

POWER DRESSING IN ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME

Jeri DeBrohun looks at the meanings expressed in the style of clothes and personal adornment adopted by men and women in the ancient world.

DID THE ANCIENT GREEKS and Romans have a sense of fashion? Historians of dress have traditionally claimed that fashion in the modern sense did not exist in Greece and Rome, but this assertion rests upon a misconception of rather sophisticated Greco-Roman attitudes toward physical appearance, as well as upon definitions of 'dress' and 'fashion' that are too limited.

As is abundantly clear from their art and literature, the ancients attached great importance to ideals of bodily perfection and to outward appearance in general. Both the Greeks and the Romans demonstrated, from their earliest history, an

Classic beauties? The Venus de Milo (left), of around 100 BC, and the Doryphorus by Polykleitos (5th-century BC, Roman copy).

extraordinary awareness of the potential of the body (and various modifications that could be made to it) as a means of marking social, political, religious, and even moral distinctions, aside from the opportunities dress and body decoration represent for self-expression or the pursuit of beauty. The ancients manipulated the expressive potential of clothing and adornments in a myriad of contexts: in their rituals, in

theatre, and in the political arena, as well as in literature. There is also considerable evidence of innovation, experimentation, and the determined expression of personal style, even in Republican Rome where societal norms or expectations were ostensibly rigid in regard to clothing, correct grooming, or the use of adornments such as jewellery, perfume or cosmetics.

The term 'dress' includes any modification of, or supplement to, the body that conveys meaning that can be 'read' by others. For the ancients it encompassed much more than clothes but also included beards, hairstyles, and wigs,

The mirror was an important accessory throughout the classical world. 5th century BC.

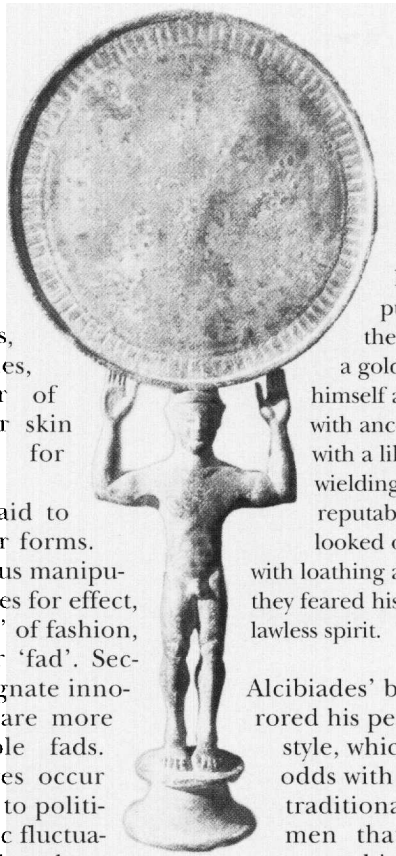
perfumes and cosmetics, jewellery and accessories, and colour, whether of clothing, hair dye, or skin treatments (tattoos, for example).

'Fashion' may be said to encompass any of four forms. First, there is a conscious manipulation of dress that strives for effect, a 'momentary instance' of fashion, 'fashion statement' or 'fad'. Second, fashion may designate innovations in dress that are more enduring than simple fads. Some of these changes occur abruptly, whether due to political upheavals, economic fluctuations, or even the sudden abundance (or scarcity) of certain materials; other innovations may develop more deliberately. Third is the phenomenon whereby styles in a particular area of dress change swiftly and repeatedly, with the new ones replacing the old in rapid succession. Finally, fashion may refer specifically to the use of such adornments as cosmetics, fragrance, hair treatments, and jewellery, whose primary *raison d'être* is to enhance a wearer's natural features. Primarily considered the preserve of women, this aspect also plays a significant role in the lives of men, especially in the male-dominated societies of Greece and Rome, in which the 'correct' appearance was often a necessary prerequisite to a man's political success.

