

## The Materiality of Beauty. Approaches, Methods, and Problems in the Field of Beauty Studies

Conference report by Lisa Brunner



As is well known, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder and what is considered beautiful is contextual. The itinerant symposium [Medicine, Beauty, and the Body: Materials, Texts and Artifacts](#) which took place from September 24 to 28, 2023 in Innsbruck, Salzburg and Vienna explored this topic in an interdisciplinary way and examined the intertwining of beauty, health and medicine from antiquity to early modern Europe. The event was a cooperation between the programme “Figurations of Transitions” of the inter-university institution Science and Art of the Paris-Lodron-University Salzburg and the University Mozarteum in Salzburg, Schloss Ambras and the Museumsverband Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien. Not only the sheer diversity of sources in the field of historical beauty cultures became apparent, but also their circulation and transformation through time and space as well as their significance as social, political, religious, and economic variables. The practical approach of the event in particular showed new paths in the field of historical beauty studies.

The symposium dealt with the topic of beauty in various contexts, including its links to the disciplines of medicine and pharmacy. The first stop of the event was a guided tour by the

historian and pharmacist Andreas Winkler through the Winkler City Pharmacy in Innsbruck. Owned by the family for several centuries, the pharmacy holds an important treasure of pharmaceutical history and, with its historical collection of pharmaceutical materials and texts, offers insights into the connection between pharmaceutical knowledge and historical beauty cultures. Beauty has been closely related to health since ancient times, because being beautiful ultimately also meant – for many centuries – being healthy. Likewise, cosmetics and medicine were interwoven and primarily concerned with achieving and maintaining natural beauty.<sup>1</sup> The conference group took a closer look at the medical practices at the court of Archduke Ferdinand II and his wife Philippine Welser at Ambras Castle as well. Insights into early modern medical and pharmaceutical practice at Ambras are provided, among other things, by the records from Anna Welser's medicine book, Philippine's mother, as well as the medical objects in the Ambras collection and the 'Bath of Philippine Welser', both have been preserved to this day.<sup>2</sup> In a workshop with curator Katharina Seidl, the working group was then able to gain a practical understanding of the production of early modern cosmetic products using historical recipes by Philippine Welser and her mother. Although historical recipes have aroused the interest of researchers in various contexts, their textual analysis as well as the attempt to reconstruct and examine them in laboratories have remained largely desiderata. Yet it is precisely the practical experimental approach that can provide new insights into the medical, pharmaceutical, and cosmetic modes of action and knowledge of earlier centuries, as the [Beautiful Chemistry Project](#) at the University of Auckland has shown in recent interdisciplinary investigations.<sup>3</sup>

Another station of the group was an open seminar at the programme "Figurations of Transitions" of the inter-university institution Science and Art (Paris Lodron University Salzburg / Mozarteum University Salzburg). In short presentations, the participants addressed questions and problems of methodological and theoretical approaches to source material in the field of historical cultures of beauty. Irene Calà (Munich) opened the discussion and explored the reception of ancient recipes in the Renaissance. She referred primarily to a work by the Italian physician Giovanni Marinello (*Gli ornamenti delle donne tratti dalle scritture d'una Reina Greca*, 1562). In Marinello's writing, too, cosmetics is a branch of medicine and should support natural beauty, thus Marinello referred to ancient ideas, above all Galen. Montserrat Cabré (Cantabria), in turn, investigated the (in)visibility of female cosmetic competences in medieval and early modern texts, including writings such as Juan Vallé's *Regalo de la vida humana* (1563) in her research. Cabré particularly noted the great influence of Muslim women in European texts on cosmetics. Timothy McCall (Villanova) examined the strong connection between beauty and political power in Renaissance ideals of masculinity. With his look at male beauty practices, he expanded the symposium's field of investigation. The practices as well as recipes for the preservation of natural beauty by no means referred only to the female sex. Beauty was specifically instrumentalized to establish, support and expand political power. Using Barbara Gonzaga as an example, Christina Antenhofer (Salzburg) illustrated late medieval body care practices based on two preserved letters that provide insights into the use of certain care products – such as soaps – while travelling. Once again, during the ensuing discussion, it could be noted that personal hygiene was not a matter of gender; even for men in this period, hygiene and beauty were equally important. Erin Griffey (Auckland) focused her study on recipes for preserving youth in the early modern period. She identified myrrh, bitter almonds and milk as important ingredients in 85 collected anti-ageing recipes. The first results of her interdisciplinary research on the effectiveness of some recipes can be viewed on the project homepage [Beautiful Chemistry Project](#) as

