



L'Origine du Monde, Gustave Courbet



The Dinner Party, 1979, Judy Chicago

viva la vulva

Primping our private parts is all the rage. Is the next frontier of vanity the brave new womb? TEXT: DIANE PETERS

It's no longer *just* a sex organ—it's a pop-culture commodity. Just talking about it in Eve Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues* has made millions and launched a worldwide wave of female bonding. International porn star Houston even took hers on the road—or at least the pieces that were surgically trimmed. After completing her L2K Labia Tour, Houston auctioned her pruned private parts on eroticbid.com. The top bid, so far, is US\$4,500 from some, um, discerning collector.

But economics aside, most vaginal primping is done for pleasure, not profit. And it's not only adult entertainers who are keeping the boat afloat. Brazilian waxes, genital piercings and vaginal cosmetic surgeries—including hymen reattachment for

those wanting to be deflowered a second time—are becoming increasingly common.

In this age of post-procreative sexuality, San Francisco-based sexologist Carol Queen says women's relationships with their vaginas—and vulvas—have changed. "Women now view themselves as sexual agents in their own right," she says. So in other words, we've discovered our gams, derrières and ta-tas, and now we're taking it a step further by embracing our sexual epicentre.

Then and now

Despite the recent hoopla, interest in this part of our anatomy is hardly new. "People have been interested in the vulva from paleolithic times," says Nigel Cawthorne, author of *The*

Quim: An Exploration of the Female Genitalia Through Art and Literature (available at www.authorsonline.co.uk). "Stone Age artists carved female forms that had generous breasts and ample thighs. Their legs were closed, so that the centre of focus became the pubic triangle."

Cawthorne says the vulva was increasingly viewed by most cultures around the world as something hidden, mysterious and, consequently, sacred. For example, the Incas drank from pots shaped like vulvas in recognition of the role the vagina played in the endless cycle of life and death. But in the West, Cawthorne says, the penis eventually became the main object of veneration, if not exactly envy, as posited by Freud. "There is not a single depiction of it [the vagina] in



White Flower, 1932, Georgia O'keeffe

Black Hollyhock Blue Larkspur, 1930, Georgia O'keeffe

mainstream Western art from the time of the early Greeks until the late 19th century," says Cawthorne. "For almost the entire sweep of European civilization, the vulva has been, if not deliberately hidden, at least overlooked."

Penthouse effect

In 1866 Gustave Courbet broke the rules when he painted his famous *L'Origine du Monde*—a hyperrealistic painting of a naked woman lying spread-eagled on her back. By the mid-1920s, American artist Georgia O'Keeffe created her famous vaginal-like flowers. But perhaps the most shocking vagina-art happening was Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, which debuted in the late '70s at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It featured a dining-table set with 39 ceramic plates etched with images of women's genitalia. The '70s also saw *Penthouse* upping the ante on the now petit bourgeois *Playboy* by turning the vulva into the absolutely

ultimate erotic zone. As Elizabeth Haiken, author of *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Johns Hopkins University Press), points out in a *Salon* interview: "Before crotch shots were published, nobody was interested in this, but now everyone knows what labia are supposed to look like."

Designer vagina

"When you talk about a beautiful vagina, you've got to look at *Playboy*—it's the number one thing women bring in to me when we talk about surgery," says Dr. David Matlock, a gynecologic surgeon based in Los Angeles whose trademark surgeries include the designer laser vaginoplasty (DLV) and the laser vaginal rejuvenation (LVR). The DLV "aesthetically" modifies the labia, while the LVR tightens the vagina.

Glance through any porn mag, at least in North America, and the ideal vagina is usually perfectly propor-

tioned. The outer labia are plump and smooth, the inner lips are never bigger than the outer, and the clitoral body is small and tidy.

But how are designer cuts different from those inflicted on unwilling young girls in some African cultures? For starters, female genital mutilation—slicing away the clitoris and often the vaginal lips, and sometimes even sewing up the labia—isn't voluntary. And second, its goal is to nix sex, not enhance it.

But that's not a sufficient distinction for Dr. Nahid Toubia, a medical doctor and president of Research, Action and Information Network for the Bodily Integrity of Women, an international organization that works to protect African women's health and human rights. "These surgeries are all about women's sexuality and structure having to conform to some standardized preconceived notion."

A notion that has been shaped by a small group of male publishers,▷

photographers and pornographers, says Betty Dodson, a New York City sexologist and author of *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving* (Crown Pub). "In North America we've become so uniform and boring. It's a form of sexual-fashion Fascism. I'd like to see women determining their own taste in female beauty."