Antiquity displays examples of fashion in each of these four senses. Plutarch, the prolific first-century AD biographer, described how the flamboyant young fifth-century BC Greek politician Alcibiades flouted convention with his outlandish behaviour, including this 'fashion statement':

All his statecraft and eloquence and lofty purpose and cleverness was attended with great luxuriousness of

A bride prepares for her wedding on this 5th-century BC Greek vase-painting. She wears the traditional *peplos*, belted and attached with buckles at the shoulder.



life, with wanton drunkenness and lewdness, and with effeminacy in dress – he would trail long purple robes through the agora ... He also had

a golden shield made for himself and decorated not with ancestral insignia but with a likeness of Eros wielding a thunderbolt. The reputable men of the city

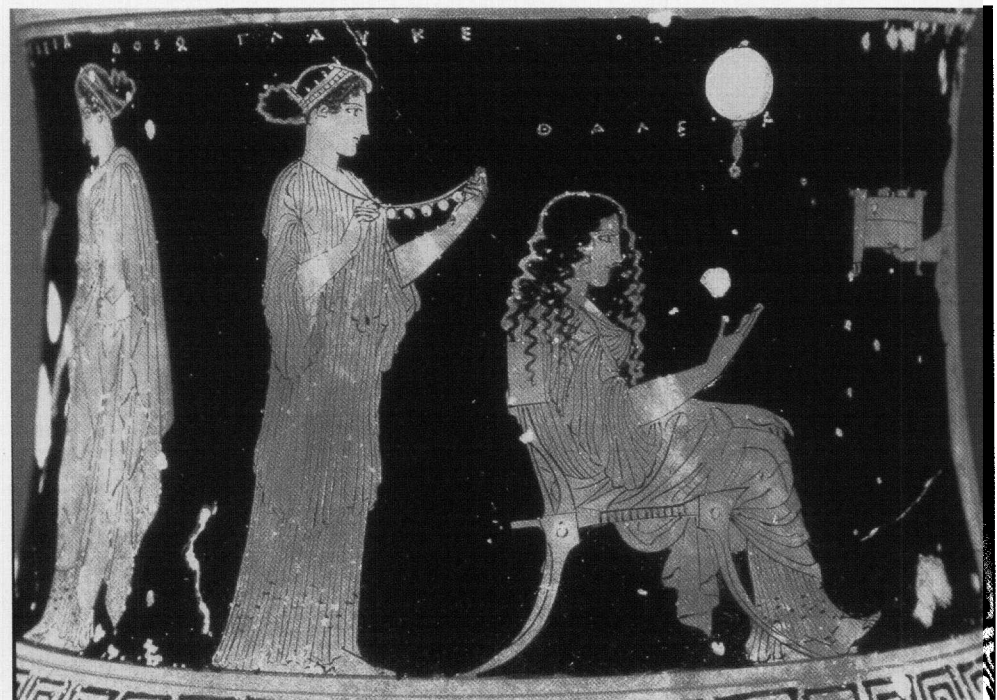
looked on all these things with loathing and indignation, and they feared his contemptuous and lawless spirit.

Alcibiades' bizarre apparel mirrored his personal and political style, which was at times so at odds with the deportment of traditional Athenian statesmen that it inspired fear among his fellow Athenians that he was aiming at a personal tyranny. He paid for his novel ways with his exile from Athens.

There were also 'fads' which involved groups. A familiar sight in fifth and fourth-century BC Athens were the provocatively-fashioned 'Laconisers', young men who aped Spartan fashions – extravagantly long beards and short cloaks – in what was often interpreted as an advertisement of their estrangement from the democracy and indication of their sympathy for the oligarchic conser-

vatism that Sparta represented. The comic poet Aristophanes coined the term 'Laconomania' for this phenomenon, whose adherents he derisively described in *The Birds* as 'long-haired, hungry, dirty, and "acting like the philosopher Socrates"' by carrying the Spartan cane'. 'Laconisation' was by no means an innocent fad, however. After Spartan's defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), ardent 'Laconophiles' such as Critias instituted a reign of terror in Athens as leaders of the Spartan-sponsored oligarchy. But as sometimes occurs with modern fads that begin as political statements, some of the Laconisers apparently forgot that their Spartan attire held any particular meaning. Plutarch related an encounter between the Athenian statesman Phocion (402/1-318BC) and one of these would-be Spartans. As the incident illustrates, even deliberately constructed appearances can sometimes be deceiving:

