

“Color, Power, and Spoons: An Ancient Roman Beauty Tutorial”

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At first glance, the revered marble sculptures that date back to the Roman Empire betray no hint of color. But thanks to a wave of recent restorations, the iconic works now reveal red lips, flushed cheeks, and dark brows. For Roman women, this bold look was emphasized with the help of a makeup kit. One common tool was a cosmetic spoon, a slender implement with a long handle and a shallow, rounded bowl on the end. Four cosmetic spoons, made of bone and found throughout Italy, are displayed at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. These spoons would have touched the skin of Roman women as they changed the presentation of their very faces. This intimacy serves as launchpad to consider the position of makeup in relation to both the woman wearing it and the society in which she moved. By walking through a tutorial of an elite Roman woman's makeup routine, it is possible to understand how cosmetics would have enabled her to communicate power, style, and influence in a society that limited female growth.

Before diving into the application of makeup in ancient Rome, it is essential to understand who the women holding the cosmetic spoons were. Women of all social classes wore makeup, but beauty routines would have been performed differently based on their standing. While most used their own talents to smear on foundation and define their eyes with dark kohl, wealthy women had skilled female slaves, called *cosmetae*, do their makeup, as well as hair and skincare.¹ The harsh division between free and slave was a critical part of Roman society. In Gaius's legal commentary *Institutes*, he declared, "The principle distinction made of by the law of persons is this, that all human beings are either free men or slaves."² Slaves were coldly referred to as "speaking tools" in legal code, and the children of female slaves were

¹ Amy Richlin, *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*, "Chapter 6: Making Up a Woman: The Face of Roman Gender" (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 178.

² Thomas Ernst Josef Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge Publishing, 1981). 21.

automatically enslaved as well, creating a near-unlimited supply of slaves for the free class.³ Even slave names were a constant reminder of their inferior social status — for example, Phaedra, slave of Cyrus. If a slave eventually became free, their status would be as a free man or woman, not a freeborn, which still put them lower on the social spectrum.

One way to gain freedom was by purchasing it through wages, although this could take many years.⁴ If a female slave were to spend part of her wages on cheap cosmetics to enhance her own beauty, this could be viewed with suspicion from her mistress. Male fidelity was not the expectation, and wives were constantly aware of the physical allure held by others in their husbands' lives. Sex workers, who were sometimes slaves, were obvious competitors, but even slaves who did not engage in that work were seen as a threat. In Caecilius Statius's comedy *Plocium*, a jealous wife demands that her husband sell a female slave who "looked good enough to be free."⁵ Although the wife commanded greater respect in society and lived far more comfortably, she still found it necessary to quash any challengers from below in order to secure her position. When studying these tensions and distances, it is important to remember that there were hierarchies within the slave class, too. Some slaves had their own beauty attendants on occasion, possibly given to them by male clients — meaning that they could be taken away at any moment. In Plautus's play *Poenulus*, two female, enslaved sex workers sing about how they are "not too pretty and not too lovely without a makeup job and lots of cash."⁶ *Cosmetae* certainly had more comfortable working conditions than those who worked in the brutal

³ Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22.

⁴ D'Ambra, 24

⁵ Richlin, 180.

⁶ Richlin, 174.

agricultural sector; still, their role must not be glamorized.⁷ If the slave somehow displeased her mistress — applying the wrong shadow, working slowly, or having done nothing wrong at all — she risked physical punishment. Galen, a philosopher and physician, was “mortified that his mother bit her slave maids when she lost her temper.”⁸ And as shown in the stories of Statius, men’s lascivious looks at slave women further put them in a dangerous, vulnerable position.

Such was the jarringly uneven relationship between the enslaved beautician and the freeborn beautified. But no matter which concerns lay heavy on the minds of the *cosmetae*, they had to ensure that their work passed approval. The first step was to ensure that the woman being primped was clean. Hygiene was extremely important in Roman society. Elaborate baths were centerpieces of urban Roman life, with the largest, the Baths of Diocletian, supposedly holding up to three thousand bathers.⁹ Most were not nearly this expansive, but they did all share the commonality of being a public space for rest and cleansing, with both same-sex and unisex baths.¹⁰ As with makeup application, wealthy women would have had slaves to assist them. A sarcophagus from the late second century CE depicts a slave bathing a child while the mother does nothing, completely distancing herself from the labor of cleaning bodies.¹¹ Not only does this artifact nod towards the comfort and social status of having slaves, but its inclusion of the bath scene in a funerary object emphasizes how importance this ritual was. Luxuriating in the hot water was an experience that Romans truly looked forward to.¹² Of course, there were also

⁷ D’Ambra, 23.

