

by Ray Albrektson

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One reason that the show has struck a nerve (not to mention gold ratings) is that most people *are* unhappy with the way they look. *Extreme Makeover* seems to steer clear from those in the Quasimodo category, but chooses people who are basically average in attractiveness. Each seems convinced that with a little liposuction here, a little off the nose there, a bit more chin and maybe a tweaked belly-button, life will finally be worth living.

And by the end of the thirty-minute episode, we see the truth of the makeover gospel: God-like creatures emerge from the chrysalis of surgical recuperation and immediately join the ranks of the “beautiful people,” bursting with confidence, elan and reveling in their newly-minted status as beauty icons. The contrast is emphasized by repeatedly displaying before-and-after pictures that testify to the de-

gree to which surgery can reshape, enhance or otherwise alter what our grandparents would have been stuck with for life.

It's not just TV shows like *Extreme Makeover* that tell us that the cosmetic surgery business is up—way up. Despite the economic slowdown of the last two years, cosmetic surgery clinics have boomed like never before. The number of procedures done annually in America is approaching the ten million mark.³ Some of the most well-known surgeons are booked up for months in advance.

We can rebuild him. We have the technology. We can make him stronger, faster...and with a firmer chin, a thinner nose and pectoral implants.”¹

If the vintage sci-fi drama starring Lee Majors, *The Six-Million Dollar Man*, were to be remade today, I doubt that the hero's upgrades would be limited to the purely utilitarian. American society has fallen in love with plastic surgery, and everyone from soccer moms to laid-off dads are taking surgical steps to remake themselves into the image

of normally attractive people—like Madonna.

Once the behind-the-scenes not-so-secret beauty treatment of the rich and famous, plastic surgery has hit the mainstream. The ABC TV show, *Extreme Makeover*,² has become a huge hit in the ratings game among reality shows, and unexpectedly large numbers of ordinary folks have flooded the network with applications. A mandatory part of the application process is a three-minute videotape in which the would-be perfect “10” whines heart-wrenchingly about

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And don't forget that almost all plastic surgery is paid for from the patient's own pocket—only a tiny percentage is ever paid by insurance companies.

The top cosmetic and surgical procedure in 2001 was liposuction, which, along with eyelid surgery, has overtaken breast augmentation as front-runners in the surgical sweepstakes. But the new kids on the block are a host of cosmetic procedures that don't actually require surgery. Best known is Botox[®]—a medicinized version of a paralyzing poison that makes facial wrinkles vanish.⁴ A group of newcomers to the field include injectable plastic beads, collagen and less-appealing concoctions made from cadaver-skin or silicone.

These facial-smoothing and wrinkle-removing options are relatively low cost,

and make it possible to get much of the effect of a surgical face-lift for a fraction of the cost. A surgical face-lift may last for a decade before requiring touch-ups, however, while most of these injection-only treatments must be redone at least annually, sometimes every six months.

Vanity Also Appeals to Men!

While women still outnumber men in the rush to surgical self-improvement (by a seven to one ratio), more men than ever are getting on the bandwagon, and the reason is partly economic. It's always seemed obvious that women would be drawn, moth-like, to the flaming promise of spectacular beauty through cosmetic surgery, but men were thought to be immune to a frontal attack on the vanity front. In fact, men seem equally interested as women in pursuing a related goal—the illusion of eternal youth.

Whether it is truly age-discrimination, or simply a way of getting an edge on the next guy seeking a prize job, men have begun to do anything necessary to turn back the hands of time. Gym membership soared in the 1980s, but aging executives seeking a second chance at the brass ring are beating down the doors at the cosmetic surgical suite.

