

Nails



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The Story of the Modern Manicure

Suzanne E. Shapiro

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Introduction

They say there are eight million stories in New York, and it seems that a good number of them involve nails. In an early stage of this project a few chilly winters ago, I roamed the city with a hand recorder and approached women who revealed stunning, distinctive manicures from under the protection of their gloves. For a moment, many of them looked at me like I was a bit daffy. But then, these women in subway trains, stores, and of course, nail salons realized it was the one question they've always wanted to be asked. *Tell me about your nails. . . . How do you feel about them?*

Some, like Tracy, a solidly-built thirty-eight-year-old had an instant response: "It makes me feel sexy, sophisticated, attractive, noticeable," adding that when she's wearing all of her rings and bracelets, she's "attracted to my own self—like wow!" Diane, a hospital worker in her forties, initially mentioned the brittleness of her natural, unmanicured nails, but paused and reflected, "This is the only thing I do for myself. . . . It's worth it to save on other expenses just to keep this one thing for me." Other women mentioned specific times in their lives when the manicure mattered most: after immigrating to America, starting a new job, getting engaged, and instating a special, shared routine with a loved one. Harriet, who seemed fairly sour about where her eighty-plus years had taken her, had to smile when she recalled her daughter's search for nail polish that matched her new car, sometime back in the day.

All this individual enthusiasm for nails helped explain the clearly observable fervor all around: some city blocks host a half-dozen nail salons, while a chain pharmacy might carry about five hundred different shades of nail enamel on its shelves. There are more specialized, licensed nail techs in the United States (357,265 in 2012) than the population of the Bahamas. Americans spent a record \$7.47 billion on professional nail treatments in 2012, surpassing the nearly \$7 billion spent on engagement rings that year.¹ Diamonds may be forever, but the manicure's fleeting charm seduces all the same.



ABOVE: Monogrammed nails were unheard-of until this 1938 *Life* feature on the "initial craze." Today's long-running nail art trend offers unlimited opportunities for customization. Here, London's WAH Nails updates the monogrammed mani.

OPPOSITE: Photograph by Horst P. Horst for *Vogue*, June 1942.



The truth is that it's usually money well spent compared to other personal indulgences. Nail polish (variably known as enamel, lacquer, or varnish) adds jewellike color to the hands for hardly any cost and can't fall down the drain in a moment of butterfingered abandon. Versus other cosmetics that make miraculous promises to renew youth and garner attraction, the results of the professional or home manicure are almost always reliable: your hands will look noticeably better or flashier, as desired. And this is something you can appreciate yourself, without the validation of others or a glance in the mirror. Unlike so many of the day's fashions, with nail care there's little need to sigh and wish you were thinner or curvier or younger. Great nails are one-size-fits-all regardless of body type, ethnicity, or age and the easiest way to appropriate celebrity style to a T. It's a fix without the peril of plastic surgery and flair without the permanence of a tattoo. You simply choose your style until you change your mind.

Throughout the century, copywriters and journalists have occasionally used the phrase "modern manicure" when lauding an up-to-date treatment. In 1945, Nail-Dri addressed the perennial concern of drying nail polish pronto.

This easy appeal has turned the painted nail into a basic beauty convention. Men and women have attended to their growing, breaking fingernails throughout human history, and a few cultures have adorned them with natural dyes. Yet only recently have women imbued nails with the specific aesthetic consideration that they do now, enabled by improved coloring methods, reduced manual labor, and a modern permissiveness toward artificial beauty. It is widely recognized that lipstick—nail polish's cosmetic sibling—appeals to our instincts by simulating the look of blood-rushed passion, but the manicure's kaleidoscope of unnatural color cannot be explained by such primal universalities. One study concluded that women who gesture more frequently and more boldly are approached romantically at a greater

rate, independent of beauty.² In this context, perhaps there's something to be said for the look-at-me display of hands, but the fact remains that nails tend to be admired most by the person to whom they're attached.

There's timeless beauty in a cared-for fingertip and a quintessentially modern sense of chic in a carefully shaped, polished, and decorated nail. Of course, the appearance of the fashionable manicure has changed considerably over the years, pushing the notion of "modern" forever forward. While some may dwell on the perceived tyranny of fashion that compels susceptible souls to replace their wardrobes and looks each season, for many others the forward march of fashion presents an invigorating, even liberating opportunity for visual renewal. The keratin cells of the fingernail are no longer actually alive, but comprise an endlessly renewable surface that practically cries out for small-scale personal experimentation.

Prevailing nail fashions often share an uncanny visual affinity with other aesthetics of the day, from sleek Art Deco enamels to the vibrant Mid-Century Modern palette to the airbrushed urban vernacular of graffiti. Also at play is fashion theorist Anne Hollander's compelling argument that the art and fashion we make is conditioned by the literal way we see. The natural nail's lantern-like transparency, for example, would have been most noticeable when evenings were lit by candles and gaslight; deep red enamels thrived in the heyday of black-and-white film, where they imparted striking, noirish contrast. Today, the prevalence of digital retouching inures us to real-life imperfections like cellulite bumps and ragged cuticles. High-res mobile devices allow us to capture and broadcast ultra-detailed nail art, another and perhaps related modern obsession.