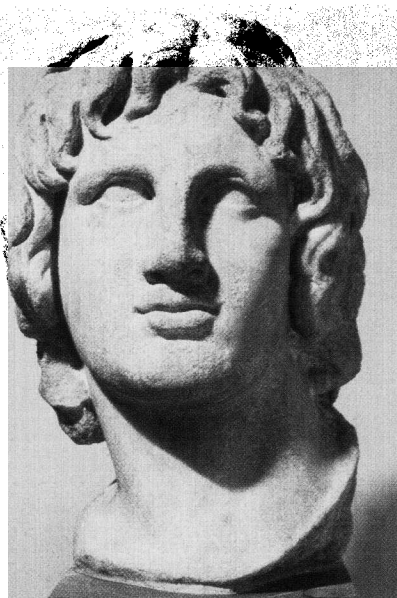
There was a certain Archibiades, nicknamed Laconistes, because, in imitation of the Spartans, he let his beard grow to an extravagant size, always wore a short cloak, and had a permanent scowl on his face. Phocion was once greeted with a stormy reception in the Council, and so he called upon this man for testimony and support in what he said. But when the man rose up and gave



advice that was pleasing to the Athenians, Phocion seized him by the beard and said: 'O Archibiades, why, then, did you not shave yourself?'

There were, of course, innovations in ancient dress that had a more enduring impact. In the years before the Persian Wars (490-480/79 BC), Athenian men and women had increasingly begun to adopt more luxurious fashions, favouring, for example, a linen *chiton* (a kind of tunic) over the simpler, woollen one of tradition (the female version of which was called a *peplos*). In addition, Athenian men, who had already traditionally worn their hair long, now began to sport more elaborate hairstyles. The historian Thucydides, writing in the late fifth century, described one of these styles, in which men tied their hair behind their heads in a kind of knot, or *chignon*, fastened with a clasp of 'golden grasshoppers'. These extravagant fashions came to Athens from the eastern Ionian Greeks of Asia Minor, who were themselves influenced by the dress of their 'oriental' neighbours.

When against all odds the Greeks emerged victorious from the threat to their liberty posed by the Persian invasion, a reaction set in against these eastern influences. The second quarter of the fifth century BC saw both men and women in Athens return to the traditional woollen *chiton*, called 'Dorian' for its connection with the Spartans (although the 'Ionian' linen *chiton* was never fully abandoned); and men began wearing their hair short. Indeed, long hair for Athenian men became associated with the 'oriental' vices of effeminacy and decadence. Aristophanes caricatured the effeminate 'pretty boys' who persisted in following the eastern models by wearing hairstyles such as the *chignon* mentioned by Thucydides. There is little doubt that this change in the style and material of Athenian garments, as well as the switch to cropped hair for men, occurred as a direct response to the



Alexander sported loose flowing locks and a clean-shaven chin, and by propagating his image widely he changed the fashions of his age.

with symbolic meaning than was Greek attire. While the Greeks made distinctions in dress primarily on the basis of gender, for the Romans differences in gender, age, class, political status, and religious role were

This Boeotian woman of around 320 BC is wearing the linen *chiton*. This garment was originally made of linen but came to be made in wool as well.

