

# Sculptures to Sex Dolls: Body Positivity and Experimental Forms of Expression

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In sculptures of Western Group of Temples, Khajuraho and Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai, one finds a rare reflection of their “self”. On examining the stone deities and their subjects closely, a sound of the contemporary hullabaloo of sculpted bodies and magnificent physical form is reiterated into one’s own mind. That is, every statue of a woman reveals the present day infatuation of achieving the ideal bodily form. Ranging from shape large hips and chests, small waists, rounded bellies, plump faces, dimpled chins, bee-stung lips. The sculptures display the nakedness of the compulsive obsession of society for unrealistic and more importantly metaphysical ideas of the body. Carved into stone for eternity and displayed as art on screen, the idea of the body being visually represented and reflected has been in a way historical and simultaneously current. Many of the figurines in both the temples resonate with the modern-day conception of a woman with superficial beauty standards.

According to Khanna, there were certain aesthetic guidelines for Indian religious iconography and art in the classical to late medieval eras of Indian history. A text called the *Shilpishastra* discussed the practicalities of sculpture, such as the balance between negative and positive shapes, body language such as *mudras* (gestures made by fingers and hands), and facial expressions meant to emulate total calm. The figurines reflect the curve of an “S” which is considered to be a must know pose in the glamour industry to be struck before paparazzi or a red carpet event. The “celestial nymphs” are shown with the large eyes, round breasts, narrow waist, and broad hips that were elements of ideal beauty for a woman in ancient India (Khanna). Vidya Dehejia opines that in India, the aim of art was never to imitate nature or to recreate reality through illusionistic devices; rather, the goal was to produce an idealized form. This form wasn't even supposed to be based on nature. Following such models specified in ancient texts, sculptors invariably produced an idealized female form with a narrow waist, broad hips, and high, rounded breasts. Dehejia maintains that “The arms, shapely and elongated, were created to resemble the slender, pliant bamboo shoot. Eyes were modeled on the lotus petal or the fish.” (Dehejia)

An idealized version of modern-day body type is so easy to find in contemporary art, on television, or in movies and magazines. There is a flood of obtaining a certain body type that it has become a commercially viable prospect to launch body shaming tools so indiscriminately that it is as though the future generation would not even know the existence of bodies that did not find acceptance on the media platforms. myself existed, much less existed in multiple media for my body type, my mind doing tiny calculations and comparisons as the Terminator might, but instead of looking for John Connor, I'm looking for signs of softness in form or thickness of thigh. The fashion police act as detectives on TV and the women featured in magazines all look similarly sharp, toned, and slim, with few instances of variation.

The body-positive vibe that oozes out of Indian temple sculptures teaches us that the thing about having a beauty ideal is that there will always be someone who doesn't fit it.

As appealing as it might be to identify oneself with a classic beauty ideal, it must be understood that the women carved in stone resemble our ancestor and the television commercials featuring brown actors are simply playing the stereotypical longing for beauty which is idealized in modern India. While looking closely at the “celestial nymph” or “apsara” one finds her walking barefoot along a path accompanied by her attendants. She steps on a thorn and turns, adeptly bending her left leg, twisting her body, and arching her back to point out the thorn and ask her attendant’s help in removing it. This arching of the back is what can be described as the ancient “S” pose. The Lakshmana Temple at Khajuraho in India depicts idealized female beauty as important for temple architecture and even auspicious. Not only that, the different types of women within and on the temple walls emphasize their roles as symbols of fertility, growth, and prosperity. Additionally, images of loving couples known as “mithuna” (literally “the state of being a couple”) appear on the Lakshmana temple as symbols of divine union and *moksha*, the final release from *samsara* (the cycle of death and rebirth). The temples at Khajuraho, including the Lakshmana temple, portray amorous images some of the figures engaged in sexual intercourse. These erotic images were not intended to be titillating or provocative, but instead served ritual and symbolic function significant to the builders, patrons, and devotees of these captivating structures. The Buzzfeed video "Women's Ideal Body Types Throughout History," conveys a strong message citing historical references that tell us when our bodies were considered more beautiful than those of other women. As of now, by virtue of having reigning body ideals, the majority of the lot is not acknowledged half as deserving as the sculpted bodies. Hence such a fashion policing and delusionary body ideals lead to the pressing issue of Body-Shaming.

