

Beauty and the Global History Interview with Sebastian Conrad

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With this issue we inaugurate a section of interviews with historians of great international prestige and diverse academic backgrounds, asking them to share brief reflections on their current cutting-edge research. Sebastian Conrad (Freie Universität Berlin) is our first interviewee.

Specialist on European and East Asian history (primarily Japan), colonialism/postcolonialism, and global history, he holds the Chair of Modern History at Freie Universität Berlin where he directs the MA-Program “Global History” and the Graduate School “Global Intellectual History”. He was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg) in Berlin; visiting professor at the École des Hautes Études in Paris, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and at the New School, New York; and full professor of Modern History at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. He is an elected member of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and of the Academia Europaea.



His most recent publications are *German Colonialism: A Short History* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); *What Is Global History?* (Princeton University Press, 2016); and *An Emerging Modern World, 1750-1870* (with Jürgen Osterhammel, Harvard University Press, 2018). He is currently involved in a project that aims to study the beautiful body in the turn of the twentieth century, and that is precisely what we want to know more about.

Jaime Gouveia – *How this project came about and what questions you intend to answer?*

Sebastian Conrad – In recent years, I have worked extensively on the question of how global integration played out in the cultural field, and how cultural norms and standards in turn impacted the process of globalization. In this context, it struck me that the history of aesthetics, of looks, of the body rarely featured. While there is an increasing literature on the global history of literature, music, architecture, historiography, and so forth, the way people have perceived the human body, and corporal “beauty”, has not been sufficiently addressed.

This, I felt, was particularly striking as in the modern age, as Terry Eagleton once phrased it, “our bodies are the site of our ideologies.” Over the past two and a half centuries, the authority of established worldviews that guaranteed social stability and order gradually vanished. Benedict Anderson and others have shown how religious and dynastic cosmologies were replaced by nationalism as collective reference point. But nationalism was much more than lofty ideas. In quotidian practice, it was emotional, affective, and embodied. Outward appearance and the physical body assumed a relevance of their own, connecting individual subjectivities to the collective body of the nation. As a result, aesthetic judgments began to convey meaning in ways that had been assumed by religion. In the nineteenth century, the arts were a privileged site of such proxy metaphysics; but the aestheticization of the lifeworld, including the concern with the individual body, was part and parcel of this larger development.

Much more than in previous epochs, the exterior, material dimension of the body took on a significance of its own. In contrast to the ancient Greek conviction that a good body was the necessary correlative of a good soul, from the 1890s onwards, practices ranging from sun-bathing and nude culture to aerobics and the preoccupation with fitness have targeted the physical body as an intrinsic value in itself. Now, the aim was less and less a balance of body and soul, but the cultivation of the body into an asset of its own. This trend has only continued into the present, as bodies are increasingly seen as malleable, as something that can be modified and changed. In late modernity, as Anthony Giddens has explained, “we have become responsible for the design of our bodies,” as care for one’s body is “a core part of the reflexive project of self-identity”. The idea of physical self-fashioning, closely entangled with patterns of consumption and affect, has dramatically changed the status of the body from a given to a project.

Therefore, I posed myself a number of questions: How did the body, how did looks become so important? How has physical appearance arrived at its current

privileged status? How does the modern cult of the body, of outward attraction, differ from an earlier tradition of aesthetic appreciation? How is bodily appearance connected to power and inequality? Whose beauty is it in the first place? Who sets the standards in the global marketplace? Is beauty the same everywhere, or is it culturally specific? How has this changed in our globalized world?

JG – *Haven't there always been, throughout the centuries, ideals of beauty? What makes the turn of the twentieth century special for studying the beauty body?*

SC – You are right – the fascination with outward beauty is nothing new. The myths of Adonis and Aphrodite, the cosmetic boxes that have survived from ancient Egypt, the legend of the Four Beauties in Chinese antiquity – they all demonstrate the awe with which human beauty was appreciated and revered throughout history. Examples abound, from Plato to modern pinup girls. Throughout history, an appealing physical appearance, in its various forms, was valued and could bestow social prestige and even divine status.

Nevertheless, we can identify a few characteristics that mark the modern notion of beauty – even if that does not mean that there is no continuity to premodern times. I think it's fair to say that in the wake of industrialization, the social history of beauty gradually changed. Larger segments of the population increasingly adopted practices hitherto mainly restricted to established elites. The invention of fashion turned aesthetic distinctions from an exclusively aristocratic preserve into an omnipresent habit. Social mobility, in all classes, took people out of their familiar networks. This added to the impact of chance encounters and first impressions, and therefore of the importance that physical features when people met and got to know each other. To some extent, one can even speak of a democratization of beauty standards.

This was enabled by the media revolution that created a mass audience for the new beauty regime. The communicative technologies emerging in the nineteenth century – newspapers, photography, the telegraph, exhibitions, competitions – were fundamental in shaping a popular beauty culture. Photography, in particular, signaled the most thorough break in the history of our perception of physical appearance. It allowed images to materially circulate that hitherto had been confined to hearsay and the imagination. No reader of Homer's *Iliad* was ever able to tell what the beautiful Helena really looked like. The images of women competing in beauty contests in the early 1900s, by contrast, were printed in newspapers for all to see.

And finally, standards of beauty were increasingly negotiated globally. In the nineteenth century, debates about beauty did not remain confined to

individual countries or cultures. The globe grew ever closer connected, as trade, large-scale empires, the border-crossing flow of migrants, and the imposition of Western laws and norms had created a world that was deeply intertwined. In this context, beauty emerged as one of the arenas in which the new global order was played out. This is, of course, a story of borrowing, of influence – but most of all, it is a story of empire, of race, and of the production of “whiteness” that frequently remained unnamed, concealed by a discourse of “beauty.”