⁸ D’Ambra, 23.

⁹ Frank Richard Cowell, *Life in Ancient Rome* (London: Pavilion Books, 1976), 145.

¹⁰ Garrett G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 28.

¹¹ D’Ambra, 110.

¹² Ibid.

practical reasons. In Ovid's *Arts amatoria*, the Roman poet bluntly told readers that "no fierce goat should go into your armpits."¹³ Now and then, it is difficult to gain a reputation for beauty if one's underarms smell like farm animals. To prevent this embarrassing fate, women would have their slaves rub olive oil into their skin, then scrape it off using a strigil, a curved, metal tool.¹⁴ This was an effective way to remove unwanted dirt and oil on the skin, as well as moisturize. It was also possible to hire an attendant at the baths to do the same job, but having a slave do it instead was a public display of power.

After ensuring that the woman's skin was clean and prepped for makeup, the next step would have been to apply foundation. Small tins and jars used as makeup containers are common archaeological finds, so the *cosmeta* would have removed the lid, dipped the cosmetic spoon into the pale, creamy foundation, and applied it liberally all over the face. The spoon's rounded scoop would have been perfect for measuring out the right quantity each time, and the back of the spoon might have been used to even out the cosmetic. Starch was a key ingredient for ensuring that while the cream went on greasy, it became smooth and powdery once dried and set. A recreation of a cream dating back to the second century CE revealed that it melted into the skin easily due to its reliance on animal fats and simple body heat. This suggests that fingers would have been good tools to follow up the cosmetic spoons with. One can imagine the *cosmeta* looking back at her handiwork, deciding which areas needed more coverage — perhaps those pesky dark circles or a stubborn patch of acne — and seamlessly blending in more cream with her ring finger.

¹³ Richlin, 172.

¹⁴ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life In the Roman City: Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press), 111.

However, the most important thing about the foundation was its shade. Choosing from forty bottles of foundation to find the perfect match was not the goal; rather, women wanted to look as pale as possible. The aforementioned animal fats, usually from cattle or sheep, were heated to be bleached. Dissolving lead shades into vinegar further lightened the cream, although one tin canister from the second century CE reveals that tin was a fine substitute.¹⁵ The deliberate decision to paint women's faces white came from the ideal in which women's skin was pale and men's was dark. This color differentiation was broadly used throughout the ancient Mediterranean for millennia, and has both biological and cultural roots.¹⁶ Firstly, multiple contemporary studies have showed that on average, females tend to have lighter skin than males, regardless of society.¹⁷ Classicist Martin Robertson adds that while a man was a "sun-burned frequenter of market-place and sports ground," a woman's "place is in the house."¹⁸ Thus, men's outdoor life would have made them tanner. This is another reminder that even for wealthy women, their options for movement were limited; their indoor abodes were not typically places that encouraged female academic study or the earning of income. Scholar Mary Ann Eaverly warns against learning too heavily on these explanations, though. Artists often expressed cultural preferences over realism in their works; for example, Archaic Greek *kouroi*, or statues, favored showing an ideal of male beauty over an anatomically correct model.¹⁹ Thus, through consistent

¹⁵ R.P. Evershed, *Formulation of a Roman Cosmetic*, (Nature, Volume 423, November 2004), 35-56.

¹⁶ Mary Ann Eaverly, *Tan Men/Pale Women: Color and Gender in Archaic Greece and Egypt, a Comparative Approach* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press), 4.

¹⁷ Eaverly, 2.

¹⁸ Martin Robertson, *A History of Greek Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 125.

¹⁹ Eaverly, 5.

depictions of light skin, the artists were choosing to display what the female beauty ideal was. White foundation was an easy way for Roman women to meet this expectation.