Dodson speaks from personal experience. In her 30s—at the height of the '60s sexual revolution—she

look right," she says. "It looked like a duck's bill. I've seen *Playboy*, and I know that those images are air-brushed, but it did seem odd to me that my vagina didn't look like the women's in the photographs. It really affected my sexuality. I wasn't comfortable with oral sex, and I always wanted the lights off."

Last spring, she checked into plastic surgeon Dr. Robert Stubbs' clinic for what's known as the Toronto

Lip services

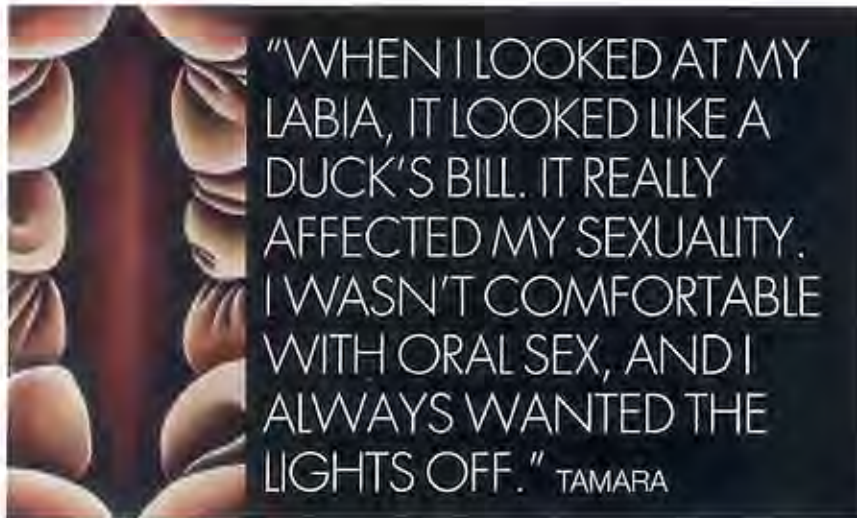
Unlike surgery, where a woman isn't okay with the way her genitals look, wearing decorations, such as piercings, is about loving and sprucing up what you've got, says sexologist Carol Queen. It's also less intrusive, with fewer, if any, complications.

Susan*, a 28-year-old civil servant, got her outer labia pierced on her 21st birthday, around the time she came out as a lesbian. "I was taking ownership over my body—my body belongs to me and I can do whatever I want." While her piercing hardly labels her a nonconformist in the lesbian community—many of her peers have them—they make her feel secretly rebellious when she's at work.

One of the most genteel and popular form of genital landscaping is having one's pubic hair waxed, shaped and coloured. "In the late '80s, when I suggested a customer try a bikini wax, she usually got defensive, insisting she wasn't a stripper," says Sudi Sarrafzadeh, owner of Sudi's Spa and the Toronto School of Aesthetics. "Now when a woman waxes her pubic hair, she's making a feminist statement. It's about respecting herself. Taking care of herself."

Perhaps the desire to beautify and modify our vaginas has more to do with our protean urge to change our form, and, in doing so, redefine how we experience our sexuality. At last year's influential Ars Electronica festival in Austria, artists were asked to explore the theme Next Sex: Sex in the Age of Procreative Superfluousness. In one exhibit, *Klones*, the artists created images of a mutant vagina with two vulvas, and another vagina with a penis sprouting out of it. With such metaphoric possibilities, we are indeed entering a brave new womb. □

*Not her real name.



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thought her own vulva's uneven inner lips were deformed. "I believed I had stretched them because I masturbated when I was a child," she says. "But after my boyfriend and I looked at girlie mags that showed a range of female genitals, I realized I was normal. I saw vulvas that looked like mine." For an alternative to cookie-cutter genitals in most porn today, Dodson recommends people check out her video *Viva La Vulva* or surf the online Genital Art Gallery on her Web site (bettydodson.com).

Pubic discourse

Tamara*, a 28-year-old Toronto marketing manager, isn't interested in having a labia love-in. She just wants to fit in. And she isn't doing it for a man. "When I looked at my labia, it did not

Trim—or labiaplasty. Three thousand dollars later, the problem was solved. "It's fabulous," she says of the results. "I made the right decision."

But not all nips and tucks are about achieving a desired look: some are just about the sex. Function versus form. Barbara*, a 32-year-old Los Angeles woman, was born with what she describes as a "naturally loose" vagina that made sex and small penises a disastrous mix.

"It would be constantly flipping out," says Barbara. "I'd know it was not going well. No one was getting any pleasure from it." She went under Dr. David Matlock's laser for a complete overhaul—the DLV and LVR. "I can't even tell you how it made me feel afterward—it was phenomenal," she says.