

It's by my face – there it is in my passport and on my driving license – that I am recognised and identified in public. I glance in the mirror: observer and observed, two in one, the register a bit askew.

In embarrassment, head down and hands to cheeks, shielding, protective – a movement as involuntary as the blush itself.

Young children, covering or closing their eyes, can believe they are not being seen.

Or a mask – as in carnival, when the world is turned upside down and the everyday rules don't apply. Or a veil – because the face is the centre (in Havelock Ellis's phrase) 'of anatomical modesty'.

We didn't have an altarpiece in the house where I grew up but in my mother's bedroom there was a dressing table with triptych mirrors and little drawers for unguents.

Cosmetics conceal as well as display. Here is Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* (1848) on Becky Sharp, after one of her little lies has been found out: 'She rubbed her cheek with her handkerchief as if to show there was no rouge at all, only genuine blushes and modesty in her case. About this who can tell? I know there is some rouge that won't come off on a pocket-handkerchief; and some so good that even tears will not disturb it.'





The Golden Age of blushing may be said to have ended in 1894, the date of first publication (in *The Yellow Book*) of Max Beerbohm's essay 'The Pervasion of Rouge': 'The era of rouge is upon us, and as only in an elaborate era can man, by the tangled accrescency of his own pleasures and emotions, reach that refinement which is his highest excellence, and by making himself, so to say, independent of Nature, come nearest to God, so only in an elaborate era is woman perfect. Artifice is the strength of the world, and in that same mask of paint and powder, shadowed with vermeil tinct and most trimly pencilled, is woman's strength.'

Saturated with irony and making parodic use of traditional rhetorical strategies, Beerbohm's essay parades its own artifice.

In 'The Pervasion of Rouge', Beerbohm rejoices that the old days are over, the days when women were 'utterly natural in their conduct - flighty, fainting, blushing, gushing, giggling and shaking their curls. They knew no reserve in the first days of the Victorian era.' Not content with 'rink[ing] [skating] and archery and galloping along the Brighton Parade', they 'sped on . . . from horror to horror': 'The invasion of the tennis courts and the golf links, the seizure of the bicycle and of the typewriter, were but steps preliminary in that campaign which is to end with the final victorious occupation of St Stephen's [the House of Commons].' By great good fortune, 'Artifice, that fair exile, has returned', and 'the horrific pioneers of womanhood who gad hither and thither . . . are doomed.'

Artifice's first requirement of women is that they should 'repose': 'With bodily activity their powder will fly, their enamel crack. They are butterflies who must not flit, if they love their bloom.' There is more: since 'expression is but too often the ruin of a face', 'the safest way by far is too create, by brush and pigments, artificial expression for every face'. For the Reformed Toilet Table, Beerbohm proposes 'a list of the emotions that become its owner, with recipes for simulating them'. According to her skill with cosmetics, a woman 'will blush for you, sneer for you, laugh or languish for you' - monotony will be banished, 'And for us men matrimony will have lost its sting.' This is just the beginning; science, harnessed to pleasure, will soon so work its magic that even 'Arsenic, that "greentress'd goddess", ashamed at length of skulking between the soup of the unpopular and the test-tubes of the Queen's analyst, shall be exalted to a place of consummate honour upon the toilet-table of Loveliness.'

By 1904 the tattooist George Burchett was inflicting 'permanent delicate, pink blushes on ladies' cheeks'. The word tattooing was not mentioned; the ladies underwent 'a minor surgical operation' in a Mayfair salon staffed by 'lady assistants dressed in the sombre uniforms of hospital nurses' and furnished with aspidistras, dwarf palms, a large divan 'draped with a gorgeous Chinese silk rug' and a lacquered table with the required instruments: 'the tattooing tool, a cut-throat razor, a box with cotton wool and a few small jars containing dyes'. The ladies 'were brave and grateful'. Journalists were invited to attend demonstrations (which employed 'a girl from Soho, or a chorus-girl from a music hall who was treated free of charge'). *The Tatler*: 'A chaste and charming blush'. The *Daily Mail*: 'The rosy cheeks that rival Nature at her best . . .'



Since the late 19th century the blush has been coarsened: marginalised, cosmeticised, monetised, medicalised . . . While many novelists have employed the blush as a device to explore ambiguous psychological states, the currency has more usually been debased. Pasted like emojis into the plots of traditional romance fiction, blushes add a light sexual frisson. Blushes are Mills & Boon and Barbara Cartland (whose heroines were described by a *Times* reviewer as 'helpless, coy, game-playing blushing violets who say no and run away, no matter what they feel'). Blushes are 'bashful', 'virginal', 'maidenly'; they have been co-opted into a reactionary system of binary gender stereotypes: pink for girls, blue for boys.

Blushing is not cool. It is associated with social anxiety, which undermines self-esteem, and the consequent feelings of inadequacy can be horrible, but the implication in the titles of self-help books that social anxiety is somehow abnormal and needs to be corrected is stupid. Social anxiety is as normal as it gets. For those who suffer at the extreme, surgery is available: endoscopic thoracic sympathectomy, which involves cutting the nerves that cause facial blood vessels to dilate and can result in increased sweating in other parts of the body.