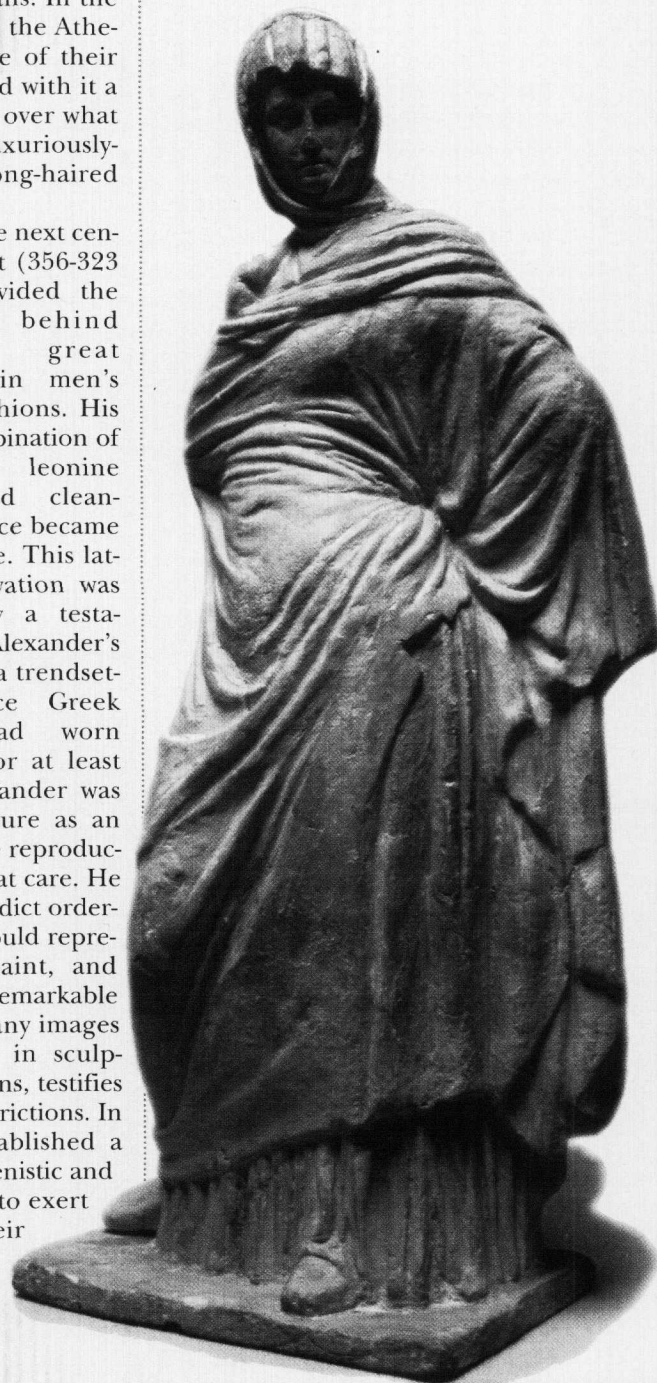
encounter with the Persians. In the aftermath of their victory, the Athenians gained a new sense of their 'Greekness', which carried with it a pride in their superiority over what were in their eyes the luxuriously-clad, effeminate, and long-haired barbarians.

Towards the end of the next century, Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) provided the impetus behind another great change in men's facial fashions. His own combination of flowing, leonine hair and clean-shaven face became the vogue. This latter innovation was especially a testament to Alexander's status as a trendsetter, since Greek men had worn beards for at least

half a millennium. Alexander was clearly aware of his stature as an icon, and he managed the reproduction of his image with great care. He went so far as to issue an edict ordering that only two artists could represent him: Apelles in paint, and Lysippos in marble. The remarkable degree of unity of the many images of Alexander preserved in sculptures, paintings, or on coins, testifies to the success of these restrictions. In this, too, Alexander established a trend, as subsequent Hellenistic and Roman rulers attempted to exert a similar control over their official portraiture.