The contemporary representation of bodies on screen and in other forms do not suggest that beauty is not static but a fluidic concept. We can glean the ideal standards of beauty at a time in history by observing the paintings and figurines from that period. While tracking everything from body types to hair and makeup, one may be surprised to observe how the definition of beauty has changed so drastically over the years. The ideal Chandella woman was more voluptuous than any other time in history. Sculptures from this era depict women who likely would be considered overweight by today’s standard, but at that time these full-figured ladies were the epitome of beauty. Our culture and society have molded into us our ideals for beauty from a young age, it is indeed very hard to see past those standards. Therefore, it becomes a deafening task to appreciate the beauty of the woman in the sculptures and look in horror at the size 0 models of today. Let’s try and construct an idea of what was "traditional Indian beauty" through the lens of our ancient sculptures and terracotta figurines. These women conform closely to the ideas of feminine beauty propagated by the great 5th Century playwright Kalidasa, who writes of men pining over portraits of their lovers, while straining to find the correct metaphors to describe them: "I recognize your body in liana; your expression in the eyes of a frightened gazelle; the beauty of your face in that of the moon, your tresses in the plumage of peacocks... alas! Timid friend- no one object compares to you." (Dehejia)

As the great Indian art historian Vidya Dehejia puts it, “The idea that such sensual images might generate sexual thoughts did not seem to arise; rather the established associations appear to have been with accentuated growth, prosperity and auspiciousness.” (Dehejia) We can immediately notice that the perception of beauty has not changed much. The figure and proportions are nearly identical to the untrained eye. This is significant considering that the ideals of beauty seem to have remained nearly the same for such a vast period. The common characteristics of "traditional Indian beauty" objectified on the walls of the temples suggest:

- Large dreamy, almond-shaped eyes placed two-thirds of the way up the face (an interesting position because it is unnatural and shows that the artists were not working from life models, but from a metaphysical perspective).
- Sharp, almost aquiline noses.
- Full/thick lips.

- Neatly shaped eyebrows and long, elongated earlobes.
- Shapely tapered arms with slender hands and exquisitely flower-like hands.
- Narrow waists and rotund hips.
- Using the head as a measure, the bottom of the exaggerated breasts are placed one head's height below the chin.
- Rounder faces in Khajuraho sculptures, comparatively narrow faces in the Madurai figurines.

The common recurring posture we see is called the "tribangha" or 'pose of the three bends' bent at the hips, waist, and breasts (sometimes with the head cocked), to provide an "S" like shape. These were simply "ideals" which were not meant to be attainable by any mortal human woman. They are something akin to our modern cosmopolitan tabloids. Going by the body size of fashion store mannequins promoting "too thin" and unrealistic body ideals can be dangerous for young adults. The study, published in the *Journal of Eating Disorders*, found that the average female mannequin's body size was representative of a severely underweight woman. These ultra-thin models may prompt body image problems and encourage eating disorders in young people, the researchers said:

"Because ultra-thin ideals encourage the development of body image problems in young people, we need to change the environment and reduce emphasis on the value of extreme thinness." (Times Now)

However, altering the size of high street fashion mannequins alone would not "solve" body image problems. The conundrum is that the presentation of ultra-thin female bodies is likely to reinforce inappropriate and unobtainable body ideals. So as a society we should be taking measures to stop this type of reinforcement. Given that the prevalence of body image problems and disordered eating in young people is worryingly high, positive action that challenges communication of ultra-thin ideal may be of particular benefit to children, adolescents, and young adult females.

While surveying fashion retailers located on the high streets of New Delhi, one finds that the average male mannequin's body size was significantly larger in contrast to the average female mannequin's body size and only a small proportion of male mannequins represented an underweight body size. People do not walk into malls looking at mannequins for an accurate portrayal of the female form. The slim, smooth Barbie doll figures are so commonplace that their unrealistic physique hardly raises an eyebrow. There are many instances of mannequins, Barbie dolls where the depiction of unrealistic and sham bodies have led to the creation of a new genre in the artificial assembly of an "ideal" body fueling important conversations about the beauty expectations of real, rather than plastic, women.

The Barbie-doll proportions caused the furor in retail stores to display mannequins with enlarged breasts, tiny waists, and unnaturally sculpted rears are catering for and fueling the national obsession with implants and plastic surgery. One of the most positive ways that retailers have manufactured mannequins to deviate from their ideal form. The visual or print media, in the same way, provides a stereotyped image, an imposition which has to be internalized by 'women' and exhibit their 'beauty' that suits to the popular and dominant perception of the larger community. Socio-cultural standards of feminine beauty are presented in almost all forms of popular media, projecting women images that portray what is considered to be the "ideal body." Such standards of beauty are almost completely unattainable for most women; a majority of the models displayed on television and in advertisements are well below what is considered healthy body. Mass media's use of such unrealistic models sends an implicit message that if a woman wants herself to be considered beautiful must resemble a model recognized by the popular culture. The women who match the socio-cultural ideal of beauty excessively prevalent in popular media and that repetitive exposure to images influence

viewers abilities to decipher that projected standards in the media are unrealistic. As females constantly view images of tall, thin women that appear in different forms of mass media the cumulative effect over a time frame is that many are lured to accept the unrealistic standard of beauty as "reality." To meet this media triggered gap between body image and real body billion dollars industry has sprung up globally. Magazines and advertisements are marketed to help women "look better" by providing information and products that are supposed to make them look and feel good. But even the models that are advertising the clothes and products are not considered beautiful enough for those who make the advertisements. The majority of models in ads are far more imperfect than their photos on billboards and magazines. This is because models are, more often than not, airbrushed, photo-shopped, and digitally corrected, before the ads are ever introduced to the public.

#### Work Cited

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