The cosmetic spoons were not the only tools that were found in a Roman woman's makeup kit. In Roman Britain, the *cosmeta* would have also reached for a cosmetic grinder. This unique device was made up of two crescent- or elliptical-shaped pieces which fit into each other. It functioned as a mortar and pestle, used to grind the cosmetics and then apply them. The *cosmeta* would select a substance, such as charcoal or ash, and gently pour it into the mortar's shallow indent.²⁰ Then, she would pick up the smaller pestle and connect the two pieces, rocking the pestle back and forth to produce a fine powder. Similar to foundation, animal fat might have been added to form a cohesive paste. Once the cosmetic was ready, the *cosmeta* would take the side of the pestle that had been grinding down the powder and gently press it onto the edge of the woman's eyelid, like a stamped eyeliner. This tool serves as a potent reminder of the vastness of the Roman Empire. While the Kelsey's cosmetic spoons were found throughout Italy, and other cosmetic spoons have been found across the empire, grinders are not a common find. Over four hundred mortars and two hundred pestles have been found throughout Britain, but other locations have not turned up the eyeliner tool.²¹ In fact, there was initially a great deal of confusion surrounding the finding's purpose. The mortar and pestle were not always found together, so they were studied as two separate objects. Since the pieces have loops either at the end or the center, they were initially assumed to be some kind of pendants, although now researchers believe that the loops were used to hang up the grinders when not being used.

²⁰ Richlin, 172

²¹ Jackson, 3.

Despite the grinder's unique status, it did not exist in isolation from the rest of the empire. Trade was hugely important, especially given the convenience of shortcuts provided by the Mediterranean Sea. While Roman Britain, located far in the north, would have taken more time to reach than a location on the coast, like Carthage, it was still culturally connected to the empire as a whole. Evidence for this comes in the phallic designs symbolizing fertility, only found on grinders made in the Roman Empire, not the pre-Roman Iron Age.²² By having those designs, women would have shown that they were up-to-date with the latest cultural shifts. Additionally, personal style, from hair to makeup, would have been influenced by the looks of Roman emperors' wives, such as Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus. This was a clear way for wealthy women to project their power and privilege, since the complex beauty routine required time and multiple *cosmetae*.

A few steps remained to complete the Roman look. After the elite woman had looked in the mirror, perhaps demanding that her *cosmeta* apply an extra layer of white foundation, the *cosmeta* would have applied the finishing touches. In the same passage in which Ovid warned women against smelling of goats, he recommended that women fill in their brows and apply a dusting of blush.²³ A completed makeup look — light skin, darkened lids, neat brows, slight rouging of the lips and cheeks — can be seen in a mid-second century portrait which depicts a well-dressed woman.²⁴ While a woman sat back might have and admired her slaves' handiwork in the mirror, many sources that discuss attitudes towards makeup are overwhelmingly negative. One man groused, "Even if a woman appears to be beautiful, it is the laborious contrivance of

²² Jackson, 21.

²³ Richlin, 172.

²⁴ D' Ambra, 116.

make-up.”²⁵ Even a son’s compliment to his mother became an insult to women who enjoyed wearing cosmetics — “You never polluted yourself with make-up.”²⁶ These two complaints suggest that makeup is a deceitful, shameful strategy that women use to lie about their appearance and perhaps even who they are. This was hardly a new claim about women. When telling the story of Pandora, Hesiod claims that her foolhardy actions brought “the deadly female race [...] who live with mortal men and bring them harm.”²⁷ He offers nothing to celebrate about womanhood or beauty.

Yet despite these waves of negativity, there were still compelling reasons for women to brave judgement and wear makeup anyway. Ovid made the case for makeup being a form of *cultus*, or the formation of culture. He wrote, “*Culta* things are pleasing: lofty roofs are smeared with gold, the black earth hides under its superimposed marble.”²⁸ This is a perspective that sees makeup as a way to improve a raw, natural, and potentially displeasing canvas. More broadly, it could refer to the growing urbanization of Rome, which Ovid supported. Although the message of women being imperfect without makeup is yet another form of criticism, Ovid’s view does provide a positive way for women to view their beautification as a way to improve society as a whole, which would have been especially true for elite women who may have already held semi-influential positions, such as being the wife of a senator. Unfortunately, in many cases, a man’s voice is all that scholars have to go off of. With the exceptions of so-called barbarians and males who are penetrated by other males, makeup was being predominantly used by women, yet their

²⁵ Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press), 231.

²⁶ Lefkowitz and Fant, 243.

²⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony* (Oxford, England: Oxford World’s Classics), lines 591-592.

²⁸ Richlin, 171.

voices are painfully underrepresented in the literary record.²⁹ Still, there are ways to uncover what women thought and desired. For example, cosmetic kits — ivory combs, mirrors, and compacts — have been found at young girls' burial sites.³⁰ This indicates that wearing makeup was so ingrained in the culture that children were encouraged to play with the cosmetic tools and aspire to someday wear them. Clearly, the naysayers' objections did not translate to women actually stopping their makeup practices.

