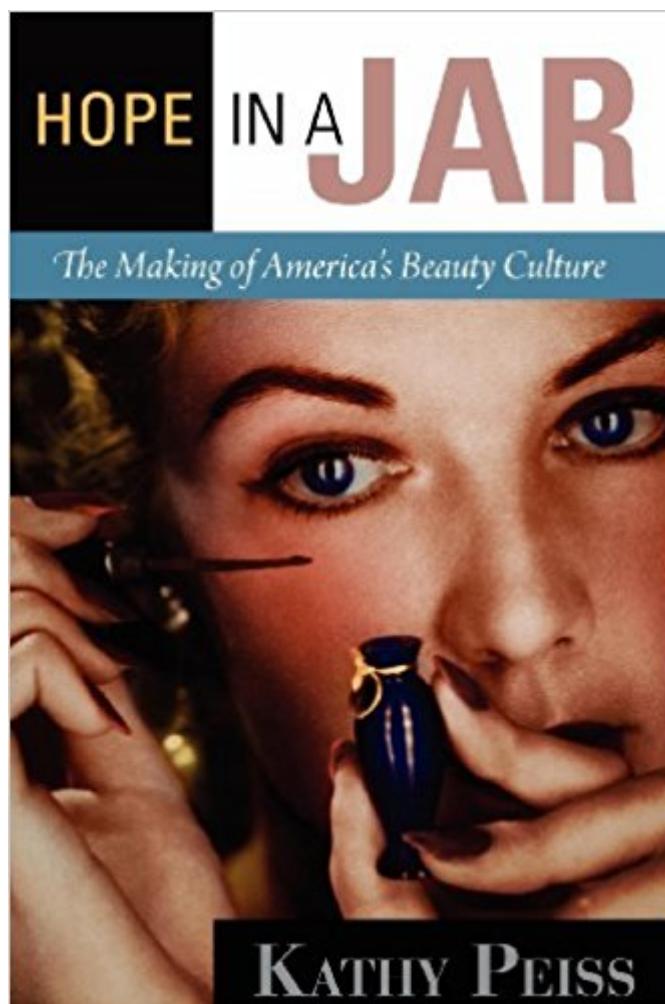


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Hope In A Jar: The Making Of America's Beauty Culture



Synopsis

How did powder and paint, once scorned as immoral, become indispensable to millions of respectable women? How did a "kitchen physic," as homemade cosmetics were once called, become a multibillion-dollar industry? And how did men finally take over that rarest of institutions, a woman's business? In *Hope in a Jar*, historian Kathy Peiss gives us the first full-scale social history of America's beauty culture, from the buttermilk and rice powder recommended by Victorian recipe books to the mass-produced products of our contemporary consumer age. She shows how women, far from being pawns and victims, used makeup to declare their freedom, identity, and sexual allure as they flocked to enter public life. And she highlights the leading role of white and black women—Helena Rubenstein and Annie Turnbo Malone, Elizabeth Arden and Madame C. J. Walker—in shaping a unique industry that relied less on advertising than on women's customs of visiting and conversation. Replete with the voices and experiences of ordinary women, *Hope in a Jar* is a richly textured account of the ways women created the cosmetics industry and cosmetics created the modern woman.

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Customer Reviews

Beauty products have withstood the slings and arrows of more than 100 years of public debate, charged with being guilty of everything from immorality to self-indulgence to anti-feminism. A welcome new angle on the subject of our culture's obsession with personal appearance, *Hope in a Jar* reveals that the American beauty industry was founded on more than just clever advertising or

patriarchal oppression. "Not only tools of deception and illusion," says historian Kathy Peiss of our culture's powders and pastes, "these little jars tell a rich history of women's ambition, pleasure, and community." The early entrepreneurs in the beauty business were often women, most of them as skilled at reinventing themselves as at making over their customers. Elizabeth Arden came from a poor Canadian family but remade her image into one of "upper-crust Protestant femininity" in order to sell her products. Madame Walker, one of the many African American women who were able to find careers in the beauty industry, rose from laundry lady to head of a small cosmetic empire. Indeed, Peiss finds, the beauty industry was one of the first to bring a substantial number of women a decent income. For American consumers, the marketing of makeup has long stirred issues of race, class, and morality. Peiss addresses in particular how makeup has long been marketed in ways that assert the superiority of "white" features and skin over that of other races, and how African-Americans and other minorities in the cosmetic industry have dealt with this issue. This is a well-researched, fascinating book that is more than a picture of the business of American beauty; it is a window into over a hundred years of American women's history. --Maria Dolan --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this lively social history of America's beauty culture, freelance writer Peiss traces the background and growth of the billion-dollar U.S. cosmetics industry over the past century. Relating cultural changes at the end of the 19th century, she observes that using makeup, heretofore forbidden for "nice" women, became a lightning rod for larger conflicts over female autonomy and social roles. The burgeoning industry provided opportunity for entrepreneurial women who eventually played a key role in its development. Among the early titans were Elizabeth Arden, a Canadian immigrant who learned to speak with proper diction to project an upper-class image, and Polish-born Helena Rubenstein, another powerful, self-created woman. They also had their counterparts in the black community: Annie Turnbo Malone and Madame C.J. Walker, who developed hair-care products, recruited women as agents as they traveled the country; Malone rewarded them with cash, diamond rings and even low-interest mortgages, a forerunner of today's direct-sales incentive programs. According to a study in the late 1980s, quoted here, feminist politics of recent years have done little to diminish women's use of makeup. This is a delicious and serious look at a glamorous industry. Illustrations of cosmetics advertising offer a history of their own. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A delightful history of cosmetics, I very much enjoy the connections the author draws between