The top choices for men are liposuction (gyms can't do it all, evidently), hair transplantation and eyelid surgery. This eyelid procedure is especially

Extremely Popular

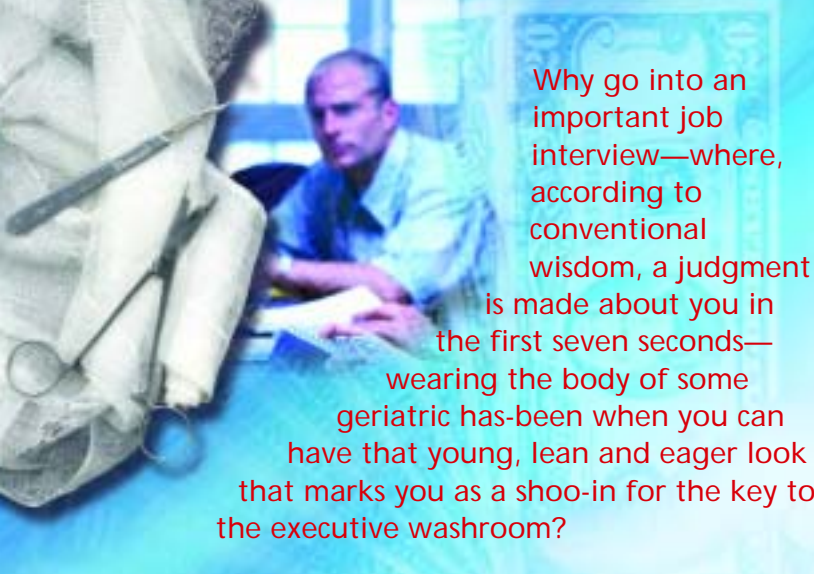
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The History of Beauty

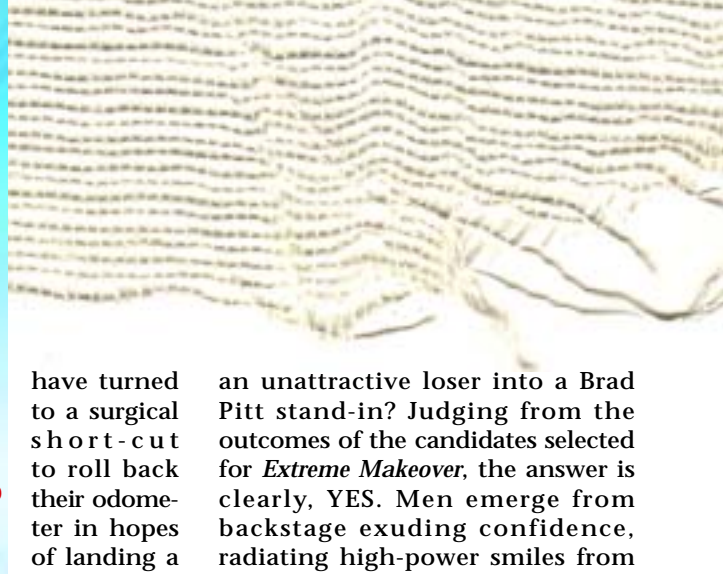


Adam and Eve have historically been considered to be ultimate examples of physical perfection. But human ideas about perfect bodies change, as seen from subjective Adam and Eve depictions over the course of a few centuries.





Why go into an important job interview—where, according to conventional wisdom, a judgment is made about you in the first seven seconds—wearing the body of some geriatric has-been when you can have that young, lean and eager look that marks you as a shoo-in for the key to the executive washroom?



have turned to a surgical short-cut to roll back their odometer in hopes of landing a better job—

an unattractive loser into a Brad Pitt stand-in? Judging from the outcomes of the candidates selected for *Extreme Makeover*, the answer is clearly, YES. Men emerge from backstage exuding confidence, radiating high-power smiles from newly-laminated teeth, striding boldly onto the stage with the air of one born to lead. Women step forth arrayed with every feminine symbol of desirability, finally secure and contented in having achieved the ideal of physical perfection.

But the sad truth is that all plastic and cosmetic surgery ultimately disappoints. It's not that the doctors and cosmetic surgeons have failed medically—far from it. Most cosmetic surgical outcomes are extremely good, despite the very real risk involved in major surgery. And most patients are satisfied with the outcome. In fact, the satisfaction rate for breast augmentation is very high—greater than 90 percent. The ultimate failure of cosmetic surgery doesn't lie with the doctors, but with the expectations of the patient.

