

**FASHION IN DEFORMITY:  
AS ILLUSTRATED IN THE  
CUSTOMS OF BARBAROUS  
AND CIVILIZED RACES**

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Fashion in deformity: as illustrated in the customs of barbarous and civilized races by William Henry Flower

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# FASHION IN DEFORMITY,

AS ILLUSTRATED IN THE  
CUSTOMS OF BARBAROUS AND CIVILIZED RACES.

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

TO WHICH IS ADDED:

## MANNERS AND FASHION.

By HERBERT SPENCER.

### FASHION IN DEFORMITY.

THE propensity to *deform*, or alter from the natural form, some part of the body, is one which is common to human nature in every aspect in which we are acquainted with it, the most primitive and barbarous, and the most civilized and refined.

The alterations or deformities which it is proposed to consider in this essay, are those which are performed, not by isolated individuals, or with definite motives, but by considerable numbers of members of a community, simply in imitation of one another—in fact, according to *fashion*, "that most inexorable tyrant to which the greater part of mankind are willing slaves."

Fashion is now often associated with change, but in less civilized conditions

of society fashions of all sorts are more permanent than with us; and in all communities such fashions as those here treated of are, for obvious reasons, far less likely to be subject to the fluctuations of caprice than those affecting the dress only, which, even in Shakespeare's time, changed so often that "the fashion wears out more apparel than the man." Alterations once made in the form of the body cannot be discarded or modified in the lifetime of the individual, and therefore, as fashion is intrinsically imitative, such alterations have the strongest possible tendency to be reproduced generation after generation.

The origins of these fashions are mostly lost in obscurity, all attempts to

solve them being little more than guesses. Some of them have become associated with religious or superstitious observances, and so have been spread and perpetuated; some have been vaguely thought to be hygienic in motive; most have some relation to conventional standards of improved personal appearance; but whatever their origin, the desire to conform to common usage, and not to appear singular, is the prevailing motive which leads to their continuance. They are perpetuated by imitation, which, as Herbert Spencer says, may result from two widely divergent motives. It may be prompted by reverence for one imitated, or it may be prompted by the desire to assert equality with him.

Before treating of the subject in its application to the human body, it will be well to glance, in passing, at the fact that a precisely similar propensity has impelled man, at various ages of the world's history, and under various conditions of society, to interfere in the same manner with the natural conformation of many of the animals which have come under his influence through domestication.

The Hottentots, objecting to symmetry of growth in the horns of their cattle, twist them while young and pliant, so that ultimately they are made to assume various fantastic and unnatural directions. Sheep with multiple horns are produced in some parts of Africa by splitting with a knife the budding horn of the young animal. Hotspur's exclamation, "What horse? a roan, a *crop-ear*, is it not?" points to a custom not yet extinct in England. Docking horses' tails—that is, cutting off about half the length, not of the hair only, but of the actual flesh and bone, and *nicking*, or dividing the tendons of the under side, so that the paralyzed stump is always carried in an unnatural or "cocked" position—were common enough a generation ago, as seen in all equestrian pictures of the period, and are still occasionally practised. In spite of all warnings of common sense and experience, we continue, solely because it is the fashion, to tor-

ture and deform our horses' mouths and necks with tight bearing-reins, which though only temporarily keeping the head in a constrained and unnatural, and therefore inelegant position, produce many permanent injuries.\* Dogs may still be seen with the natural form of their ears and tails "improved" by mutilation.

Besides these and many other modifications of the form given by nature, practised upon the individual animal, selective breeding through many generations has succeeded in producing inherited structural changes, sometimes of very remarkable character. These have generally originated in some accidental, perhaps slight, peculiarity, which has been taken advantage of, perpetuated and increased. In this way the race of bull-dogs, with their shortened upper jaws, bandy legs and twisted tails, have been developed. The now fashionable "dachshund" is another instance. In this category may also be placed polled and humped cattle, tailless cats of the Isle of Man and Singapore, lop-eared rabbits, tailless, crested, or other strange forms of fowls; pointer, tumbler, feather-legged, and other varieties of pigeons; and the ugly double-tailed and prominent-eyed goldfish which delight the Chinese. Thus the power which, when judiciously exercised, has led to the vast improvement seen in many domestic species over their wild progenitors, has also ministered to strange vagaries and caprices, in the production and perpetuation of monstrous forms.

To return to man, the most convenient classification of our subject will be one which is based upon the part of the body affected, and I will begin with the treatment of the hair and other appendages of the skin as the more superficial and comparatively trivial in its effects.

