

# Body Arts Cosmetics

## Africa

In many African societies, soft, clear, and very shiny skin is considered beautiful. To achieve this look people rub oil or fat on to their bodies.

Amongst the Nuba of Sudan, oil is necessary to help the skin surface appear black and shiny. Without oil, the skin becomes dry and flaky, giving it a pale appearance considered particularly unattractive. Before a young Nuba man marries he is required to supply his intended wife



with oil and ochre. Failure to do so is grounds for the relationship to be ended and the girl to become betrothed to someone else. Oil is also one of the most common gifts requested by young brides-to-be. If a girl does not have oil for her body to make her skin beautiful she will not go out.



Cattle-horn fat container,  
Kenya, 1978.20.203

## Europe

In eighteenth-century Europe, pieces of silk, taffeta, or even leather were stuck to the face with an adhesive in order to hide blemishes caused by skin diseases.

People also applied a thick coat of white face powder to make their complexions look fashionably pale and smooth. They then added rouge to their cheeks – the contrast that this 'blush' created with their pale, powdered faces was considered very beautiful.



Round patch box to store  
patches for applying to face, UK,  
1965.9.102



The base ingredient for cosmetics like rouge was finely flaked lead, which is highly poisonous. It is easily absorbed by the body, can cause severe head pain, nausea, dizziness, bowel problems, blindness, and, if large enough amounts have been ingested, paralysis or even death.

## India

This tool from India was held upside down over oil lamps to collect lamp-black (soot), which was then used for decorating the eyes. Similar cosmetics were used in Ancient Egypt. Made from the mud of the Nile, these were known as *khol*.



Tool for collecting soot, India,  
1892.49.52



## Further Reading

FARIS, JAMES, *Nuba Personal Art*, London: Duckworth (1972).

Further information can be found in the Body Arts Gallery and on our Body Arts website: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts>

**Objects featured in this fact sheet can be found in the following cases:**

**First Floor (Lower Gallery) L49A for patch box and horn fat container**

**First Floor (Lower Gallery) L49B for soot collector**

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