Here's the problem: Even the finest eyelid surgery begins to droop after another decade. Newly reconstructed breasts eventually begin to sag, and liposuctioned thighs don't last forever. And that's exactly the problem: It's not that the surgery goes wrong, but that the human body itself doesn't last forever. *If we base our hope for wholeness and happiness on physical perfection, then we're setting forth on a track that is certain to end in a train wreck.*

Consider the situation of those who have been disfigured by a burn or serious accident. They go to a cosmetic surgeon with a completely different set of hopes—to be once again “normal.” If they're not beau-

popular for the fifty-and-up crowd, where more than a third of all cosmetic procedures for this age group involve taking the sags and droops from aging eyes. Why go into an important job interview—where, according to conventional wisdom, a judgment is made about you in the first seven seconds—wearing the body of some geriatric has-been when you can have that young, lean and eager look that marks you as a shoo-in for the key to the executive washroom? And in the increasingly competitive job market, the appearance of youth has become a winning strategy.

For most of the 20th century, America gradually became a culture that idealizes and idolizes youth. Take, for example, the slogans of a major advertiser, Pepsi Cola. Their jingles emphasized good digestion in 1903 and being sociable in 1955, but hit a lasting theme in 1960 to the present: Now it's “Pepsi For Those Who Think Young.”⁵

The obsession with youthfulness has come to dominate every aspect of our society—from entertainment to politics—and has recently begun to have a significant impact on business. While it's understandable that entertainers would pursue the appearance of youth at all costs, recently laid-off businessmen

or any job, for that matter.

Turning Losers Into Winners?

The goal for both men and women is not just an outward metamorphosis, but a transforming boost in their inner selves. They seek a surge of confidence and a sense of

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In Europe at the time of Queen Elizabeth I and Louis XIV pale white skin was in. And if it wasn't white enough, lead powder was applied, leading to many untimely deaths. Hair, at the time, was also seen to be in need of improvement by bleaching. Unfortunately this bleaching was done with lye, causing the hair to fall out. The wig industry flourished.



belonging that assures them that they truly *are* one of the beautiful people, the ones about whose lives we read as we furtively skim the tabloids at the checkout counter of our grocery store. It is this inner craving for belonging, admiration and respect that fuels the engine of our makeover mania.

But—does it work? In other words, can these procedures turn

"When you stop striving for perfection, you might as well be dead."

—Dr. Troy Christian of *Nip/Tuck*

tiful after the procedure, they're still delighted, because their hopes were appropriately set.

The current bubble in cosmetic surgery isn't inflated by people hoping to correct significant physical defects, but by an irrational hope that cosmetic surgery represents a high-tech fountain of youth. This hope fails to recognize that even a good result is only paving the way for even higher expectations. If the treatment is successful in perfecting one part of the body, then another part moves into position as a focus of bodily discontent.

Cosmetic Surgery Is Addictive

The Hollywood community serves as a ready-made model of how this cycle of discontent has turned reconstructive surgery into a highly-addictive activity—the surgical equivalent of crack cocaine. The beautiful people of the entertainment industry come as close

improvements. No matter how many features were previously fixed, there is always a long list of those remaining. If health, technology and finances permitted, surgery junkies would pursue their mania for fighting off all signs of age and imperfection until they dropped dead—leaving the coroner with what appeared to be the body of a twenty-something who died of old age.

It's no coincidence that the cosmetic surgery carnival pulled into town at just the same time that body image disorders, especially bulimia and anorexia, have also peaked. Our grandparents, if they subscribed to magazines like *Look*, or *Life*, saw only a handful of images of handsome men and beautiful women in the course of a week. Now we're



to physical perfection as mere mortals can achieve—yet they are constantly submitting themselves for surgical

Our grandparents, if they subscribed to magazines like *Look*, or *Life*, saw only a handful of images of handsome men and beautiful women in the course of a week.

Now we're bombarded daily with thousands of retouched images of human perfection.

bombarded daily with thousands of retouched images of human perfection. Millions of voices tell us, "This is beauty—and you don't look *anything* like that."

While not solely to blame, television is a major source of images apparently calculated to make normal

Is it Real or is it FX?

In a unique blending of entertainment and reality, cable channel FX's popular *Nip/Tuck* website not only provides information about stars and future episodes but also offers online "free consultation" concerning your own cosmetic surgery needs. This interactive site not only recommends surgical solutions to your perceived physical failings but also provides animated graphics and price breakdowns for each medical procedure.

