

Slim waists may top the list

An hourglass waistline has impressed men for centuries.

Michael Hopkin

Of all the ingredients that make up the ideal female form, it isn't the most obvious winner. But researchers claim that, for enduring popularity down the ages, nothing beats a narrow waistline.

A team in the United States surveyed accounts of female beauty in British literature from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and found that the only feature that consistently got authors' pulses racing was a slender midriff.

"The waist does not sound an intuitively sexy body part," admits Devendra Singh of the University of Texas, Austin, who led the study. But nevertheless, it was the one thing on which the hundreds of writers surveyed seemed to be unanimous. They didn't even agree on whether large breasts, that modern staple of sexual attractiveness, are nice or not.

A preference for a slim waist is also found in first-century Indian writings and fourth-century Chinese works, Singh's team previously found.

The popularity of a slender middle might be due to what it reveals about a woman's health and fertility, Singh says. Healthiness is associated with low levels of abdominal fat, and high levels of female sex hormones such as oestrogen pinch the waistline and give the body an hourglass shape.

British writings

Singh and his colleagues scanned a database containing some 345,000 works of British and American literature, selecting only older British writings, and cross-referenced terms such as 'waist', 'breast', 'hips' and 'buttocks' with words such as 'plump' and 'slim'. They report their results in *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*¹.

The evidence for preference of a narrow waist from around the world and throughout the centuries suggests that it comes from something more inherent than fashion or the influences of global mass media.

"Nowadays there's no culture without Western influences, so it's easy to say 'oh yeah they're copycatting the West'," Singh says. "But this shows that it cannot be explained as a whim of Western culture."

It might not be quite unanimous, however. In a 1998 survey in which men from the indigenous Matsigenka people of Peru were asked to choose their favoured female silhouette, most preferred a plumper lady and some commented that slim-waisted women looked like they had been suffering from fever and diarrhoea (see '[World-wide waistlines](#)').

Health signal

A mini midriff may give men valuable information about a woman's potential to have healthy babies, and that could be why they subconsciously find it attractive, Singh says. A similar theory has also been used to explain why we subconsciously register highly symmetrical features — an indicator of good genes — as more beautiful.

References to beautifully slim waistlines go all the way back to ancient Egypt, Singh and his colleagues point out. The epithet of Queen Nefertari, favourite wife of pharaoh Ramses II, who reigned almost 4,000 years ago, explicitly mentions her narrow waist.

The preoccupation has endured throughout the centuries, all the way from the Venus de Milo to Playboy, Singh says. He dismisses as "whimsical" the blubbery beauties made fashionable by the nudes of seventeenth-century artists such as Rubens.

The discovery also suggests why Victorian women favoured corsets over dieting, and potentially brings depressing news for today's women who might be unhappy with their bodies, Singh says. "Many women are losing weight but will it give them the right body shape?"

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Being thin round the middle is one sign of health. *Alamy*

References

1. Singh D., Renn P. & Singh A. *Proc. R. Soc. B*, doi:10.1098/rspb.2006.0239 (2007).