Roman dress was more obviously loaded

Aristophanes caricatured the effeminate 'pretty boys' who followed eastern models by wearing hairstyles such as the *chignon*.





often immediately visible from the type, colour, and decoration of their garments alone. In addition, the notion of 'correct' dress and grooming was central to Roman culture. Taking to heart the Greek maxim 'the style is the man', they extended it even further, establishing a correlation between manner of dress and style of language, both of which were assumed to reflect closely a person's moral character. In a letter condemning oratorical styles which relied too much on purple prose, Seneca, the tutor of Nero, writes:

Whenever you see a style of speaking that is too careful and polished, rest assured that the mind that produced it also is no less occupied with petty things. The truly great man speaks informally and easily; whatever he says, he speaks with more assurance than pains.

You are familiar with the carefully coiffed young men, with their gleaming beards and hair – everything from a box; you can never hope for anything strong or solid from them. Speaking style is the 'dress and adornment' [cultus] of the mind: if it has been trimmed and dyed and treated, it shows that the mind is not wholly right and has some kind of flaw. Elaborate elegance is not a manly ornament.

With his analogy between overly contrived oratorical style and overly

elaborate coiffures Seneca makes clear that in his opinion both are indicators of small minds and weak characters.

The rhetorician Quintilian also demonstrates the close connection between 'correct' dress, language and behaviour in his instructions to aspiring orators:

What use is it if we employ a lofty type of speaking in trivial cases, a small and polished style in important cases, a happy one in sad matters, a gentle one in rough matters, a threatening one in matters of supplication, a submissive one in energetic situations, or a fierce and angry one when charm is required? It is as if men were to disgrace themselves with necklaces and pearls and a long dress, which are the



The Greek males of the classical period wore their hair carefully dressed and beards trimmed. These feasting lovers are from the walls of a sarcophagus from Poseidonia in southern Italy.

adornments of women, or if women should put on triumphal robes, than which nothing more august can be imagined.

Rome's greatest orator, Cicero, often effectively manipulated his audience's expectations of a close connection between outward appearance and moral character. In one speech, he juxtaposed scathing descriptions of the two consuls of 58 BC, men who had proved – at least to Cicero's perhaps jaundiced eyes – to be equally corrupt and dangerous despite the great contrasts in their appearance. Cicero began with a reminder that both men, as consuls, would have been adorned with the insignia of the state's highest office, which included carrying the *fascēs*, the bundle of rods symbolic of their magisterial power, and wearing the *toga praetexta*, with its characteristic purple border. He then described the consuls themselves starting with Gabinius, 'dripping with unguents, with his hair artificially waved', presumably

This soldier is wrapped in a *chlamys* or short military cloak. It was frequently richly embroidered or dyed to signify rank. 500 BC.



This Roman statuette from Verona, 1st century AD, reflects the Roman adoption of the Greek style of dress, commonly adapted with oriental motifs.

through the aid of a curling iron. Gabinius deceived no one, Cicero noted, for his 'foppish' appearance reflected well his debauched and immoral lifestyle. His colleague, Piso, was a different case:

Great Gods! How repulsively he walked, how fierce, how terrible to look at! You would say that you saw one of those bearded men of old, a very *exemplum* of the ancient regime, an image of antiquity, a pillar of the State. He was clothed harshly in our common purple, which was nearly black, with his hair so shaggy that at Capua, where he held the office of *duumvir* in order to add another title to the wax portrait image he would leave for posterity, he looked as though he were ready to carry off the whole Seplasia [a street occupied chiefly by perfumers and hairdressers] on his locks.

Piso's appearance, Cicero related, deceived nearly everyone; for his manner of dress, like his family name, recalled old-fashioned Republican values. His full beard, the dark purple band of his toga, and his shaggy hair were out of style in the late Republic, when clean-shaven faces and neat hair were the norm. In outward appearance, there could have been no more striking contrast between the two consuls. In reality, as Cicero reminded his audience, Piso's appearance disguised his true character, which was just as debauched as that of his colleague.

