



THE 13<sup>TH</sup> EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
**EUROPEAN INTEGRATION  
 REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES**

**When the “Weaker Sex” became the “Beauty symbol” – The Feminine  
 Beauty in the Romanian Interwar Press**

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**Abstract:** Among the important changes brought about by the early years of the interwar period in the life of the woman was the fact that she, the woman, was no longer regarded as the “weak” half of man, as it had been before, but the “beautiful” half. Another feature of the interwar era is that beauty is no longer old. The desire of the interwar woman, regardless of her social status or her age, of being always beautiful was explained by the fact that a beautiful woman was easier to find a job or get into the business world. For some journalists, lipstick and last fashion clothes were specific to women of mild morals. Most of the texts used for this paper were published in the years between the two world wars.

**Keywords:** beauty; history of the press; interwar period; newspaper; media

**What is and what is not a Woman**

More than a decade before the period specified in the title of this paper, in the first issue of the magazine “*Moda/Fashion*”, which was released on October 8, 1905, the article “*Cartea de aur a femeii: Femeia și femeile/Woman's Gold Book: Woman and Women*” was published. The quoted text has attracted our attention for several reasons. First, the author of the text defines the *woman*. So the *woman* is a *complex creature*, which makes her different from the *feminist*, which is, at least in some cases, “a sexless being”. This *complexity* referred to by the author of the article makes, for example, that women, even those with poor education, can easily climb “the steps of the social ladder” and, once entering the salons of the high society, leave a good impression to those who they come to know her. The woman is not only different from the feminist (the “sexless being”), but also from the man who, when coming from a lower social class, will never be able to integrate into the high society and thus will always be a *parvenu*. The *woman* differs from *the man* also by possessing a *fine intellect*, and *he* is often *brutal*. In a *woman-man relationship*, *he* is the *master*, who, in many cases, preying on prejudices, forgets that his mission is to support *her*.

After he shows what *the woman* is, the author of the text reveals what *she* has to do to remain what *nature* has created her for - *the creature that completes the man*. So, if the woman does not want to become a *bad and snappy creature*, she must do it in such a way as to remain *the creature* to which nature has given her *grace, courage and moral gentleness*. The author warns, however, that a woman must be mindful when she uses *the gifts* she has received from nature. To always be *seductive, the*

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woman must keep these gifts as long as possible. She can accomplish this goal only if it first takes as weapons *hygiene*, and later on the *therapeutic hygiene*.<sup>1</sup>

Among the important changes (Teodorașcu, 2016, pp. 101-112) brought to the first years of the interwar period in the life of *the woman* was, as one of the publications of those times shows, that the woman was no longer regarded as the “weak” half of mankind, as it has been before, but the “beautiful” half (Const., 1932, p. 9) The beauty<sup>2</sup> that was referred to had nothing to do with the *canons* (Umberto Eco, 2012, pp. 72-75), which governed, for example, the artists of ancient Greece.

### The Beauty - Romanian Standards

In the book *Basmul în cultura integrală/The fairy-tale in Full Culture*, published in 1914, Anastasie C. Păunescu speaks about the form of beauty in popular thinking. According to the author, the beauty is given first of all by young people, the youthful age playing an important role when it is attributed to a girl the title of *the most beautiful*. The body of the *most beautiful* girl is characterized by gentleness. Body robustness was not appreciated for girls, “big hands and feet” are specific to “uncivilized” beings. (Păunescu, 1914, p. 36)

In the Romanians, according to a paper that first published in 1890, *the beauty* was always among the *main attributes* that a virgin who wanted to be married had to possess. Only the girl that met very clear “quality criteria” (the virgin had to be: honest, stout, diligent, shrewd, caring, smart, wise, beautiful and healthy) managed to get married before she was 20 years of age which the young girl became an *old girl*. (Marian, 1995, p. 34) *Beauty* is among the most important criteria on the basis of which the ladies choose their brides. Girls who were not *beautiful* remained in most cases unmarried. (Marian, 1995, p. 25)

In 1932, a study, signed by N. Argintescu, on the “popular canons of body beauty” was published in the Archive for Science and Social Reform, a publication belonging to the Romanian Social Institute. In our paper we will present only some of the conclusions reached by the author of the study about the way the female beauty of the woman in the Romanian village was understood. Clothes play a very important role when considering the beauty of a woman, because they can turn ugly into beautiful. The same goes for cleanliness. To be beautiful, a woman needs to be clean. But is beauty also conditioned by *good living*. The one who works a lot cannot be nice, because he does not have time to care of herself. The prestige of cleanliness is also related to the light colour of the skin. And youth has an important role. 27-28 years is the age to which a woman could be beautiful. Social prestige could also give a woman *beauty*. (Argintescu, 1932, pp. 428-442)

