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ASIAN BEAUTY

From foot binding to stilettos, the ideals of feminine beauty have shifted dramatically over the centuries.

Beyond Skin Deep

BY SONIA
KOLESNIKOV-JESSOP

When the Chinese blockbuster movie "Curse of the Golden Flower" opened last year, Gong Li's ample cleavage stole the spotlight. Historically, Chinese women have more commonly been associated with modesty, and many viewers thought Gong's revealing look was an anachronism in a film set at the end of the Tang dynasty (618–907). In fact, the film was reviving a long-forgotten image of Asian beauty as voluptuous. "In the Sui and early Tang dynasties [late sixth and

seventh centuries], willow figures were idealized in thousands of pottery figurines of female beauties," says University of Melbourne art historian Tonia Eckfeld. "But by the early eighth century, plump women were portrayed, signifying the popularity of that body type during the prosperous Tang era."

A compelling new exhibit at Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum tracks the changing ideals of beauty across centuries of Asian culture. By juxtaposing images of contemporary beauties such as Gong and Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai with ancient statues of Indian goddesses

and paintings of Chinese maidens, "Beauty in Asia: 200 BCE to Today" (through Sept. 23) invites visitors to reflect on how the pursuit of beauty has evolved, from foot binding to Botox. "In today's world, there is so much persuasive advertising of the Western ideals of beauty that in Asia we have begun to forget the Asian esthetic values," says Gauri Parimoo Krishnan, the exhibition's curator.

Indeed, while slimness has become an international beauty standard, the show makes clear that it was not always so in Asia. The "Fat Lady," a small, painted earthenware figurine dating from



CURVES GO IN AND OUT OF STYLE: The Singapore show includes (from left) sculpted figures from North Vietnam, China and India

the ninth century, shows a chubby face and full figure. An Indian Yakshi (female earth spirit) sculpture from the second century depicts a figure with slender upper limbs, a narrow waist, wide hips and full thighs and breasts, considered ideal for childbearing.

"Beauty in Asia" highlights the painful lengths to which women have gone to uphold prevailing trends. On display are lotus-foot shoes used for foot binding—once considered erotic—as well as heavy brass colls worn around the neck by some Thai and Burmese

tribeswomen, who sought to push down their shoulders and ribs and create a long-necked look.

Pieces like a rare 15th-century kneeling figure from North Vietnam, Javanese shadow puppets of clown servants and statues of ugly but benevolent Indian spirits

also challenge the age-old notion of evil as ugly and goodness as beautiful. "They teach us that beneath their appearance lies great wisdom," says Heidi Tan, a curator at the ACM. Their beauty, in other words, goes far deeper than the skin.