All these examples show that in a society where strict rules of 'correct' dress and grooming were established, deviations from the norm, or manifestations of personal style, would always be open to criticism as immoral, effeminate, or politically dangerous. At the same time, however, the very existence of these 'ridiculous' or 'outdated' fashions shows that innovations and expressions of personal style persisted even among men who knew that their appearances, as well as their behaviour, would be noted by critics and observers such as Cicero and Seneca.

The unguents applied by Gabinius



A slave attends to a young Roman girl, from Herculaneum, 1st century AD.

and by Seneca's 'fashion-conscious' young men, and the dark purple of Piso's dress, are good examples of areas in which ancient styles changed rapidly and innovations were frequent. Women's hairstyles provide a further example of these swiftly-shifting fashions. Perfumes and scented ointments were wildly popular in antiquity. The fourth-century BC Greek scholar Theophrastus, in his *On Odours*, and the Roman Pliny, in his *Natural History*, devoted much space to cataloguing the various sources of different scents, and they also provide recipes for specific perfumes and ointments. We learn from them that special fragrances were developed for use on different parts of the body, to hide unpleasant odours as well as to provide pleasant ones. Fragrance was even added to wines, and the satirist Martial mentioned perfumed lozenges used to freshen the breath. Pliny noted in particular how quickly perfume fashions changed:

The first thing one needs to know

about perfumes is that their importance changes, and quite often their popularity, passes away. In the old days, the perfume made in Delos was most praised, but later that from Mendes [in Egypt]... The iris scent of Corinth was very popular for a long time, but after that the fragrance of Cyzicus took over...

The list continues with many additional examples. Pliny also criticised perfumes as 'the most superfluous of all luxuries; for pearls and jewels pass on to an heir, and clothes last for some time, but unguents lose their scent at once, and die in the very hour they are used.' Sumptuary laws forbidding the sale of 'exotic unguents' appear throughout Greco-Roman history, clear indications that their use, however expensive, was pervasive.

While ancient garments did not undergo the swift and often capricious changes in fashion that regularly occur in modern clothing, innovations in material, colour, and decoration were common. Cicero's reminder that Piso's clothing was dyed a dark, nearly black purple indicates that this colour, like his beard and unkempt hair, was old-

fashioned. That different shades of purple came in and out of vogue in Rome is also recorded incidentally by Plutarch, who related that the determinedly conservative Cato the Younger (95-46 BC), when he saw that an exceedingly vivid scarlet purple was the current vogue, deliberately switched to wearing a darker shade. Pliny recorded a striking example of rapid innovation in the colour of Roman clothing. In discussing contemporary luxury, he related that the variety of purple dyes used for Roman garments had proliferated greatly and that newer, more expensive dyes, as well as processes such as 'double-dyeing', were constantly being developed in the hope of producing richer, more

Cicero, symbol of Republican virtue in his career and writings in the 1st century BC, also demonstrated traditional values in his wearing of the toga.





A Roman hairstyle of the late 1st century AD, when such elaborate styles were at their peak. Hairpieces and curling tongs were frequently used.

Right: A Roman toilet box, perhaps containing chalk, lead and antimony for make-up.

ity. Since the cultivation of physical beauty was considered chiefly a female concern, women's behaviour in particular was closely scrutinised. The same Seneca who was so disturbed by the glistening hair and trimmed beards of young Roman men considered it a fulsome tribute to his mother Helvia to praise her for never yielding to the 'shameful temptations' that attracted other women:

You – unlike so many – never succumbed to immorality, the worst evil of the century; jewels and pearls did not bend you ... The bad example of lesser women – dangerous even for the virtuous – did not lead you to stray from the old-fashioned, strict upbringing you received at home ... You never polluted yourself with makeup, and you never wore a dress that covered about as much on as it did off. Your only ornament, the kind of beauty that time does not tarnish, is the great honour of modesty.

