Adapted from a presentation by Dr. Sarnoff at the 13th World Congress on Cancers of the Skin held in Madrid, Spain, April 7-10, 2010, and sponsored by Vichy Laboratories. The presentation was based on the five-volume series 100,000 Years of Beauty, edited by Elisabeth Azoulay, Angela Demain, and Dalibor Frioux.

Tanning is a fairly recent trend. Tanned skin is not, nor has it ever been, a universally accepted ideal. Today “ideal” skin color varies among different cultures. For example, Caucasian women in Europe, the US, and Brazil often want to look tan, while women in China, Korea, and Thailand want to look fairer, more pink in tone. Both Indian men and women use “fairness creams” to lighten the complexion; these are supposed to guarantee “success in business and love.”

**IDEAL SKIN IN ANCIENT EGYPT**

Meet Prince Re-hotep (opposite page, top left), high priest of Heliopolis (circa 2,580 BC), and his wife Nofret, whose name means “the beauty.” Nofret, whose statue was discovered near Memphis in 1871, has the pale, smooth skin so admired by ancient Egyptians.

Nofret’s fair complexion reflects her high rank. She maintained her skin tone with powders and lotions made from tree resins like myrrh and frankincense, and used pigments like yellow ochre to make her skin pale and clear.

**THE MIDDLE AGES**

Of the nomadic North Africans of the Sahara Desert, the Islamic Moroccan scholar Ibn Battuta wrote in 1356, “Bardama women are the most perfect in terms of beauty — outwardly most extraordinary, flawlessly white and very plump.” The women achieved their pale skin (and possibly their plumpness) by staying in their tents, and avoiding the harsh sun.

In Europe, pale skin was likewise a sign of privilege, and when the upper classes went out riding on horseback, they applied lotions made of violet and rose oils to protect their skin from the sun.

In Japan from the eighth century on, female beauty was associated with a white face — the so-called white mask, or o-shiroi. This was achieved with lead- or mercury-based powders, which were applied to the face. Red tints (beni-bana) then colored the cheeks.

As in Japan, Chinese women powdered their faces white, and applied color to their cheeks. A pale complexion was the accepted aesthetic ideal. In 1671 the writer Li Yu praised the wearing of dark blue clothes, since “it makes light complexions even lighter, and if those with darker complexions wear it, the darkness of their complexion is less easily discerned.”
2,580 BC
Prince Re-hotep and Nofret

Japan, eighth century onward

1920’s fashion icon Coco Chanel popularizes tanning.

1855 Arnold Rikli, the “Sun Doctor,” uses light therapy to treat tuberculosis.

1978 UV tanning beds introduced to US

2008 The Skin Cancer Foundation launches Go With Your Own Glow™ PSA ad campaign.

1979 The Skin Cancer Foundation is founded.

As in Japan, a pale complexion was the accepted aesthetic ideal in China.

1927 Huile de Chaldee tanning oil, by Jean Patou, promises to end sunburns

1978 Annual paid leave introduced in France, encourages travel to sunny climes.

1936 Annual paid leave introduced in France, encourages travel to sunny climes.

1800 Marie Antoinette Members of the Sun King’s royal court strove for a flawless, white complexion.
A healthy glow does not mean a tan, and I think that’s what we have to clear up. A healthy glow is your skin tone, glowing.

— Sarah Brown, Vogue’s Beauty Director

THE EARLY MODERN ERA
Fair skin remained highly valued in Europe. During the reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715), members of the Sun King’s royal court strove for a flawless, white complexion.8 Fashionable French society avoided the sun, and also used skin-whitening cosmetics to help conceal scars that were so common in an era when diseases like smallpox left the skin covered in blemishes and pockmarks.

Powders such as “Spanish white,” made of mercury, and “pearl white,” which contained white lead (we know now that those weren’t great health choices either!), were combined with greasy substances like wax, whale blubber and vegetable oil, and applied to the face. Over this base layer, rouge was painted onto the cheeks all the way up to the eyes. The red coloring agents (such as red lead and cinnabar) were also toxic, and long-term use could lead to skin damage; loss of teeth; lead poisoning; eyesight problems, and neurological disorders.9

THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES
By the end of the 17th century, French doctors, concerned about the long-term effects of harmful mercury- and lead-based cosmetics, successfully campaigned for the outlawing of these toxic ingredients.10

As use of cosmetics spread throughout France, the upper classes sought to differentiate themselves with more subtle, natural-looking makeup.11 During the Victorian era, female beauty was closely associated with notions of purity and innocence. Makeup suggested artfulness and coquetry, and its use was considered inappropriate for proper 19th century girls. Of course, women still used cosmetics, but the alabaster face of the 18th century was abandoned in favor of a more subtle, natural-looking visage. Nineteenth century women also continued to avoid the sun, carrying parasols outdoors and wearing large straw hats to keep their complexions pale.12

THE SUN’S CHANGING ROLE
The sun became associated with health when Arnold Rikli, the “sun doctor,” first used light therapy to treat consumption (tuberculosis) in Slovenia in 1855. Sunlight was also used to treat depression and even madness.13

In the 1920s, pioneering designer and fashion icon Coco Chanel popularized the idea of tanning, and the sun started to represent pleasure and relaxation as well as health.14

Once tans became popular, sunburn was inevitable, and soon the search was on for a product that would allow burn-free tanning. The tanning oil Huile de Chaldée, created by perfumer Jean Patou and introduced in 1927, promised to “put an end to sunburn, soften and tan the skin.”

THE DARK AGE
Just as in the past pale skin had been a mark of privilege, from the 1960s on, a tan announced that you had the leisure to bronze your skin and the money to travel to places where one could be acquired. A tan also suggested enthusiasm for outdoor activities, and, by implication, physical fitness and good health.15

Of course, not everyone had the time or money to take a tropical vacation, but with the development and growth of the artificial tanning market, more and more people were able to give that impression. The first self-tanner, Man-Tan, was introduced in 1959,16 and UV tanning beds started to appear in the US in 1978.17 By the 1980s and 1990s both practices were firmly established in the US.18

A RAY OF LIGHT
However, recently the appeal of the tan has been fading. Today we know that 90 percent of all skin cancers are associated with exposure to the sun’s ultraviolet (UV) radiation, which is also linked to eye damage, immune system suppression, and up to 90 percent of the changes commonly attributed to aging, including wrinkles, leathery skin and brown spots.

As the public has become aware of the long-term risks and results of sun-tanning and using artificial UV tanning beds, truly health-conscious, style-savvy individuals have abandoned tanning to embrace sun protection and their own natural skin tones. As Sarah Brown, Vogue’s Beauty Director, commented: “A healthy glow does not mean a tan, and I think that’s what we have to clear up. A healthy glow is your skin tone, glowing.” In 2008, The Skin Cancer Foundation appealed to people to stop tanning with the launch of Go With Your Own Glow™, a PSA ad campaign. Developed to encourage women to love — and protect — their skin, whatever its natural hue, the campaign has received $4.4 million in donated ad space and has reached more than 360 million readers.

In the future, perhaps skin that is neither artificially whitened nor UV-damaged will become the new standard for beauty and health.

References available on p.96.