JG – *Although Herstory has tried to place the study of strongwomen within the scope of the beauty body, it has not succeeded in reversing the historiographical trend of studying women from a masculine perspective. How can global history of beauty be an active part of this reversal?*

SC – I would be unable to write this book without building on the thorough and highly sophisticated scholarship by feminist scholars on various aspects related to it. While it is true that the history of body-building is primarily concerned with men, this is not the case for so many other aspects of the history of the body, and of beauty. Research on beauty contests, for example, has produced an incredibly rich body of scholarship, both historical and anthropological. Many of these studies go into depth, focusing on one country and even one particular pageant. This way, they are able to bring out the complex interplay between global forces and local dynamics, and between patriarchal structures and the motivations and agency of individuals.

JG – *We know that you are preparing a book on these subjects. Can you tell us a little about it?*

SC – For the book, I have decided not to attempt anything resembling exhaustive coverage, which would be impossible in the first place. A comprehensive overview of all aspects of bodily beauty everywhere would by necessity remain shallow, if not result in outright caricature. To avoid this, chapters are organized around specific case studies, selected because they can help us better to understand specific features of the current beauty regime. I have identified five case studies that help me to make my argument: The history of bodybuilding; women’s beauty contests that operate on a global level; the twentieth-century career of the image of Nefertiti, the ancient Egyptian queen; the role of St. Sebastian (the one with the arrows) in creating a model of gay and queer beauty; and cosmetic surgery.

A global perspective, then, does not mean the history of everything. Indeed, many important topics had to be left out. For some, there is already a rich literature, such as on skin lighteners, the cosmetic industry, and fashion. Other

themes, such as ugliness, hair, beard, tattoo, piercing, body fat, etc., would have been conceivable as well. But while selective, the cases presented here allow me to zoom in on crucial aspects – gender and sexuality, the continued relevance of race, the impact of empire and of markets – that have shaped our understanding of the beautiful body, frequently behind our backs, into the present. In addition, the aim is to convey a sense of the global dynamic of the topic. Covering more than a century in a global perspective by necessity results in a trade-off: the chapters can by definition not go into the same depth as some of the best studies that confine themselves to one aspect and one place of this larger history. However, I feel that the global ramifications of the modern beauty regime do not really come into view as long as we study individual locations in isolation.

JG – *How does the study of the beauty body allow us to better define the potentials and limits of global history?*

SC – Initially, global history developed alongside a general discourse about globalization, and questions of economic interaction, such as the emergence of world markets or the so-called “Great Divergence” (Kenneth Pomeranz) initially took center stage. The history of empires, and of migration, were also classical themes early on. This early work – I am speaking of work that was produced in the 1990s – frequently operated with the assumption that globalization would bring about a homogenization of the world. This view is no longer shared by many, and as a result, different responses to global challenges have increasingly come into view.

The challenge of doing cultural history on a global scale is, of course, that the webs of meaning that come with cultural phenomena are usually understood as so stubbornly local that they make a global perspective difficult, if not impossible. In my earlier work, I tried to work towards a cultural history perspective on global change – a perspective that is, however, not limited to discourse analysis and the like, but deeply grounded in social history and an awareness of geopolitical hierarchies.¹ In this current project, I attempt to use a similar approach to address the notion of “beauty.” Here, too, the focus is on a topic that defies easy generalizations. If “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” as the saying goes, this implies that it will vary from place to place, sometimes radically so. But I am convinced that we will not be able to exploit the potential of global history unless we find ways of explaining such differences that go beyond a simple reproduction of the narrative of local diversity.

¹ CONRAD, Sebastian (2018). “A Cultural History of Global Transformation”, in Sebastian Conrad und Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *An Emerging Modern World, 1750-1870* (A History of the World, vol. 4). Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 433-708.

JG – *Studying the gradual integration process of the globe can raise the challenge of interdisciplinary work. Do you think it is also a call for a more integrated way of doing history?*

SC – The global turn has affected many different disciplines at the same time, and for me, that has been a source of inspiration. Economists, political scientists, anthropologists and sociologists have made important contributions to the study of globalization – for example, historians continue to discuss contributions by scholars like Thomas Piketty, Arjun Appadurai, and others. But also in the disciplines of art history, literature, and philosophy, we see scholars grappling with the question of how to explain the causes, and (even more so) the effects of global integration. For my own thinking, this interdisciplinary conversation has been enormously helpful and productive.

JG – *Certainly, the search for innovative conceptions that propose a break with compartmentalized thinking has a wide margin for progression. How do you see the development of Global history in the future? What other topics, seemingly marginal or peripheral, might result in excellent studies or research projects in this field?*

SC – My understanding is that global history both as an approach, and as a field, has not yet exhausted its potential. Methodologically, there is still work to do. All too frequently, historians presume the “global,” and take it for granted as a scale of human interaction – instead of exploring how what we understand as the “global” was produced in the first place.

As far as themes are concerned, there is really no limit – almost any topic can benefit from a global perspective. In recent years, corresponding to urgent political events, we have seen a number of topics gain immensely in importance – among them new histories of capitalism, histories of migration, of (mostly right-wing) populism, and of environmental history (and the Anthropocene). These will continue to be important. Beyond them, I hope for more interesting work with a global perspective on premodern societies; and I think that the topic of inequality – in all its variants and guises – will become ever-more necessary in the years to come, in particular in its global ramifications.

JG – Thank you very much for your willingness to share with our readers the cutting edge research you are doing. We are looking forward to the publication of your book.