Unlike Seneca or his mother, however, most Greeks and Romans, men or women, were not content with virtue as an adornment. They often undertook extreme, even dangerous, measures to improve upon their natural features. The Athenian Xenophon, writing in the fourth century BC, reported a conversation between a wealthy young householder and the philosopher Socrates:

Ischomachus then said, 'One time, Socrates, I saw that my wife had covered her face with white lead, so that she would seem to have a paler complexion than she really had, and put on thick rouge, so that her cheeks would seem redder than in reality, and high boots, so that she would seem taller than she naturally was'.

Ischomachus informed Socrates that he used this opportunity to explain to his wife the difference between true beauty and its mere

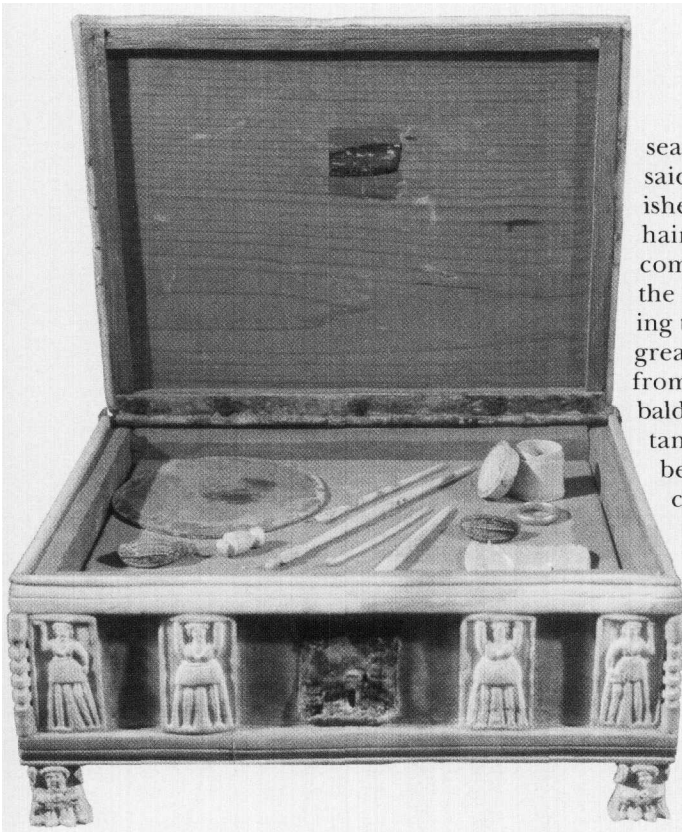
beautiful shades. He ended with a reminder that the motivation for these innovations was sheer vanity.

Women's hairstyles also changed rapidly in antiquity, especially in Rome. The Augustan poet Ovid commented, 'It is impossible to enumerate all the different styles: each day adds more adornments.' During the Roman Empire, innovations in female coiffures occurred often enough that those who could afford to even had their portraits sculpted with separately-carved wigs, presumably in order to change the wigs when necessary to keep up with the latest styles.

The ancients idealised the beauty

of the human body, and in this respect perhaps more than any other their concerns and efforts equal – or even surpass – those of modern men and women. Mirrors, perhaps the single strongest indicator of an interest in personal appearance, are found with astounding frequency in ancient burials, particularly those of women. Great care was lavished on their manufacture and decoration. The Greeks even developed an early version of the 'compact,' a 'box' mirror made of two metal disks fastened by a hinge.

As we have seen, there was always an uncomfortable relationship in antiquity between fashion and moral-



appearance. He did not, however, react to his wife's appearance with shock, as though she were behaving unexpectedly. Her make-up must, therefore, have appeared essentially typical for a young Greek woman. There are numerous additional references in the literature to women's use of cosmetics, including the white lead (lead carbonate) applied by Ischomachus's wife. Unfortunately, as Pliny reported of the substance, 'it is useful for giving women a fair complexion; but like scum of silver, it is deadly poison.' Many Greek women died unknowingly from lead poisoning after applying this noxious substance. Even more startling, however, is the fact that its use continued in Rome even after its poisonous effects were recognised, an indication of the extreme lengths to which women would go for the sake of beauty.