Here we are at once introduced to the domain of fashion in her most potent sway. The facility with which hair lends itself to various methods of treatment has been a temptation too great

\* See "Bits and Bearing Reins," by Edward Fordham Flower. London, 1879.

to resist in all known conditions of civilization. Innumerable variations of custom exist in different parts of the world, and marked changes in at least all more or less civilized communities have characterized successive epochs of history. Not only the length and method of arrangement, but even the color of the hair, is changed in obedience to caprices of fashion. In many of the islands of the Western Pacific, the naturally jet black hair of the natives is converted into a tawny brown by the application of lime, obtained by burning the coral found so abundantly on their shores; and not many years since similar means were employed for producing the same result among the ladies of Western Europe—a fact which considerably diminishes the value of an idea entertained by many ethnologists, that community of custom is evidence of community of origin or of race.

Notwithstanding the painful and laborious nature of the process, when conducted with no better implements than flint knives, or pieces of splintered bone or shell, the custom of keeping the head closely shaved prevails extensively among savage nations. This, doubtless, tends to cleanliness, and perhaps comfort, in hot countries; but the fact that it is in many tribes practised only by the women and children, shows that these considerations are not those primarily engaged in its perpetuation. In some cases, as among the Fijians, while the heads of the women are commonly cropped or closely shaved, the men cultivate, at great expense of time and attention, a luxuriant and elaborately arranged mass of hair, exactly reversing the conditions met with in the most highly civilized nations.

In some regions of Africa it is considered necessary to female beauty carefully to eradicate the eyebrows, special pincers for the purpose forming part of the appliances of the toilette; while the various methods of shaving and cutting the beard among men of all nations are too well known to require more than a passing notice. The treatment of finger nails, both as to color and form, has

also been subject to fashion; but the practical inconveniences attending the inordinate length to which these are permitted to grow in some parts of the east of Asia appear to have restricted the custom to a few localities. (See Fig. 1.)



FIG. 1.—Hand of Chinese Ascetic, from Tylor's "Anthropology."

It may be objected to the introduction of this illustration here, that such nails should not be considered deformities, but rather as natural growth, and that to clip and mutilate them as we do is the departure from nature's intention. But this is not so. It is only by constant artificial care and protection that such an extraordinary and inconvenient length can be obtained. When the hands are subjected to the normal amount of use, the nails break or wear away at their free ends in a ratio equal to their growth, as with the claws or hoofs of animals in a wild state.

The exceedingly widespread custom of tattooing\* the skin, may also be alluded to here, as the result of the same

\* A word used by the natives of Tahiti, spelt *tattooing* by Cook, who gives a minute account of the method in which it is performed in that island. "First Voyage," vol. ii., p. 191.

propensity as that which produces the more serious deformations presently to be spoken of. The rudest form of the art was practised by the now extinct Tasmanians and some tribes of Australians, whose naked bodies showed linear or oval raised scars, arranged in a definite manner on the shoulders and breast, and produced by gashes inflicted with sharp stones, into which wood-ashes were rubbed, so as to allow of healing only under unfavorable conditions, leaving permanent large and elevated cicatrices, conspicuous from being of a lighter color than the rest of the skin. From this it is a considerable step in decorative art to the elaborate and often beautiful patterns, wreaths, scrolls, spirals, zigzags, etc., sometimes confined to the face, and sometimes covering the whole body from head to foot, seen in the natives of many of the Polynesian Islands. These are permanently impressed upon the skin, by the introduction of coloring matter, generally some kind of lamp-black, by means of an instrument made of a piece of shell cut into a number of fine points, or a bundle of sharp needles. When the custom of the land demands that the surface to be treated thus is a large one, the process is not only very tedious, but entails an amount of suffering painful to think of. When completed it answers part at least of the purpose of dress with us, as an untattooed skin exhibited to society is looked upon much as an unclothed one would be in more civilized communities. The natural color of the skin seems to have influenced the method and extent of tattooing, as in the black races it is limited to such scars as those spoken of above; which, variously arranged in lines or dots, become tribal distinctions among African negroes. In Europe tattooing on the same principle as that of the Polynesians, is confined almost exclusively to sailors, among whom it is kept up obviously by imitation or fashion.

The nose, the lips, and the ears have in almost all races offered great temptations to be used as foundations for the display of ornament, some process of

boiling, cutting, or alteration of form being necessary to render them fit for the purpose. When Captain Cook, exactly one hundred years ago, was describing the naked savages of the east coast of Australia,\* he says: "Their principal ornament is the bone which they thrust through the cartilage which divides the nostrils from each other.