In 1933, in the pages of a publication that appeared as a “religious-literary magazine”, it appeared that true beauty “lies not only in the charm of the curves, in the fine contours, but in the holiness of the soul.” (Vultur, 1933, p. 7) This vision of beauty reminds to some extent some of the statements made by William Hogarth in *The Analysis of Beauty*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (October 1905). Cartea de aur a femeii: Femeia și femeile/Woman's Gold Book: Woman and Women. *Moda/Fashion*, year I, no. 1, 8, pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> M.P., (1933). Există un model tip, definitiv, al frumuseții?/Is there a type, definitive pattern of beauty?. *Realitatea ilustrată/ Illustrated Reality*, Year VII, no. 341, 10 august, pp. 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> “With regard to character and expression; we have daily many instances which confirm the common received opinion, that the face is the index of the mind; and this maxim is so rooted in us, we can scarce help (if our attention is a little raised) forming some particular conception of the person's mind whose face we are observing, even before we receive information by any other means.” (William Hogarth, 1753, p. 125)

In another text, from the same “religious-literary” magazine mentioned above, it is shown that *purely sensual beauty* is not *true beauty*. More specifically, *beauty* is *real* only when *grace* is complemented by the *radiance of eternal beauty*. (Potcaș, 1935, p. 8) Another author, referring to the Bible, pointed out that beauty is not among the characteristics of the feminine ideal. The ideal woman is “a virtuous, active, provident, economical, devoted, kind, religious woman who deliberately and courageously fulfils her duties as a housewife, housekeeper, wife and mother.” (Fântânariu, 1935, p. 3) It must be said, that Solomon, in *Cântarea Cântărilor/Song of Songs*, speaks of the *woman’s bodily beauty*. In the same biblical text even some expensive adornments are mentioned, which are meant to emphasize the beauty of the woman.

### Any Woman can be Beautiful

In an article published in the *Ilustrațiunea română/The Romanian Illustration* in 1929, it is shown that among the most burning desires of the woman, who are “the weaker sex,” but to whom the poets say the “beautiful sex”, is to become *more beautiful than in reality*. To turn her dream into reality, *the woman* began fighting nature. The winners of this fight were those who manufactured powders, soaps, lotions or creams. For the women to be more beautiful than nature, it is not enough the use of the products listed above. She needs to know when and how to apply them. Most women, especially those who want to keep up with “Paris fashion”, do not master the *secrets of the make-up*. For this reason, on the street or in other places, we can see women who do not know how to choose their lipstick, the red is too bright from their lips, disturbing the eyes of those who look at them. (Celina, 1929, p. 17) The desire of the interwar woman, regardless of her social status or her age, to be always beautiful was explained by the fact that, as shown in an article published in January 1930, the ugly ones have difficulties in finding a job and are not allowed to enter into the business world.<sup>1</sup>

But there were also journalists who did not understand the need to change the interwar woman of any age. Pamfil Șeicaru, one of the most important Romanian journalists in the years between the two world wars, blamed the transformation of the old white-haired woman, who until then was happy when she was called “*grandmother*” in something that was *disgusting*. In the opinion of the same journalist, it was unnatural for a “*grandmother*” to use male-up, to trim *à la garçon* and wear dresses that did not cover her knees. However, this transformation only occurred to women with a good financial situation. (Șeicaru, 1928, p. 1) The same way of seeing things can be found in some early 20th century publications, where elegance brought to ladies approaching the age of 50 was labelled as being “ridiculous”. (Teodorașcu, 2017, p. 8)

Some authors highlight the difficulty faced by the one who is trying to identify *the aesthetic ideal that the media have spread in the 20th century*. (Umberto Eco, 2012, p. 428) From an article about the place occupied by a *mirror* in a *woman's* life, we find that *wrinkles* and *white hair* are signs of ugliness, and any resemblance to a movie star is a sign of beauty. (Doria, 1931, p. 17) One possible explanation for this might be that, with the development of the film industry, personal charm has become more important than any canon of beauty. The hypnotizing charm of cinema stars, called “sex appeal” by Americans, was the “ideal of qualities” to which *modern women* aspired. (Rodia, 1932, p. 13)

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<sup>1</sup> From English by Laura, (1930). *Cosmetica este o artă/Cosmetics is an art. Realitatea ilustrat/Illustrated reality*, year IV, no. 153, 2 Jan., p. 20.

**“81-61-91” - Looking For Ideal Measures**

Another feature of the interwar era is that *beauty* had no *age*. This situation was due in particular to *beauty salons*<sup>1</sup>: “At the age of 30, a 18th-century writer wrote, a woman must start hiding her hair in a lace cap and make room for those younger than her.” If this author lived in our day, he would run the risk of becoming a man of a very poor mentality.<sup>2</sup> “Women's magazines reserved space *for advice to maintain beauty*<sup>3</sup>. Many of these tips came from cinema, music-hall, or theatre stars.<sup>4</sup>

As shown in an article published in early 1932, *the woman* of the interwar period is a challenge for the one who proposes to designate her in exact terms: “Never before did an age offer a greater diversity of images, and the feminine type amplifying her curves, above the norms known in the past ages.”<sup>5</sup> It is self-evident that in the press of those times, there have been many attempts to define beauty. One of the conclusions reached is that the *theory of relativity* remains valid in terms of *beauty*:

“The laureate of a recent beauty contest possesses the following characteristics: neck thickness - 35.70 cm, bust - 81.60 cm., Waist - 61.20 cm., Hips - 91.80 cm., Thighs - 45.90 cm, calf of the leg - 31.87 cm, ankle - 15.94 cm, leg - 14.03 cm. and weight - 52 kg.

