

Nail beauty

Robert Baran¹ & Douglas Schoon²

¹Nail Disease Centre, 42, Cannes, France, ²Science & Technology, Creative Nail Design, Inc., Vista, California, USA

Summary

Nail beauty depends firstly upon nail health. It is a truism to say that a beautiful nail is always a healthy nail. In addition, there are subjective and evolving aspects of nail beauty which are related to fashion.

The texture of the nail affects its appearance and function. Soft or brittle nails are fragile. This results in unattractive longitudinal and horizontal splitting. Fragility is encouraged by wet work and excessive nail manicuring, especially by the removal of nail cosmetics. Critical to the aesthetic appeal of the nail is its shape. Most pleasing are nails are those that conform to the 'magic' ratio, in which the nail's length is approximately equal to its breadth, especially for the thumbs. The role of nail decoration and nail art in nail beauty is a subjective and evolving question of fashion.

Keywords: nail art, nail beauty, nail decoration, nail shape, nail texture

Introduction

The fingernail has been decorated since time began. As it evolved from being a primeval claw, the nail's aggressive and working uses have become less important than its aesthetic value. The application of cosmetics to the nail represents an attempt to enhance its beauty, but the widespread use of cosmetics may result in unwanted reactions to them.

The nail is a convex, hard, horny plate covering the dorsal aspect of the tip of the fingers and toes. Its appearance is determined by the integrity of the terminal bony phalanx and the paronychium, i.e. matrix, nail bed and hyponychium and nail folds. Along the free border the cuticle seals and protects the nail pocket.

The nail also has a functional role. It protects the nail bed and provides counter pressure for the pulp, which is essential for tactile sensations involving the fingers. The nail can act as a weapon and as a tool for scratching, scraping or gripping small objects. Finally, the nail enhances the appearance of the fingers.

Both the functional role of the nail and its beauty depend on three main factors: the shape of the nail, its decoration and its texture.

The shape of the nail

The shape of the nail depends on proportion and contour. The ratio of length to breadth of the nail is critical to its aesthetic appeal, and the two dimensions should be approximately equal,¹ at least on the thumb (Fig. 1a). When the 'magic' ratio differs from the ideal, the nail is less attractive (Fig. 1b). Polish, which enhances nail beauty, adds little in cosmetic improvement to a broad, short fingernail.

In the past, attractive nails were oval in shape (Fig. 2a), but nowadays there is a tendency to cut the tip more or less squarely (Fig. 2b), although the basic nail shape may be round or pointed.

Length creates the impression of thin, tapered and graceful fingers. When too long, however, they may become unsightly. Excessive length may even interfere with the efficiency of hand performance. In addition, a long nail may act as a lever and facilitate the rupture of the nail plate – nail bed attachment, a condition called onycholysis. The form or style of the nail varies geographically. In some areas, nails tend to have shorter, almond-shaped

Correspondence: Robert Baran, Nail Disease Centre, 42, rue des Serbes, 06400 Cannes, France, E-mail: baran.r@club-internet.fr or BARAN.R@wanadoo.fr

Accepted for publication 21 November 2004



Figure 1 (a) The magic ratio of nail length to breadth should be close to 1. (b) When this ratio differs from the ideal, the nail is less attractive and polish adds little to improve its appearance.

free edges striving to create a natural looking nail, while in other areas, clients prefer longer nails with higher apex arches. Artificial nails are often used to build up flat nails or concave plates to produce a beautiful natural arch, a more dramatic curvature at the free edge, uniform colouration of the bed and even to create the



Figure 2 (a) In the past, attractive nails were oval in shape. (b) Nowadays, there is a tendency to cut the tip more or less squarely.

illusion of a longer nail bed. It is a misperception that they are mostly worn to lengthen the nail plate.

The decoration of the nail

For nails of equal length and corresponding contour, a painted nail is usually considered more attractive (Fig. 3). The only exception to this would be the French manicure. Nail technicians use pink powders with monomer liquid and apply the slurry over the nail bed. They then use stark white powders to form the free edge. These 'pink and white' nails are very popular and clients who have them will often avoid wearing nail polish. Of course, they can apply polish whenever they wish and remove it later to reveal the French manicure underneath. We believe these will become more popular, especially when combined with opaque pink powders, which can create

