

Beauty and Cosmetics Through the Ages

Dates	Tuesday 21 and Wednesday 22 April 2026
Times	18.00–20.00 BST
Location	Online (Zoom)
Tutor	Dr Barbara Lasic
Level	All Levels



François Boucher, *Pompadour at her Toilette*, 1750 with later additions (detail) Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Course Description

Experience an evocative and vivid exploration of the historical and often dangerous pursuit of beauty with Dr Barbara Lasic. Drawing on objects in the Wallace Collection and beyond, we'll discover the creativity, contradictions, and hidden perils of historical make-up. From the Renaissance to the Victorian age, cosmetics promised a perfection that was tantalising yet elusive. Vilified and mocked, yet irresistibly enticing, we'll learn how cosmetic artifice captivated remarkably diverse social groups, from impoverished courtesans to prosperous matriarchs and powerful queens. Paints, powders, and brushes became the tools of reinvention for many. However, as several coveted products contained lead, mercury, or arsenic, we'll learn how the quest for beauty was risky, sometimes even fatal.

Session One - The Art of Beauty in the Renaissance to the Early 18th Century

Our investigation will begin with the use (and misuse) of cosmetics during the time of the Renaissance through to the early 18th century. Consulting the so-called *Books of Secrets*, we'll uncover ways in which cosmetics enabled both men and women to manipulate their appearance. We'll draw on evidence gleaned from contemporary portraiture and objects used as part of the *toilette* to examine beautification rituals and learn how ideals of physical beauty were standardised and adopted.

Session Two - Discretion and Simplicity: The Cult of Natural Beauty, 1760-1900

We'll examine the complex and often ambiguous relationship people had with cosmetics from the late 18th century to the 19th. During the Enlightenment, ideals of natural beauty gained prominence, prompting growing condemnation of cosmetics as artificial or deceitful. As we move to the Victorian era, we'll consider how fragile and innocent models of femininity shaped beauty standards while mass-produced cosmetics and the rise of department stores increasingly facilitated their use.

Course Tutor

Dr Barbara Lasic has published on the subject of French decorative arts, the history of taste, the history of collecting, and museum architecture. Her research interests include the production and consumption of French decorative arts, 1650-1900, the private and institutional collecting and display of French art, and the intersection of the art market and curatorial practice in the early 20th century. Prior to her academic career, Barbara worked at the V&A Museum as part of the curatorial team involved in the redevelopment of the 'Europe: 1600-1800' galleries, and she held curatorial positions at the Wellcome Trust and the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

Joining Information and Format

This course will be taught through Zoom Webinar. Each course session duration is 120 minutes, including a five-minute break and time for Q&A with the tutor.

Tickets are for both dates. Ticket holders will be emailed the Zoom link, Webinar ID and Passcode 24 hours in advance of the first course session, which should be retained for accessing both sessions of the course.

Course Recording

This course will be recorded. Within 48 hours of each course session, ticket holders will be emailed a link to view the recording, which will be available for two weeks.