feminine agency and the usage of cosmetics. As a feminist who wears makeup, adores makeup and researching the history of makeup, I am charmed and delighted, I was expecting something far less agreeable in tone. I do believe that we claim cosmetics, artifice as an outlet for expression, a demonstration of strength. I do think that self expression through cosmetics and attire is a wonderful thing (one I believe men are beginning more and more to participate in, following very much the pattern laid out in this book, beginning with creams, and eventually leading to being able to sell them blue eyeshadow, lord knows my husband is a loyal Max Factor customer... which is frankly one of the reasons I married him). It's engagingly written and generally quite a delight to read, not mention impeccably researched, and written without the writer doing very much in the way of stating her own opinions as facts. I can say the research is excellent with some authority as I very much enjoy reading primary sources on vintage and historical beauty recipes and rituals, from translated Latin cosmetics recipes to 1970s hairdressing manuals, and this book nails it all, a fun, and informative read.

Kathy Peiss' work is always exhaustively researched and engagingly written, with clear arguments and structures. In this, it already stands head and shoulders above the bulk of cultural history written. In addition, this book, *as a straight history text* is also interesting and accessible to the lay reader. Some might argue that Peiss gives too much credence to the community-building possibilities of makeup culture, but I believe this is not the case. Rather, Peiss is taking on a time-honored and by now orthodox view of the history of women. You know the drill: women are victims; women inhabit a world made by men; women have had no pure means by which to just be women. To put it crudely. Peiss' history on the other hand focuses on this industry, makeup, which has been decried by many as a tool of patriarchy, and shows that in fact women made the world of makeup, even if they may have done so for the sake of looking better for men (and that's not the whole story either.) EVEN IF the community of fashion doesn't have the historical pedigree of the WWW or UAW, ILGWU, etcetera, it may well be because Labor was a self-consciously political movement, with a bent for public promotion. Makeup, by these standards, is just makeup. Give the historians a break. They (we) can't exist in some ideological vacuum. Peiss' work does a service for the discipline of history in that her ideological stance is healthily skeptical of many (though by no means all) orthodoxies, and her careful writing and exhaustive research are great examples of how to write good history about heretofore ignored subjects. Bottom line, folks. Peiss is never a surprising read, because her research and writing make each point seem glaringly obvious. But the strength of her observations and the clarity of her argument make this a solid piece of work indeed.

The author asks the question "Why are many women so interested in makeup?" and tries to answer it, while also telling you a history of the cosmetics industry. (It goes back further than I thought.) I don't think she fully answers the question, but the information and ideas she gives are thought-provoking. Maybe the point is that we're each supposed to come up with our own answers. I've been thinking about mine since reading this book two months ago. What's really cool to me is that the author doesn't think there's necessarily anything evil or anti-feminist about enjoying cosmetics. She doesn't try to say that women who buy makeup have given into their oppression. I've always loved makeup, yet considered myself an independent, modern person, and I don't think these ideas conflict. This is not a political book. It's more sociological. The author shows her fascination with this subject without passing judgement on anyone involved (although some of the industry people were ruthless and shady, and she lets you see that without hitting you over the head with it).

Like Piess's previous work (*Cheap Amusements*) this is a meticulously, even exhaustively, researched book. In simple technical terms, it is an unimpeachable history. Her reconstruction of a now obscure tradition of small, women-run local beauty businesses and of African American responses to dominant "white" aesthetic standards is revealing and valuable. However, as in her previous work, the problem with Piess's work lies in the interpretive spin on the evidence. She writes that "these little jars tell a rich history of women's ambition, pleasure, and community." Yes, but surely without denying any of this, it might have been possible to present an unsentimental analysis of the real limitations of "community" and "pleasure." Personal agency and power (political, economic or social) are not identical attributes; the mere fact of one (agency) does not signify the acquisition of the other. That the "community" working women found in the practice of beauty in the workplace -- whatever emotional benefits may have accrued -- is "community" of the same substance, or consequence, of say, a union, is a difficult case to make. I'm not sure if Piess intends to lead readers to this conclusion, but the text leaves impression she does. If so, I'm hardly persuaded. More individualistic dress codes in the business districts of America is no substitute for paid maternity leave, and endemic anorexia is hardly liberating or pleasurable. Excellent research is limited by an overly optimistic analysis of the costs (in addition to the benefits) American women's participation in the contemporary culture of "beauty."

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