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people feel ugly and unattractive. A Harvard Eating Disorders Center study⁶ noted that in Fiji, where eating disorders had previously been unknown, an epidemic of anorexia and bulimia burst onto the scene shortly after the introduction of TV.

The impact on how we think about our bodies is enormous. The current vision of the “ideal man” or “ideal woman”—at least, as projected by Hollywood and the advertising industry—has become increasingly unattainable without surgical intervention. As ordinary men and women see themselves as increasingly distant from the cultural ideal of beauty, their self-dissatisfaction grows. In a futile attempt to hit an ever more distant target, they flock to gyms, spas and—the last stop—surgical suites.

We are being systematically programmed to be unhappy with the way we are, whether justified or not. While some of our media-induced body-loathing can be alleviated with a better haircut, regular trips to the gym or a few

Archaeologists have dubbed this ancient stone figurine as the “First Venus”. This depiction illustrates early culture’s higher value on one’s ability to endure famine than do weight-conscious 21st century Americans.

outfits more stylish than relaxed-fit khaki Dockers, there is no way for the average woman or man to suddenly metamorphose into Barbie and Ken.

If It Makes Us Feel Better And Look Better—What’s Wrong With It?

So why not jump on the cosmetic bandwagon? Since technology has made it possible to rebuild ourselves, why not use all the cosmetic techniques available to fit in as many upgrades as possible? Here are a few thoughts to mull over before slipping under the knife.

- The pursuit of beauty is a race in which somebody keeps changing the location of the finish line. If we surgically alter ourselves to today’s standards, you can be sure that the standard will be different in a decade or two. Remember those blue-haired ladies with

tattooed eyebrows hinting at a permanent state of astonishment? That seemed like a good idea in 1968, but eyebrow fashions have come a long way since the Lucille Ball look. If we were to take a critical look at movie stars from postwar decades, few of them would rate a second glance today, but they all represented the pinnacle of beauty—according to the standards of their era.

- Cosmetic procedures don’t come cheap! Close to eight billion dollars was spent on cosmetic surgery in 2000. Want a new chin? Plan on dropping a few thousand dollars. Breast augmentation costs over \$3,000—and even more to remove the implants if you change your mind. Even the trend in wrinkle removal using Botox[®] or injectable collagen will cost around \$400 per injection, and a bit more for a chemical peel.⁷

- Some oppose cosmetic surgery on religious grounds. The reasoning is that since God created us a certain way, we should not tamper with God’s handiwork. In fact, there are several important theological

Media reflects and promotes our American love affair with physical beauty.



issues that should come into play as we consider whether or not to undergo cosmetic surgery.

While the human body is a miraculous creation of God, we all live in a world that is corrupted with evil. Accidents happen, and a once-perfect child now has a serious scar. Just as genetic diseases can be passed on by unwitting parents to innocent children, so significant physical characteristics can be inherited that have the potential to devastate a young life.

Would it be wrong to heal a genetically carried blood disease through technology? Jesus was asked a similar situation with regard to a man born blind. “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” (John 9:2). Jesus denied that either was at fault and immediately healed the blind man. Of course it would be appropriate to heal even a genetic disease, but what about genetic appearance defects?

I went to grade school with a boy who was mercilessly teased about the size and shape of his nose. One day, seeing the boy’s father, I understood the source of his unusual nose. At that time most parents would not consider a surgical solution to the problem, but that is a very real possibility today. A modern father might go with his son and have the surgery himself to show the boy that it’s all right—

and I think Jesus would approve.⁸

If we are considering cosmetic surgery, we must be sure that we don’t mistake ordinary (but non-spectacular) features for defective ones that need surgical repair. Certainly Adam and Eve, fresh from the sculpting hands of their Creator, would not have needed improving. But if we could somehow observe them by means of some kind of trans-temporal television, however, we might not agree that they represent perfect “10”s when it came to physical beauty. We might tend to judge them based on our own contemporary cultural standards. “Adam’s chin could certainly use a little more definition—and wouldn’t a set of gluteal implants look wonderful on Eve?”

• It is significant that the Bible records very few comments on the physical appearance of even the most important people in the Bible, including Adam, Noah, Moses, David and Jesus. Some of those remarked upon for their good looks often had sadly defective characters

(Saul and Absalom, for example). It’s reasonable to conclude that what really counts is inner beauty, including a godly character and a relationship with our Creator that is continually transforming who we are on the inside, not just the outside.

