uncivilized. Self-directed or ritually conventionalized marking of the body help form its possessor’s identity. In consequence, scarification and tattooing frequently are practiced on mainly aesthetic grounds, sometimes without even being associated with ritual or rites of passage. This view is widespread in Africa and elsewhere. The Tabwa of Zaire and Zambia do not consider beauty to be innate but rather to be an effect of scarification. Their term for the practice, *kulemba*, means to inscribe or beautify a blank surface. Both sexes cover themselves with scars. A similar equation of the unmarked body with plainness is seen also in the Tiv and Yoruba of Nigeria and the Baule people of Ivory Coast, who use scarification primarily to promote female beauty. Moreover, the tactile, erogenous quality of cicatrization is widely acknowledged and appreciated. The scars are tender for some years and serve as artificial erogenous zones for the bearer and his or her partner.

Maori man with moko, c. 1860-69. Photo from the collection of the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadero.

A bodily decoration might have no significance beyond its aesthetic value. And social messages aren’t always conveyed by adornment. (The police might have the word “police” emblazoned on their uniforms, for instance.) But many decorations convey information about their bearer and are frequently used deliberately to do so.

Here’s a list:

- Age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, parental status.
- Memberships and affiliations, such as ethnicity, religion, caste, class, tribe, clan, club, team, organization, fan group, political party. These are often marked by uniforms.
- Wealth, social rank, achievements.
- Occupations: think of soldiers, judges, flight attendants, chefs, wait-staff, bellboys. These are often marked by uniforms.
- Special occasions, such as weddings, proms, mourning, graduation, Halloween, rites of passage.
- Special activities, such as fishing, swimming, golfing, skiing.
- Clothing regularly is functional, but that is frequently consistent with its being intended to be aesthetically pleasing overall, along with the incorporation of complementary decorative elements.

So adornments can send a great variety of socially complex social and personal signals. Sometimes they make us stand out as individuals, sometimes they affirm our shared identity with others in a group to which we belong (and thereby

distinguish our group from other groups). Given their myriad forms and functions, any given mode of adornment might convey different messages, even contradictory ones, in different situations. The flower behind the left ear that marks one as a single female in one society might mean in another that one is a male of the cassowary totem clan.

It's interesting, then, if patterns are repeated across cultures in their use of adornments. One that is common enough to be noteworthy – though it's far from universal and has notable exceptions – is that the decorations of females tend to be permanent and to indicate fertility, marital status, and age, while those of males tend to be impermanent and to show wealth and social status. On the face of it this is significant, because it roughly maps onto (and provides indirect confirmation of) the account offered by evolutionary psychologists of the criteria to which we appeal in the course of mate selection. These psychologists maintain that (heterosexual) men seek youthful fertility in their partners and (heterosexual) women seek such things as wealth, status, and power. (These strategies supposedly follow from differences in what the sexes need from each other for successful reproduction.) And here is the connection with patterns of adornment: it looks as if each sex uses its modes of decoration to appeal to the preferences of the other, thereby hoping to attract an otherwise better mate.

This raises some intriguing questions. How much do we use our adornments to fake the desirable attributes? Is such faking detectable? Does the possibility of faking affect our attitudes toward the adornments themselves?

We should be careful not to become distracted, however. For a start, both sexes look for much more in the potential parents of their future children than has so far been indicated. (Intelligence, a caring disposition, and a sense of humor might rightly count more than youthfulness or social reputation.) But beyond this, we keep on signaling even when mate selection isn't in question. This intimates that the function of such signaling is more broadly social. It's about self-identity and identification, about establishing one's social place, contribution, and competency.



New Guinea woman with Kina shells and elaborate nose piercing (1986). Photo courtesy of Wilson Stock Photos.

In any case, adornments, rather than being meaningless and unimportant, provide a unique opportunity to observe and analyze a crucial intersection at which aesthetics, sex, sociality, and culture collide head-on.