mentioned above. Katharina Seidl (Innsbruck) discussed early modern cosmetics in the pharmacopoeia by Philippine and Anna Welser at Ambras Castle. Of 258 recipes, Seidl identified 9 with cosmetic relevance and compared the described mode of action of the recipes with the explanations in well-known herbal books of the time, such as those of the Italian physician and botanist Pietro Andrea Mattioli. Beauty and cosmetics are always connected to a specific material culture, Romana Sammern (Salzburg) explored this connection using the example of cosmetic vessels. Sammern traced the history of the reception of these vessels from Ancient Egypt to the early modern period. The poor state of preservation, the lack of provenance research, as well as the sometimes-erroneous decoding on the use of certain objects make research on the materiality of beauty cultures considerably more problematic.

Furthermore, in the context of the discussion round, important pharmaceutical and medical writings in the possession of the University Library of Salzburg could be viewed thanks to the grateful support of Beatrix Knoll, Head of Special Collections there.

Together, the above-mentioned lecturers presented their research in a public collective lecture on the topic Doctoring Beauty. Beauty and Medicine in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Europe at the University of Salzburg. It became particularly clear that the topic of beauty studies touches on many different areas, such as medicine, pharmacy, alchemy, chemistry, botany, art, etc., and that interdisciplinary studies are therefore necessary for its exploration.

One of the last stops of the symposium group, was a visit to some of the medical manuscripts and books in the holdings of the Austrian National Library in Vienna focusing on the *longue durée* of the transmission of medical texts. Concentrating on material culture and artistic ideals of beauty, the rest of the symposium was dedicated to the collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Starting with a guided tour through the exhibition *Laura in Love* by curator Konrad Schlegel, the group discussed then examples of beautiful bodies in paintings of the Picture Gallery and its storage with curator Gudrun Swoboda. This was followed by a tour around the *Kunstkammer* with curator Paulus Rainer and a visit to the Egyptian Collection and the storage with Regina Hölzl, Director of the Egyptian-Oriental Collection. Members of the group gave presentations on key artworks and objects related to beauty, highlighting how artists reflected and shaped beauty ideals in a range of media.

Above all, the itinerant symposium showed that not only interdisciplinary approaches are necessary for researching historical beauty cultures. Moreover, cooperation with non-university institutions such as libraries, archives, museums, and private individuals is equally important and profitable for research. Cultures of beauty have an astonishing history, whose knowledge and materials circulated, transformed, and were received in the most diverse forms and circles in different times and spaces.

1. Irene Calà: „Some Cosmetic Recipes in Medieval Texts of Late Antiquity. Treatments for the Face in the *Libri Medicinales* of Aetius Amidenus“, in: *Meridies. Estudios de Historia y Patrimonio de La Edad Media* 9 (2020), p. 2–14, here p. 3.
2. Katharina Seidl: „Leibärzte und medizinische Praxis am Hof Erzherzog Ferdinands II. im Spiegel der Ambraser Sammlungen“, in: *In fürstlicher Nähe – Ärzte bei Hof (1450–*

1800), ed. by Marina Hilber, Elena Taddei, Innsbrucker Historische Studien 33, Innsbruck 2021, p. 111–126.

3. Erin Griffey: “Beautiful Experiments. Reading and Reconstructing Early Modern Cosmetic Recipes”, in: *Embodied Experiences of Making in Early Modern Europe. The Body, Gender and Material Culture*, ed. by Sarah Bendall and Serena Dyer, Amsterdam (forthcoming).

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