

An Abbreviated History of Hair Removal

Legend has it that the 19th century art critic John Ruskin never consummated his marriage with the Victorian beauty Effie Gray, so shocked was he to discover her pubic hair. Having only been exposed to naked women's bodies in the form of Greek and Roman statuary, Ruskin cited these reasons in his divorce and annulment pleadings:

"It may be thought strange that I could abstain from a woman who to most people was so attractive. But though her face was beautiful, her person was not formed to excite passion. On the contrary, there were certain circumstances in her person which completely checked it."⁸

Is Ruskin so different from the fictional Christian Grey, or from the Swede, who suggested it was time for me to get waxed? Weren't Effie Gray and I sent packing in similar fashion? Although the Swede was the first in my life to consider my au naturel vagina repulsive, he certainly wasn't the first in history to react this way.

Everyone has an opinion on genital hair removal. The FDA's web site advises that "waxes should not be used on eyelashes, the nose, ears, nipples, or genital areas."⁹ Eve Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues* culturally vilified the process. New Jersey briefly considered making Brazilians illegal.¹⁰ But sex researcher Debbie Herbenick found that women who remove their pubic hair had higher Female Genital Self Image Scores.¹¹

There's a common misconception that contemporary pubic hair removal practices are new, a sign of highly sexualized times and the degenerative influence of porn on our culture. I'm here as a waxing expert and a scholar to tell you that the widespread access to pornography is what helped usher a hairless vulva back into fashion in this specific cultural moment, but I want to be clear: both the process and the preference are ancient.

The Neanderthals invented shaving in the form of scraping their matted beards off of their face with a rock or a shell. Some scholars suspect that removing facial hair gave them the advantage in combat, leaving their opponent with less to grab. The Egyptians invented the

razor, which they made from bronze. Some elaborately carved and decorated razors were found buried with their owners in tombs. Men and women alike removed all body hair. Women in ancient Greece and Rome, Turks of the 1900s, as well as several African tribes and Trobriand islanders both historically and today, removed all of their body hair. While conquering and pillaging, Alexander the Great made it compulsory for his armies to be clean-shaven. Native American groups removed most or all of their body hair by plucking. Asians also have typically always regarded body hair as undesirable. Northern Renaissance and Gothic peoples, according to artistic depictions, had some pubic hair, but it's unclear how idealized these renderings are. In early Christian Europe, body hair was more acceptable than in most other societies, until the crusaders returned and brought with them a fondness for Middle Eastern bathing rituals and the hair-removal practices that came along with them.

The feminist movement in America in the 1960s and 70s brought body hair back. Along with protesting and bra burning, growing out one's body hair was an effortless way of sticking it to the man. Rejecting the male-centric cultural expectation that women be hairless became a central part of the feminist culture – which might explain why my mother cannot fathom how I make a living removing hair from women's bodies.

Today, we document and share everything. We gaze at a lot more than our navels. A generation ago, nobody talked about vaginas and whether or not there was hair there. In the age of social media, we know everything about everybody. That can be bad: I don't need to see graphic birth photos from someone I barely know on Facebook. But it can be good: I can have open conversations about topics that have historically caused shame, like nipple hair or post 30s acne. When things are out in the open, shame can lose its power.

8 Katrina Onstad, "Wax on, Wax off: The Truth Hurts." Toronto Globe and Mail. 2 July 2011. Page L7.

9 "Removing Hair Safely." Accessed March 20, 2012. Last updated June 30, 2010. http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm048995.htm?utm_campaign=Google2&utm_source=fdaSearch&utm_medium=website&utm_term=body%20waxing&utm_content=1

10 DeFalco, Beth. Brazilian Wax Ban? NJ Considers it After Two Women Are Injured. Huffington Post. March 19, 2009. Accessed July 18, 2012. Available from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/03/19/brazilian-waxes-may-be-ban_176824.html.

11 Herbenick, Debra. "Pubic Hair Removal Among Women in the U.S.: Prevalence, Methods, and Characteristics." Journal of Sexual Medicine. October 2010, Volume 7 (Issue 10), 3322.