FIG. 2.—Australian Native, with bone nose-ornament.

What perversion of taste could make them think this a decoration, or what could prompt them, before they had worn it or seen it worn, to suffer the pain and inconvenience that must of necessity attend it, is perhaps beyond the power of human sagacity to determine. As this bone is as thick as a man's finger, and between five and six inches long, it reaches quite across the face, and so effectually stops up both the nostrils that they are forced to keep their mouths wide open for breath, and snuffle so when they attempt to speak that they are scarcely intelligible even to each other. Our seamen, with some humor, called it their spritsail-yard; and indeed it had so ludicrous an appearance, that till we were used to it we found it difficult to refrain from laughter."

Eight years later, on his visit to the northwest coast of America, Captain

\* "First Voyage," vol. ii., p. 633.



Cook found precisely the same custom prevailing among the natives of Prince William's Sound, whose mode of life was in most other respects quite dissimilar to that of the Australians, and who belong ethnologically to a totally different branch of the human race.

In 1681 Dampier\* thus describes a custom which he found existing among the natives of the Corn Islands, off the Moskito coast, in Central America: "They have a fashion to cut holes in the Lips of the Boys when they are young, close to their Chin, which they keep open with little Pegs till they are 14 or 15 years old; then they wear Beards in them, made of Turtle or Tortoise-shell, in the form you see in the Margin. (See Fig. 3.) The little notch at the upper end they put in through the Lip, where it remains between the Teeth and the Lip; the under part hangs down over their Chin.



FIG. 3.—Tortoise-shell Lip ornament of the Moskito Indians. From Dampier.

This they commonly wear all day, and when they sleep they take it out. They have likewise holes bored in their Ears, both Men and Women, when young, and by continual stretching them with great Pegs, they grow to be as big as a mill'd five Shilling Piece. Herein they wear pieces of Wood, cut very round and smooth, so that their Ear seems to be all wood, with a little Skin about it."

It is very remarkable that an almost exactly similar custom still prevails among a tribe of Indians inhabiting the south-

ern part of Brazil—the Botocudos, so called from a Portuguese word (*botoque*) meaning a plug or stopper. Among these people the lip-ornament consists of a conical piece of hard and polished wood, frequently weighs a quarter of a pound, and drags down, elongates, and everts the lower lip, so as to expose the gums and teeth, in a manner which to our taste is hideous, but with them is considered an essential adjunct to an attractive and correct appearance.

In the extreme north of America, the Eskimo "pierce the lower lip under one or both corners of the mouth, and insert in each aperture a double-headed sleeve-button or dumb-bell shaped labret, of bone, ivory, shell, stone, glass, or wood. The incision when first made is about the size of a quill, but as the aspirant for improved beauty grows older, the size of the orifice is enlarged until it reaches the width of half to three-quarters of an inch."\* These operations appear to be practised only on the men, and are supposed to possess some significance other than that of mere ornament. The first piercing of the lip, which is accompanied by some solemnity as a religious feast, is performed on approaching manhood.

But the people who, among the various American tribes, have carried these strange customs to the greatest excess are the Thlinkets, who inhabit the south-eastern shores of Alaska.† "Here it is the women who, in piercing the nose and ears, and filling the apertures with bones, shells, sticks, pieces of copper, nails, or attaching thereto heavy pendants, which drag down the organs and pull the features out of place, appear to have taxed their inventive powers to the utmost, and with a success unsurpassed by any nation in the world, to produce a model of hideous beauty. This success is achieved in their wooden lip-ornament, the crowning glory of the Thlinket

\* H. H. Bancroft, "Native Races of the Pacific States of North America," vol. i., 1875.

† See Bancroft, *op. cit.* vol. i., for numerous citations from original observers regarding these customs.

\* "Voyage Round the World," ed. 1717, vol. i., p. 32.

matron, described by a multitude of eye-witnesses. In all female free-born Thlinket children a slit is made in the under lip, parallel with the mouth, and about half an inch below it. A copper wire, or a piece of shell or wood, is introduced into this, by which the wound is kept open and the aperture extended. By gradually introducing larger objects the required dimensions of the opening are produced. On attaining the age of maturity, a block of wood is inserted, usually oval or elliptical in shape, concave on the sides, and grooved like the wheel of a pulley on the edge in order to keep it in place. The dimensions of

In this method of adornment the North Americans are, however, rivalled, if not eclipsed, by the negroes of the heart of Africa.