• The search for beauty, love and belonging



Think Young!

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gradually became a youth dominated culture. Take, for example, the slogans of a major advertiser, Pepsi Cola. Their jingles emphasized good digestion in 1903 and being sociable in 1955, but hit a lasting theme in 1960 to the present: Now it’s “Pepsi For Those Who Think Young.”⁵



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that drives people to plastic surgery and beyond is ultimately doomed to disappoint. The fact is that nobody, in their own eyes, is ever as beautiful as the cultural ideal. Remember that the so-called beautiful people are always a few operations away from the body that they would really like. And what about aging? It's wonderful how youthful a fifty-year-old can look thanks to modern surgery, but nobody asks eighty-year-olds to pose for centerfolds.

Taking Care Of, Not Remaking Our Bodies

There's an old story about the minister (often attributed to J. Sidlow Baxter) who was asked if it was wrong for a Christian to wear makeup. "If the barn needs painting," he advised, "then paint it."

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With modern technology we can go far beyond "painting the barn." God has given us a responsibility to care for our bodies—they are even referred to as God's Temple.

Most modern Christians would allow that it would be all right to

have braces to straighten crooked teeth, undergo reconstructive surgery after an accident or to remove an unsightly mole. We would celebrate and honor a surgeon who repaired a newborn's cleft palate, or separated conjoined twins. In those cases we recognize that individuals have been touched by evil as a result of living in a fallen world, and through surgery the impact of that evil can be reduced.

Body modification through weight management and exercise also seems within the scope of our duties as stewards over our bodies. What becomes less clear is whether or not God's temple needs a forehead lift or calf implants. Since now there is almost no limit to the extent that surgeons can reshape our bodies, we have to learn where to draw the line.

We can be sure that our youth-dominated culture will not draw the line in any appropriate place. We must decide for ourselves—appropriately guided by wise friends and advisors—how to decide what is broken and should be fixed and what is not broken and should be left alone.

But we must also look beyond our outward appearance. Is there a beautiful person on the inside? Our cultural obsession with youth and beauty disregards every aspect of what's inside—and who we are on the inside is what really matters in the long run. It's said of Jim Morrison, now-deceased lead singer of *The*

Doors, that his goal was to "live fast, die young and leave a beautiful corpse."⁹ At least he achieved the first part of his ambition, but I doubt that his corpse would currently be described as beautiful. A far better objective might have

been to "live well, die at the right time and leave a beautiful life."

A biblical proverb teaches us that "Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last; but a woman who fears the Lord will be greatly praised" (Proverbs 31:30, NLT). This inner attitude, incorporated in a godly character that reveals itself in caring, kindness, respect and reverence to God, is just as appropriate for men as women.

When all is said and done, none of the reasons for which people modify their bodies will result in real and lasting satisfaction. That is to be found only in a relationship with God, in a relationship that transforms us, marks us as God's unique and special person, and fills us with a real and inner beauty that won't fade—ever. □

1 The actual quote is available here: <http://www.scifi.com/bionics/sixmill.html>

2 http://extratv.warnerbros.com/dailynews/extra/01_03/01_09c.html

3 All statistics provided by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, see http://www.plastic-surgery.org/public_education/statistical_trends_92to01.cfm

4 The makers of Botox® are very strict about the use of the "registered" symbol. The term "medicized" is a deliberate play on the neologism "weaponized" that surfaced in the anthrax scare last year.

5 http://www.tvacres.com/adslogans_p.htm

6 <http://www.hms.harvard.edu/news/releases/599bodyimage.html>

7 Also extrapolated from http://www.plastic-surgery.org/public_education/statistical_trends_92to01.cfm

8 Derived from an idea from an interview with cosmetic surgeon James Wells in an article by Mary Ellin Lerner's, "Psychology of Plastic Surgery" (USA Weekend, May 30-June 1 2003), p.12. My personal experience in elementary school involved a boy with big ears, but it was changed here to big nose to prevent family members from thinking I was writing about them.

9 The actual source of "Live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse" was spoken by John Derek in the 1949 movie *Knock on Any Door*, according to <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A988266>

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