

American Beauty. Lois Banner. *New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983. Pp. 369.*

“The pursuit of personal beauty has always been a central concern of American women.” In fact, it was as central to the separate culture on nineteenth-century women as domestic chores or the rituals of childbirth. It transcended class and racial barriers, yet of all the elements of women’s culture, it has proven “the most divisive and, ultimately the most oppressive.” So argues Lois Banner in this major new work of feminist historical scholarship.

Banner charts the history of American fashions of face and figure between 1800 and 1921 and the concurrent growth of what she calls the “commercial beauty culture,” purveyed by dressmakers and designers, department store owners, hairdressers and cosmeticians. In doing so, she successfully challenges prevailing sociological interpretations based on Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). The analysis of fashion, she insists, “requires detailed historical understanding” and must be related to social and economic trends, political events, and developments in the fine arts.

American Beauty is a rejection of Veblen’s model which located the origins of fashion changes among social elites and implied a percolation downward through the class structure. It proposes instead that fashions evolved and spread through an interaction of classes, including workers and the middle classes as well as the very wealthy, and through the important influence of a “subculture of sensuality”—members of the sporting set, inhabitants of the theatrical world and frequenters of saloons and gaming parlours. Understanding this process of interaction requires detailed study of the major institutions of popular culture, including the theatre, the dance hall, the dime museum, the movies and the beauty contest.

Documenting changes in fashion and standards of personal beauty is a task which poses many challenges for historians. Banner has consulted a wide range of sources including novels, fashion magazines, diaries and autobiographies, beauty and etiquette manuals, travellers’ accounts, periodicals, and advertisements. The search for evidence was not an easy one, she observes. “Standards of personal beauty fall into the realm of cultural conventions that are so pervasive and are taken so completely for granted that commentators assume widespread familiarity with them.” Even though a dominant standard of beauty existed in every age examined, it was usually being challenged by several alternative models, and a fashion-conscious woman might incorporate elements of each into her personal style. Most importantly, our own very different standards can make it difficult for us to recognize beauty as it was perceived by nineteenth-century observers.

Banner has divided the years 1800-1921 into four distinct periods, each of which was dominated by a different idealized model of feminine beauty. The antebellum period witnessed the reign of “the steel-engraving lady,” the fragile and submissive maiden personified in the lithographed illustrations of fashion magazines such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. This figure embodied the spirit of the youthful Romantic rebellion, the American drive for high status, and the restrictive middle-class Victorian view of women’s role. She was succeeded in the 1860’s and 1870’s by “the voluptuous woman,” a more mature, sophisticated and much more ample model of beauty, originating in working-class and immigrant cultures that associated bulk with success. This model was popularized by actresses, particularly Lillian Russell, in the 1880’s. We learn, however, that Russell began dieting in 1896, following unkind reviews which compared her to a white elephant, indicating the growing appeal of “the natural woman.” This tall, slender and athletic model of beauty, a response to the “new woman” of the 1890’s and the popular health

and physical education movements, was personified in Charles Dana Gibson's enormously popular drawings of "the Gibson Girl." An ambiguous model of beauty, neither radical nor conservative, the Gibson Girl appealed to both working-class women and middle-class feminists. Yet by 1913, she too was being replaced by "the flapper," a lower-class competitor modelled on the chorus girl, who represented the hopes of working-class women and "a new, modern concept of womanhood, one that involved independence, sexual freedom and an enterprising, realistic manner toward a career."

It is Banner's contention that the evolution of fashions and physical appearance over the nineteenth century is indicative of more significant social changes. Critical of works on the history of women which have regarded the century "as a seamless whole," she argues instead that periods of repressiveness alternated with periods of sensuality and relative freedom for women. More importantly, she argues the existence of an ongoing conflict, overlooked by historians, between fashion and feminism, and the co-optation of feminist principles by the commercial beauty culture. For example, the feminist definition of beauty as a spiritual quality implied that every woman could be beautiful, a principle that was eagerly exploited by the beauty culture. Advertising directed this message at older women, in particular, who by the twentieth century had become increasingly "free" to compete with the young in the realm of beauty and fashion.

Banner's painstaking attention to detail makes *American Beauty* a treasure trove for the interested student of popular culture and women's history. We learn, for example, how women curled their hair before the invention of the permanent wave in 1906. We discover that nineteenth-century women were likely to pronounce not "cheese" but "prunes" for the photographer in order to lend the appearance of a dainty rosebud to their mouths. In the antebellum years, when cosmetics were frowned upon, some

women resorted to ingesting vinegar, chalk or arsenic to obtain a delicate complexion. During the First World War, women began shaving their armpits and legs in response to the new shorter skirts and sleeveless styles.