But what's as intriguing as the shifts in hues, finishes, and forms is the change in the manicure's social significance. As personal as our hands are, they're constantly on display and subject to others' appraisal. Historically, this has been most advantageous, allowing a woman to truly speak with her hands. As a grooming practice, the manicure has responded remarkably to each era's prevailing notions of femininity, especially in the United States, where my discussion is most grounded. "Certainly these hands are a reflection of the times," American *Vogue* said of the utilitarian, World War II-era manicure, an



Today's hi-res mobile devices have encouraged us to take a closer look at the possibilities of nail art, quite literally. Nail artists like Naomi Yasuda (top two) and Tacarra Sutton, AKA Spifster (bottom), showcase their intricate artistry through apps such as Instagram.



The vibrant punch of nail color often enhanced the visual enchantment of Nickolas Muray's color portraits and fashion photographs, including this 1936 advertising image for Lucky Strike.

ABOVE: Nickolas Muray (American, b. Hungary, 1892–1965), *Lucky Strike, Girl in Red*, 1936. Carbro print. George Eastman House Collection; Gift of Mrs. Nickolas Muray (71:0034:0015).

observation that can be broadly applied.³

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a woman showed a well-mannered sophistication by tending to her soft, natural-looking hands. The use of nail enamel declared a feminine defiance in the spirited 1920s and became a morale booster during the hardships of the Depression and war. The manicure symbolized the prosperity and conformity of the 1950s, weathered the radical attitudes of '60s youth culture, and adapted to the needs of the career woman in the following decades. Today, the hands can reflect basic hygienic upkeep, cultural identity, and a no-style-untuned eclectic. Shrewd marketing has certainly reinforced these shifts in meaning but the manicure has retained its purpose and pleasures. Throughout, the nails remain a site where a woman can define herself one day, rub it off, and start anew the next.

A wide range of media—from magazines

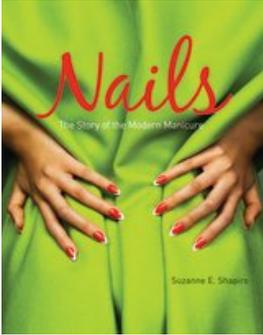
to movies to even music—has influenced women's fashion choices over the years, but their recommendations have been loosely approximated at best. Just as our homes today are usually not Martha Stewart-approved nor our wardrobes Carrie Bradshaw-worthy, the rigorous perfection of mid-century beauty was the ideal, not the absolute standard. However, the fashionable, flawless manicure has remained fairly achievable—that is, until the moment that it chips. Since at least the 1930s, literature aimed at women has often alighted on the maddening moment a woman breaks a nail, adding a touch of comic empathy to the tale. Summoning their feminine resourcefulness, women have patched up these mishaps over the years with glue and coffee filters, topcoat and tissues. Meanwhile, girls and teens have usually been a bit giddier about the procedure, reveling in the endless possibilities of color and sparkle.

The impulse to go above and beyond the norm has always spoken to creative personalities who see a tiny canvas in the nail's surface. According to a San Francisco correspondent in 1912, a "light hearted society girl" could risk the four-month commitment of having her sweetheart's photo applied to her nail, decoupage-style. Outré nail art had arrived by the early 20th century, and probably earlier too!⁴ Another personality type clings devotedly to the fashions of her golden days, staying true to that confident, glossy-nailed babe she intends to remain. Journalists and fiction writers frequently describe a subject's nails as a shorthand characterization, so strong are the associations of specific manicure styles. Unexpectedly, a take-no-prisoners newspaper editor from the late 1980s wore ladylike pink polish, while the undertaker with purple nails comes across as a character to the tips.⁵ (For my part, I will mostly resist the temptation to pepper my prose with all the convenient puns at hand.)

Men have also relied on the manicure for personal polish but have generally refrained from its decorative, customized capacity. Thus, their side doesn't play highly into this account. I am not so interested in the chemicals of nail products, the fetishism of *Guinness Book*-length nails, nor the fairly private, rather unholy world of toes (although many women execute and exhibit fabulous pedicures). Instead, I'm taken by innovators who brought a bit of joy to women's fingertips, manicurists who found independence and expression through the trade, and all of the amazing ladies who pulled up a chair. Here is a tale of bold women—vamps, sirens, divas, and otherwise—who influenced the style of their generations and the story of ordinary women who tried something new one day and never stopped.



Fifty years after Muray's Lucky Strike girl, Apollonia Kotero's bright scarlet manicure provided that same electric element in a photo by Harry Langdon.

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