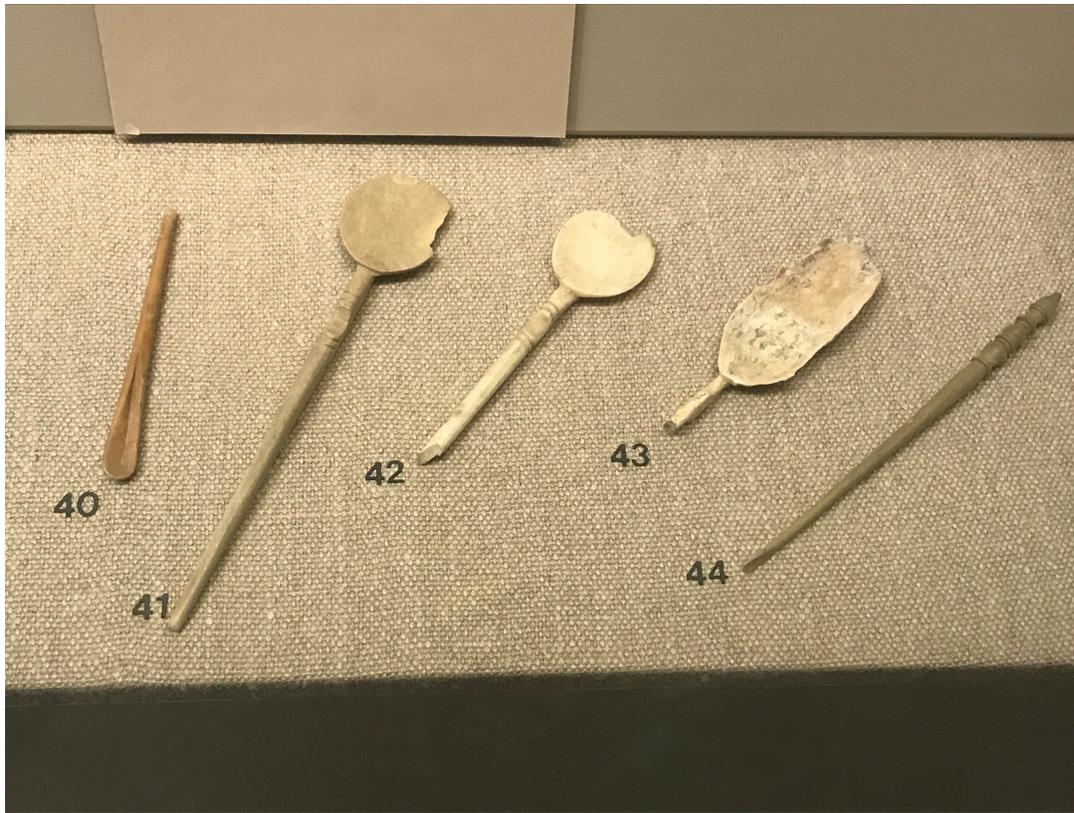
Before the days of pink, egg-shaped sponges and retractable kabuki brushes, Roman women turned to slim cosmetic spoons made of bone to apply makeup. In the hands of a *cosmeta*, the spoon would have glided over bathed, oiled skin to apply layers of pale foundation, a creamy white marker of womanhood, wealth, and privilege. Having access to fine baths, richly produced products, and effective tools added to an elite woman's projection of power, limited as it was. Yet while women may have certainly enjoyed the pampering, overcoming the waves of negativity from male critics would have required a further purpose for applying makeup. Seeing makeup as a way for oneself and future generations to contribute to the empire's civilizing efforts was a great deal of female power for a single slender spoon.

²⁹ Richlin, 2.

³⁰ Fanny Dolansky, *Playing with Gender: Girls, Dolls, and Adult Ideals in the Roman World* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press), 275.

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40–42. Cosmetic Spoons

Bone

Roman Period

No. 40: Rome, Italy. E. B. Van Deman bequest 1938. KM 6723

No. 41: Rome, Italy. E. B. Van Deman bequest 1938. KM 6722

No. 42: Italy. W. Dennison gift 1909. KM 1455

43. Large Cosmetic Spoon

Bone

Roman Period

Pozzuoli, Italy. W. Dennison gift (G. De Criscio collection) 1909.

KM 1499

44. Ear Spoon

Bone

Roman Period

Rome, Italy. E. B. Van Deman bequest 1938. KM 6721