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LIFE-CYCLE STUDIES

Lipstick

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Lipstick

Overview

Lipstick's long and colorful history begins as early as 3500 BCE, when Queen Shub-ad of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur used a mixture of white lead and crushed red rocks to color her lips. Over the years lipstick has slipped in and out of favor among queens and commoners alike; in the 1600s Queen Elizabeth I wore crimson lipstick, but Queen Victoria in the 19th century publicly declared makeup to be "impolite." In the 20th century lipstick served as a symbol both of female emancipation (suffragettes wore it) and of degradation (in the 1970s feminists protested by not wearing it).

The first lip rouge in stick form was produced by the French company Guerlain around 1910, and it wasn't long before James Bruce Mason, Jr. patented the first swivel tubes for lipstick—those instantly and universally recognizable today—in 1923. It's estimated that by the 1950s nearly 100 percent of American college girls, and 98 percent of all American women, wore lipstick. Only 96 percent brushed their teeth.

In 1941, Americans spent \$20 million on lipstick. By 1959 that figure had risen to \$93 million. Today, roughly 90 million U.S. women never leave home without wearing lipstick, and the average woman goes through four tubes a year. Although its use was most prevalent in the western world in the last century, lipstick use is now a global phenomenon.



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Shades of meaning?



Andrew Wong/Reuters © 2000

Not just the West: Mongolian pop group "Lipstick" poses in front of Lenin in Ulan Bator.



Kevin Lamarque/Reuters © 2007

Presidential lips?

Disposal and Regulation

Lipstick's recent history is best documented in the United States and Europe, where makeup use has been most prevalent, and it is in those countries where regulation is most completely developed. By and large that regulation, usually arising out of state or national toxicity laws, has meant to cover the manufacture of cosmetics and lipstick's component ingredients in order to protect drinking water supplies. The production of high volumes of lipstick—and the U.S. lipstick industry alone had estimated sales of \$9.4 billion globally in 2005—also entails lots of plastic. Add the plastic holders

to all the additional, needless packaging and the result is a lot of waste. Some major producers

have started to offer recycling programs for their tubes: MAC Cosmetics, for example, has its "Back to MAC" recycling program, where customers can select a lipstick of their choice for every six MAC cosmetic containers they return. The rest no doubt end up, unglamorously, in landfills.



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Manufacture

Lipstick makers have always strived for perfection: for a substance that doesn't melt yet is easy to apply, that doesn't dry the skin or go rancid if left on too long. Queen Shub-ad's white lead and red rocks surely met those criteria but were clearly less than ideal in other respects, and subsequent lipsticks have taken other forms. Elizabeth I had hers made with a combination of cochineal insects (which are red), the Acacia tree extract gum Arabic, egg whites, and fig milk. In the 1920s some lipsticks were made with poisonous coal tar dyes. Others were mainly based on soap.

Today, the ingredients in most lipsticks are pretty standard. A mixture of waxes, such as beeswax or carnauba wax, gives lipstick its firmness. Silicone, mineral or vegetable oils, or petroleum jelly ensure even spreading. Preservatives and antioxidants stop it going rancid. Moisturizers such as lanolin or silicone derivatives are added to keep the lips soft and supple, and pigment gives the color. The whole process is generally mechanized, with all the materials being added together before being heated and then cooled in molds and finally flash-fired to give a rounded, smooth appearance.