Virtually all of today's beauty aids can be paralleled in antiquity: from 'night creams' and 'beauty masks' to depilatory lotions and skin softeners. Ovid provides sample recipes for such treatments, with ingredients ranging from barley and eggs, to more exotic components, including asses' milk, stag's horn, and a substance called *halcyonea*, made from

sea-swallows' nests, that was said to remove facial blemishes. Measures against grey hair and baldness were also common. Suggestions for the former included massaging the scalp with either bear grease or ointments made from worms. Remedies for baldness were equally important for women and men because Roman hair dyes contained follicle-destroying ingredients. Ovid provides a portrait, both amusing and poignant, of his girlfriend who sits weeping, holding her hair in her lap, a victim of frequent dyeing. The good news, he wittily informs her, is that it can soon be replaced with a wig from Germany. Wigs were frequently imported from both Gaul and Germany, as the Romans were particularly attracted to the blond and red hair of the Celts and Germans.

The idea of dress in antiquity as stable and harmonious is false. From

fads such as the politically-inspired 'Laconisers', to more enduring changes such as those which followed the Persian Wars, and from strict 'conformists' like Cicero or Seneca to the true 'fashion-mongers' who strove to find the perfect scent or to sport the latest colours, it is difficult to imagine a more fashion-conscious society than that of ancient Greece or Rome.

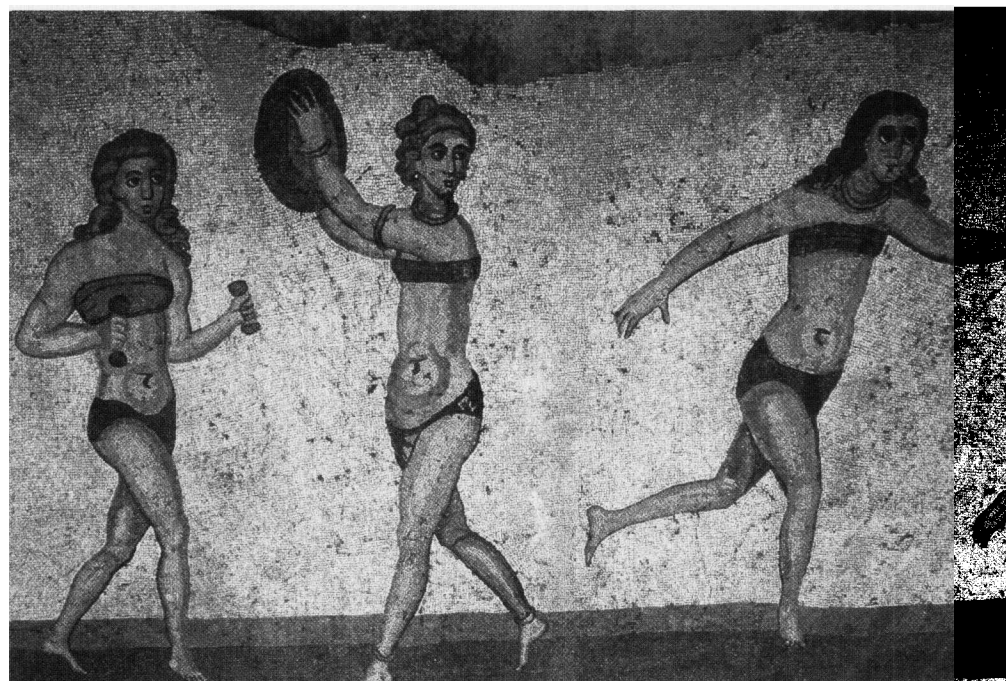
FOR FURTHER READING:

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There was always an uncomfortable relationship in antiquity between fashion and morality.

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These girls from a 3rd-century Sicilian villa appear to be exercising in the baths, wearing garments known as the *fascia pectoralis* and the *subligar*.