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ELLE BEAUTY FEATURE

SURGERY: WHAT MEN REALLY THINK

Do men find women who've had plastic surgery unsexy – and should we even care? By Avril Mair

It's an accepted fact that women dress for women. Wedge heels, harem pants, minimalism, ledge... Most trends make no sense to the opposite sex. Crushed velvet Alexander Wang flares? Chunky brown Prada sweaters? Capes? Basically, we dress to show off our fashion credentials to other stylish women. But the point is to look interesting and knowing, rather than obviously attractive. Words like "conceptual" and "directional" and "mid-calf length" pour cold water on the loins of most heterosexual men. Whether they admit it to you or not, they prefer clothes that emphasise sex appeal in simple, straightforward ways. Men are predictable in their tastes.

But surely beauty is different. Isn't the whole point of the exercise to look, well, more beautiful?

As endless surveys reiterate, men prefer women to look as though they've made an effort – just not too much. Thick makeup, fake breasts, dark tans, hair extensions: Men don't like obvious beauty. By which I mean that they don't like anything that looks as though it isn't natural and God-given. So apart from a handful of men (the banker who buys his girlfriend a boob job with his annual bonus, the footballer whose wife has a tummy tuck with her Caesarean), they really don't like cosmetic surgery or any of the cosmetic medical treatments that are now a regular part of many women's beauty regimens.

Or could it be that men don't like the idea of this stuff? They don't like the possibility of paying to change your face or shape and they don't like the attendant suggestions of insecurity and angst. They don't like vanity and its implications of self-obsession. They certainly don't like pain. And men look at their wives or girlfriends, their sisters or mothers, and don't like the idea that they



might be doing all of this for them.

"I know it sounds like a cliché but I'd hope my relationship was about more than the superficial," says my friend, Mark, an editor in his late 30s. "I'd question why I wasn't able to make her feel better about herself. I've always found the whole fake-tits thing utterly bizarre and completely un-erotic, but I do appreciate there's a world of difference between that and something more subtle, like Botox or filler. Still, I don't understand the need."

Another friend's boyfriend, James, a marketing director in his early 30s, is even more straightforward in his

disapproval: "Everybody is vain – it's part of the human psyche. But there's a difference between a bit of vanity and placing your entire self-worth on your appearance. Your looks will change as you get older; that's a simple fact of life. Is a battle you're destined to lose really what defines you as a woman?"

The trouble is this, though: Men may not like the idea of plastic surgery, but they do often like the look of women who've had it done – even if they don't realise it. Especially if they don't realise it. After all, according to Dr Jean-Louis Sebagh – the most celebrated cosmetic doctor in Europe – the majority of A-listers

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have had subtle tucks and tweaks: "You must be stupid to think that famous women in their 30s and 40s haven't done anything and yet they still look so good!" he says.

So is the objection normal, not aesthetic?

"I suppose it shouldn't matter how well it's done, as it's the 'principle' that I disagree with," Mark considers. "But if you have it done, I guess the whole point is it shouldn't be over or obvious."

"I don't want to alter anyone's face," Dr Sebagh counters. The whole idea is to keep the same face as long as possible. I don't like the classic idea of ageing gracefully, which is to do nothing at all. My version is to use the cosmetic-medical possibilities that allow you to continue looking the same as you age. Of course, sometimes women want to do things that I think are too much. They want to redesign their face! But that's a kind of dysmorphia and it's unusual."

Of course, celebrities keep quiet about this kind of thing, but we can all guess at a few likely names: Actresses and models, even politicians' wives, seemingly ageless beauties with full lips, plump cheeks and suspiciously unfurrowed brows. "I wouldn't have realised that a lot of celebrities had undergone any cosmetic work," James says, surprised. "In that sense, I feel that at least they're not losing perspective on themselves. They're not trying to change the entire way they look."

What this proves, perhaps, is nothing more than the fact that men don't notice much.

Take another friend as an example. Her husband, a reasonable man in most matters, told her family that he would initiate divorce if she ever resorted to anything as ridiculous as Botox. At the point when he said this, she'd already been tweaking her face for three years. As well as Botox, she's had fillers in the lines between her mouth and nose. I could hardly tell. And, clearly, her husband couldn't.

Mr Extremist never notices my beauty adventures. Appointments with needles and lasers pass unremarked. Bruises bloom and fade with no comment. Apart from the ill-advised boob-job-by-injection a couple of years ago, when I spent three days groaning in the sofa and was pretty hard to ignore, he's nothing much to say about my beauty exploits. "I don't see any difference," is the usual refrain. Perhaps he doesn't. Or perhaps he knows this resistance is futile. He doesn't approve, not really though, strangely enough, after his initial horror at the boob job, he was pretty impressed by the results), but he's not going to argue about it.

Anyway, I'm not necessarily doing this stuff for his benefit. Not entirely. And does it really matter what he thinks? Does it matter what anyone thinks? Whose face is it, anyway? "I definitely feel that I have a say in what my girlfriend might choose to do – it affects me as well," James disagrees. "Should anything go wrong, I'll be the one expected to offer emotional support."

Of course, men aren't as obsessed with ageing. Men don't measure their worth in a way that's bound up in aesthetics, and they certainly don't spend time studying models, friends, colleagues and total strangers at the gym to compare how their faces or bodies might be changing. Men's self-esteem doesn't depend on looking "better" than anyone else.

"We get an easy ride because it's more acceptable for our gender to look old," says Mark. "As men age, they get to be called things like 'wise' and 'distinguished' and that's still conveniently seen as sexy. I know there's a danger of sounding like a misogynist for criticising how women choose to present themselves – but I find it really misogynistic that we live in a world where women feel they need to pretend they're younger than they are, not only to other people, but also for their own self-esteem."

However, according to the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPS), the biggest growth market for cosmetic medical procedures is male. In 2009, the number of men undergoing surgery rose by 21 per cent.

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Perhaps it's just a natural progression, though, even to be expected. Or maybe men are starting to take notice after all.

Or maybe, just maybe, it's like they say: If you can't beat them... 1111