How many women do have the same measure as this one, and yet they go unnoticed!” (M.P., 1933, pp. 2-3)

Another article shows that *charm and attraction* are closely related to the woman's *age*. Even a “mathematical formula<sup>6</sup>” is presented in this sense:

Age	16 years old	20 years old	25 years old	30 years old	40 years old	50 years old
Beauty	80%	70%	60%	50%	30%	10%
Physical coquetry	–	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%
Spiritual coquetry	20%	20%	15%	15%	10%	–
Intelligence	–	–	15%	15%	25%	40%
Kindness	–	–	–	10%	25%	40%

The same source also shows that the woman can use clothes to compensate for the lack of natural beauty. The author of the quoted article brings to the attention of the public in Romania also a theme that had already stirred many discussions in France:

“Must a woman be beautiful in order to be loved?”

This question asked by a Parisian newspaper has been blatantly debated in France for weeks in a row, blurring talks on war debts, upward taxes, and the social crisis - minor issues of importance when it comes to love and beauty.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tik, Ion (1929). Într-o zi, la Ionică/One day at Ionica. *Ilustrațiunea română/Romanian Illustration*, year I, no. 25, 12 Dec., pp. 6, 19.

<sup>2</sup> \*\*\* (1931). Femeia modernă/The modern woman. *Realitatea ilustrată/The illustrated reality*, year V, no. 222, 30 April, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> \*\*\* „Cum vă puteți menține frumusețea/How to maintain your beauty. *Realitatea ilustrată/The illustrated reality*, year V, no. 223, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Teady, Georges (1930). Femeie, vrei să fii frumoasă?/Woman, do you want to be beautiful. *Realitatea ilustrată/The illustrated reality*, year IV, no. 199, 20 November, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Kar, Lucrezia (1932). Femeia standard/The standard woman. *Realitatea ilustrată/The illustrated reality*, year VI, no. 274, 28 April, pp. 29-30.

<sup>6</sup> (E.A., (1933). Trebuie o femeie să fie frumoasă pentru a fi iubită/Must a woman be beautiful to be loved. *Realitatea ilustrată/The illustrated reality*, year VII, no. 352, 26 October, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> E.A., (1933). Trebuie o femeie să fie frumoasă pentru a fi iubită/Must a woman be beautiful to be loved. *Realitatea ilustrată/The illustrated reality*, year VII, no. 352, 26 October, p. 2.

We think it is useful to mention the distinction that Edmund Burke made between “*the beauty of the sex*” and “*personal beauty*” (Burke, 1885, p. 36). The attention of the Romanian public was also brought to the “forty cardinal points of beauty”<sup>1</sup>, which we will not analyse, however, this time.

## Conclusions

With the advent of the first human civilizations, the cult of *beauty* was born, which became a *lifeless spring of life* and art. Over the centuries, some civilizations have disappeared to make room for others, but the *cult of beauty* has never disappeared. The *beautiful woman* was both an “object of artistic inspiration” and a mobile for the great human actions<sup>2</sup>. The novelty of the interwar years was that any woman could be beautiful (Fulmen, 1930, p. 5), and the pages of women's publications were full of *prescriptions* for long-lasting beauty<sup>3</sup>. Some cosmetic products, a visit to the beauty salon and the change of old clothes to those created after the latest fashion in Paris / Berlin solve the problem of the *lack of natural beauty*. The heated conversations about how *the woman* should be considered to be *beautiful* have continued to exist, because beautiful is not what is *beautiful*, but what the viewer likes<sup>4</sup>. For some journalists, lipstick and last fashion clothes were specific to women of easy morals. (Teodorașcu, 2014, pp. 243-244)

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<sup>1</sup> E.A., (1933). Trebuie o femeie să fie frumoasă pentru a fi iubită/Must a woman be beautiful to be loved. *Realitatea ilustrată/The illustrated reality*, year VII, no. 352, 26 October, pp. 12;14.

<sup>2</sup> I.S. (1930). Frumosele trecutului/The beauties of the past. *Realitatea ilustrată/The illustrated reality*, 9 Oct., p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> \*\*\* Cum vă puteți menține frumusețea/How to maintain beauty. *Realitatea ilustrată/The illustrated reality*, year V, nr. 223, 7 mai 1931, p. 2

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