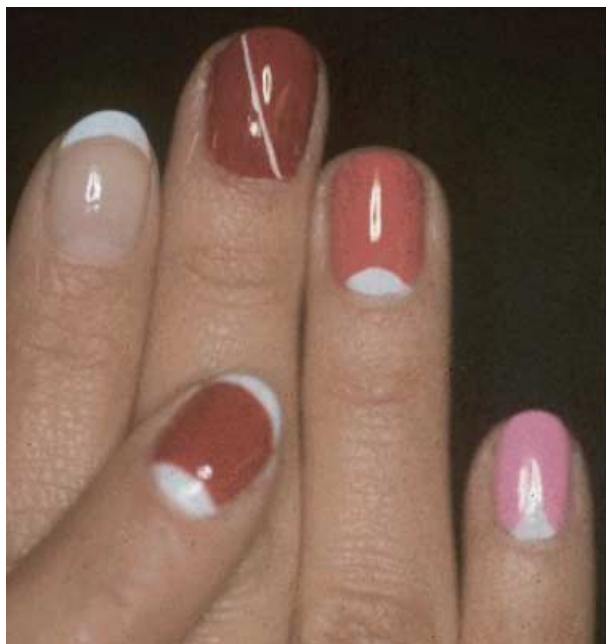


Figure 3 For nails of equal length and corresponding contour, a painted nail is more attractive (Courtesy: R. Soto-Paredes, MD, Chile).

an illusion of a longer nail bed. Clients with short, stubby fingers can now enjoy a longer, sleeker look. Also, a wider range of coloured powders are now available. Nail technicians are blending these powders to create custom colours to match the skin tones of their client's colouration or even to match their lipstick. These custom-blended, permanent manicures are the future. Interest continues to grow for sculptured artificial nails that are decorated with everything from a painted snowflake to a three-dimensional flower. The latest trend is to incorporate coloured pigments into the artificial nail, – especially colour additives which are used to create very intricate and beautiful designs and some amazing artwork (Fig. 4). Diamonds or emeralds have even been fixed into the elongated nails, and intricate jewellery attached to the free edge. The art of the jeweller has also been engaged to form artificial nails. Thus, preformed nail in gold or gold-plate (Fig. 5) may be decorated with precious stone insets or charms.

Nail art was invented in the late 1960s when American teens began to paint colourful designs onto their nails. The 'fad' evolved during the 1970s when Japanese nail technicians began mixing coloured pigments into their artificial nail products. Airbrushing with paints originally increased consumer interest in having design work on their nails and this service is still performed in salons. But interest in airbrushing is being replaced by the growing popularity of coloured pigments in acrylic



Figure 4 Nail art. Sculptured artificial nails.



Figure 5 A gold-plated preformed nail.

nail powders. Airbrushing with stencils onto the surface of the finished nail or painting with a fine-tipped brush is considered faddish and not part of the mainstream nail technician's daily routine.²

The texture of the nail

The condition of the nail may be a function of its aesthetic appeal. The nail may be softened, or, more frequently, rendered brittle. Brittle nail is vulnerable to single or multiple longitudinal splitting and horizontal splitting into layers (onychoschizia) or occasionally to transverse breaking. Nail fragility requires different kinds of treatment that have in common, avoidance of 'wet work'. In addition, the age-dependent decrease in cholesterol sulphate levels might explain the previously observed higher incidence of brittle nails in women.³

The wide variety of techniques employed in treating brittle nails can occasionally be responsible for some adverse reactions, and these must be added to the total unwanted responses to cosmetic procedures. In addition, a sound knowledge of nail cosmetics as well as the way in which instruments are used for manicures and nail care is essential for proper care.⁴

Conclusions

The nail has a role in cosmetic beauty. It also has a functional role. Both depend on three main factors: the shape of the nail, its decoration and its texture. All three are integral to each other.

References

- 1 Pfister R. Das normale Onychodiagramm. *Z Haut Geschl Kz* 1955; **18**: 132–7.
- 2 Hill S. What's new in Nail Art? *Nails Magazine* 1991; October 96–110.
- 3 Brosche T, Dressler S, Platt D. Age-associated changes in integral cholesterol and cholesterol sulfate concentrations in human scalp hair and finger nail clippings. *Aging Clin Exp Res* 2001; **13**: 131–8.
- 4 Brauer E, Baran R. Cosmetics: the care and adornment of the nail. In: R Baran, RPR Dawber, D de Berker, E Haneke, A Tosti, eds. *Baran and Dawber's Diseases of the Nails and Their Management*, 3rd edn. Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications; 2001.