

MAKING THE BODY BEAUTIFUL



A CULTURAL HISTORY OF
AESTHETIC SURGERY

SANDER L. GILMAN

Making the Body Beautiful

By Sander L. Gilman

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Nose reconstructions have been common in India for centuries. South Korea, Brazil, and Israel have become international centers for procedures ranging from eyelid restructuring to buttock lifts and tummy tucks. Argentina has the highest rate of silicone implants in the world. Around the globe, aesthetic surgery has become a cultural and medical fixture. Sander Gilman seeks to explain why by presenting the first systematic world history and cultural theory of aesthetic surgery. Touching on subjects as diverse as getting a "nose job" as a sweet-sixteen birthday present and the removal of male breasts in seventh-century Alexandria, Gilman argues that aesthetic surgery has such universal appeal because it helps people to "pass," to be seen as a member of a group with which they want to or need to identify.

Gilman begins by addressing basic questions about the history of aesthetic surgery. What surgical procedures have been performed? Which are considered aesthetic and why? Who are the patients? What is the place of aesthetic surgery in modern culture? He then turns his attention to that focus of countless human anxieties: the nose. Gilman discusses how people have reshaped their noses to repair the ravages of war and disease (principally syphilis), to match prevailing ideas of beauty, and to avoid association with negative images of the "Jew," the "Irish," the "Oriental," or the "Black." He examines how we have used aesthetic surgery on almost every conceivable part of the body to try to pass as younger, stronger, thinner, and more erotic. Gilman also explores some of the extremes of surgery as personal transformation, discussing transgender surgery, adult circumcision and foreskin restoration, the enhancement of dueling scars, and even a performance artist who had herself altered to resemble the Mona Lisa.

The book draws on an extraordinary range of sources. Gilman is as comfortable discussing Nietzsche, Yeats, and Darwin as he is grisly medical details, Michael Jackson, and Barbra Streisand's decision to keep her own nose. The book contains dozens of arresting images of people before, during, and after surgery. This is a profound, provocative, and engaging study of how humans have sought to change their lives by transforming their bodies.

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Making the Body Beautiful By Sander L. Gilman Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1507451 in Books
- Published on: 2001-01-15
- Released on: 2000-11-12
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .95" w x 6.00" l, 1.30 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 424 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

An intriguing inquiry into how aesthetic surgery has evolved into a major area of modern medicine, this book combines cultural perspectives on the body beautiful with a medical chronology. Gilman (Creating Beauty to Cure the Soul, etc.), who teaches human biology at the University of Chicago, focuses extensively on the nose as the original site of aesthetic procedures. He simultaneously explores "the basic motivation for aesthetic surgery—the desire to 'pass,'" starting with 16th-century surgery to rebuild the noses of syphilitics "so they would be less visible in their society" and its cultural implications. Early debate centered on whether surgery restored function or merely catered to human vanity. The "hierarchy of races" created by some scientists in the 18th century inspired procedures to create "American noses out of Irish pug noses," while "the origin of the 'correction' of the black nose is masked within medical literature [because] no reputable surgeon wanted to be seen as facilitating crossing the color bar." Gilman discusses political uses of aesthetic surgery, such as that of the Nazis to achieve the Aryan ideal, the transformation of former Klan Grand Wizard David Duke into what one commentator called "a blond, blow-dried replica of a young Robert Redford," transsexual surgery to permit "restoration of the relationship between the inner and outer selves" and aesthetic surgery as a fountain of youth. His fast-paced narrative blends cultural criticism with discussion of medical techniques and ethics in a thoughtful study that should appeal to both a lay and professional readership. Photos not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

Gilman, a distinguished professor of human biology at the University of Chicago, has drawn on a rich variety of sources—surgical texts as well as literature, art, and film—to trace the history and the cultural meaning of aesthetic surgery. His story begins with the Renaissance, when the focus on the human ability to transform the self and the world created the distinction between reconstructive and aesthetic surgery. In addition to undoing the ravages of disease, Gilman identifies other motives for aesthetic surgery: matching cultural ideals of beauty, repairing the impact of war-related injuries, and appearing youthful or erotic. Most disturbing are Gilman's wide-ranging examples of how aesthetic surgery has been used to correct signs of racial difference. Gilman brings his story to the present, discussing liposuction, breast enlargement and reduction, and transsexual surgery. He also gives examples from non-Western regions, reflecting the globalization of European American standards of beauty. A fascinating and provocative book that should appeal to scholars and informed general readers alike. Highly recommended. Marie Marmo Mullaney, Caldwell Coll., NJ

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From [Booklist](#)

Just what is the difference between aesthetic surgery and restorative surgery? Gilman explores many aspects of that question. He focuses on the nose as an object of surgery because it is the most visible element of the human body and has so many psychological, religious, and personal aspects. Can the surgical remodeling of the nose change a person's character? Should such an operation be performed if the surgeon believes the patient's vanity is the major motive? How does a particular patient at a particular time view his or her eyes, ears, breasts, and buttocks, or his penis? Gilman explores all these matters in terms of surgical possibilities, medical and political philosophies, and the individual's desires, both spoken and hidden. So doing, he produces a fascinating combination of text and illustration and of literary, medical, and scientific information. A thoughtful history by an author who knows his material well and has a sympathetic understanding of human beings as well as a lively sense of humor. *William Beatty*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

David Butler:

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Donna Vazquez:

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Mary Parker:

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