The evidence marshalled in support of Banner's arguments is both impressive and fascinating. Unfortunately, the detail has a tendency, at times, to overwhelm the reader. In rejecting an approach which would use the evidence of fashion "to substantiate theories rather than to write history," Banner fails to develop a coherent over-arching hypothesis which can be discerned without a great deal of effort on the part of the reader. She observes in passing that Victorianism as a social code was based on a separation of the masculine and feminine spheres and that one of its main underpinnings was the code of fashion. She further suggests the existence of a "Cinderella mythology" which corresponded to the myth of the self-made man and directed the energies of ambitious women, denied access to power and success through male-dominated enterprise, into cut-throat competition with one another in the fashion arena. While the book's conclusion provides a useful survey of fashion trends from 1921, the date of the first Miss America beauty pageant, to the present, it fails to develop further or pull together these and other important insights.

Also disappointing is the use of visual materials, which is surprisingly traditional, given Banner's innovative choice of subject matter and approach. Once again, the illustrations have been lumped together at an arbitrary point in the middle of the book and bear no particular relation to the text. In many cases, they are altogether lacking. What is the reader to make, for example, of a discussion of the considerable impact of Hiram Powers' sculpture, *The Greek Slave*, which toured the United States in 1847, when the sculpture itself is nowhere to be seen? In such a case, one thousand words do not equal a picture. Furthermore, in neglecting to inte-

grate text and pictures in a way that would direct the viewer's attention to particular features of the image being discussed, Banner has denied the reader an opportunity to learn from her considerable skills in interpreting visual evidence.

These criticisms notwithstanding, *American Beauty* will undoubtedly be recognized as one of the most important recent contributions to feminist scholarship. It is a work which may be read with profit and enjoyment, and contemporary feminists will find food for thought in the warning it contains. Nineteenth century feminists, Banner contends, underestimated both the power of the commercial beauty culture and the extent to which fashion "underlay the entire constellation of discriminations against women." The gains which appeared to have been won by the early twentieth century were, in fact, deceptive. "Standards of beauty might change and work for unmarried women become respectable, but women continue to define themselves by their physical appearance and their ability to attract men."

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Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England. Lee Holcombe. *Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1983. Pp. 311.*

This book is much more than its title suggests. It is a comprehensive account of the legal disabilities of married women in nineteenth century England; a valuable insight into the complexities of the English legal system prior to the passage of the Judicature Act; and a fascinating glimpse into the lives and work of Victorian feminists.

The law relating to married women's property turned on its head the husband's marriage vow: "With all my worldly goods I thee endow." The struggle for a system in which a woman would

have the right to retain her property on marriage and to ownership of her earnings after marriage is covered in some depth.

It begins in the 1850's when Miss Leigh Smith, who was to play an important role in the early feminist movement in England, created a women's committee which began a country wide campaign to reform the law and presented a petition with over 26,000 women's signatures to Parliament in 1856. The activities of some of these early organizers and signatories, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Anna Jameson, Mary Howitt, Elizabeth Gaskell, Marian Evans (later known as George Eliot) are described. This initial effort found supporters and critics in the House of Commons and resulted, not in property reform, but with the Divorce Act of 1857. This was an important piece of legislation for women's emancipation but it did not embody the comprehensive reform of married women's property law which feminists had been demanding. Nevertheless, the first feminist committee disbanded and it took a second generation of feminists and committees, led by such women as Elizabeth Clarke Wolstenholme, Josephine Grey Butler and Emilia Jessie Boucherett, in the mid 1860's to regenerate interest and momentum and bring the issue back to Parliament in 1867. By this time, the political scene had changed dramatically with men like Disraeli, Gladstone and John Stuart Mill now sitting in the House. Success seemed at hand in 1869 when the bill sponsored by the Married Women's Property Committee was approved by the House of Commons on third reading by a vote of 208 to 46. Unfortunately it met with great resistance in the House of Lords who substantially rewrote the bill to the detriment of married women and in direct opposition to the popular will. This compromise was reluctantly accepted by the House of Commons and became the Married Women's Property Act of 1870. For the next twelve long and frustrating years the Married Women's Property Committee laboured on through changes in membership and changes in government. A number of the