"The Bongo women" (says Schweinfurth\*) "delight in distinguishing themselves by an adornment which to our notion is nothing less than a hideous mutilation. As soon as a woman is married, the operation commences of extending her lower lip. This, at first only slightly bored, is widened by inserting into the orifice plugs of wood, gradually increasing in size, until at length the entire feature is enlarged to five or six times its original proportions.



FIG. 4.—Botoendo Indian.

From Bigg-Wither's "Pioneering in South Brazil (1878)."

the block are from two to six inches in length, from one to four inches in width, and about half an inch thick round the edge, and it is highly polished. Old age has little terror in the eyes of a Thlinket belle; for larger lip-blocks are introduced as years advance, and each enlargement adds to the lady's social status, if not to her facial charms. When the block is withdrawn, the lip drops down upon the chin like a piece of leather, displaying the teeth, and presenting altogether a ghastly spectacle. The privilege of wearing this ornament is not extended to femal<sup>e</sup> slaves."

The plugs are cylindrical in form, not less than an inch thick, and are exactly like the pegs of bone or wood worn by the women of Musgoo. By this means the lower lip is extended horizontally till it projects far beyond the upper, which is also bored and fitted with a copper plate or nail, and now and then by a little ring, and sometimes by a bit of straw, about as thick as a lucifer-match. Nor do they leave the nose intact; similar bits of straw are inserted into the edges of the nostrils, and I have seen as many as three of these on each

\* "Heart of Africa," vol. 1, p. 297.

side. A very favorite ornament for the cartilage between the nostrils is a copper ring, just like those that are placed in the noses of buffaloes and other beasts of burden for the purpose of rendering them more tractable. The greatest coquettes among the ladies wear a clasp, or cramp, at the corners of the mouth, as though they wanted to contract the orifice, and literally to put a curb upon its capabilities. These subsidiary ornaments are not, however, found at all universally among the women, and it is rare to see them all at once upon a single individual; the plug in the lower lip of the married women is alone a *sine qua non*, serving, as it does, for an artificial distinction of race.\*

The slightest fold or projection of the skin furnishes an excuse for boring a hole, and inserting a plug or a ring. There are women in the country whose bodies are pierced in some way or other in little short of a hundred different places, and the men are often not far behind in the profusion with which this kind of adornment is carried out.

"The whole group of the Mittoo exhibits peculiarities by which it may be distinguished from its neighbors. The external adornment of the body, the costume, the ornaments, the mutilations which individuals undergo—in short, the general fashions—have all a distinctive character of their own. The most remarkable is the revolting, because unnatural, manner in which the women pierce and distort their lips; they seem to vie with each other in their mutilations; and their vanity in this respect, I believe, surpasses anything that may be found throughout Africa. Not satisfied with piercing the lower lip, they drag out the upper lip as well for the sake of symmetry.\*"

. . . Circular plates, nearly as large as a crown piece, made variously of quartz, of ivory, or of horn, are inserted into the lips that have been stretched by the growth of years, and then often bent

in a position that is all but horizontal; and when the women want to drink they have to elevate the upper lip with their fingers, and to pour the draught into their mouth.

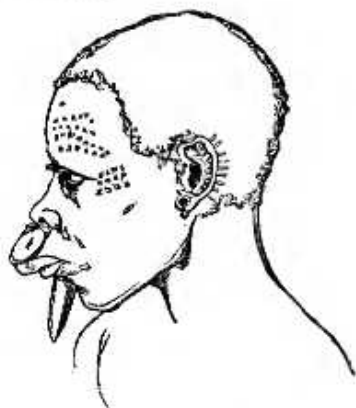


FIG. 5.—Loobah Woman.

From Schweinfurth's "Heart of Africa."

"Similar in shape is the decoration which is worn by the women of Maganya; but though it is round, it is a ring and not a flat plate; it is called 'petelo,' and has no object but to expand the upper lip. Some of the Mittoo women, especially the Loobah, not content with the circle or the ring, force a cone of polished quartz through the lips as though they had borrowed the idea from the rhinoceros. This fashion of using quartz belemnites of more than two inches long, is in some instances adopted by the men."

The traveller who has been the eye-witness of such customs may well add, "Even among these uncultured children of nature, human pride crops up among the fetters of fashion, which, indeed, are fetters in the worst sense of the word; for fashion in the distant wilds of Africa tortures and harasses poor humanity as much as in the great prison of civilization."

It seems, indeed, a strange phenomenon that in such different races, so far removed in locality, customs so singular—to our ideas so revolting and unnatural, and certainly so painful and in-

\* The mutilation of both lips was also observed by Rohlfs among the women of Kadje, in Segseg, between Lake Tsad and the Benwe.