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Heian Period Fashion and Beauty

While reading a bit about the Heian period, I was immediately fascinated with the fashion and beauty standards. This kind of thing has always appealed to me in one way or another. It's always fun to reminisce about that ridiculous hairstyle you had 15 years ago or the atrocious leopard-print pants that seemed like a good buy at the time. The Heian period offers many examples of things that would be considered absurd in today's society, but there are also examples of beauty standards that have withstood the test of time and remain relevant even today. In a nutshell, I've learned that fashion is a crazy thing, and beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder.

One of the first things I read about was how it was common for people to dye their teeth black. This was known as "ohaguro." The reasoning for this is because objects that were pitch black were considered beautiful back in the day. Also, women used to use makeup to whiten their skin (we'll get to that in a minute) and by comparison their teeth looked rather yellow. Today, voluntarily blackening your teeth would seem a bit odd for most people. Next time you find yourself looking at an advertisement for anything, take note of the person's teeth. On a scale from one to ten, ten being the highest, I'm willing to bet those pearly whites are an eleven. Society has done a complete 180 to say the least. One thing ohaguro had going for it: it acted similar to modern day toothpaste, helping to prevent tooth decay. Take *that* gingivitis.

For no particular reason the next thing I read up on was Heian hairstyles. Before I go any further, I must stress that I absolutely love long hair. I always have and I always will. For me, long hair is the best. So I was completely overjoyed to learn that women in the Heian period grew their hair out as long as humanly possible. On occasion they would braid or tie their hair in some way, but it was extremely common to simply let the hair run naturally down the person's back. This custom started out as a reaction to Chinese hairstyles, which tended to be short. Today, long hair still seems to be the preferred beauty standard. Watching any beauty contest drives that point home. But to my dismay, many people cut their hair with the reason, "It's easier to take care of." Understandable? Yes. Makes me feel better? Not really, but I digress. Emotions aside, I was really interested how this fashion trend has survived the ages. Surely not many women grow out their hair as long as they used to (it was common for hair to exceed 4 feet in length), but it's very interesting to see how long, simple, straight hair is an extremely common hairstyle to this day.

Of course it is impossible to talk about beauty without eventually talking about makeup. Makeup's main purpose, in essence, is to alter someone's looks to more closely match the current standard of beauty. Fair skin was very desirable back in the day, and as mentioned above, women used a heavy rice powder to whiten their skin. Compare that with today when people try their best to get a tan and we can see this is another 180 by society. However, one thing I find funny is the beauty standard for eyebrows. During the Heian period women would pluck or shave their eyebrows and redraw them higher on their forehead. Although no one does it to this extreme anymore, plucking and trimming eyebrows is still very much relevant in modern day society. To sum it up, makeup hasn't changed one bit. What has changed is the desired result.

I chose to look into Heian period beauty because I was genuinely interested in the fashion trends. I thought it was amazing to read about how completely different the standards were, but at the same time how we can still find common ground between the two time periods. Yellow teeth still isn't favorable, long hair is still very much relevant, and makeup is still makeup. It makes me wonder what will be popular 10, 50, or even 100 years from now. Will current day beauty standards persist? Or maybe people will roll their eyes and wonder what we were thinking. Either way, beauty is a fickle thing. It will much more interesting to see what stays the same, because our standards will without a doubt change again.