

## ARTIFICIALLY DEFORMING THE HUMAN HEAD FOR 'BEAUTY'

BY HENRY FIELD  
CURATOR OF PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

There is a saying that "beauty is only skin deep," but judging from the age-old ideals of certain groups of people scattered throughout the world, it would seem that Samuel Johnson's broader interpretation of that desirable quality is more accurate. Johnson defined beauty as "that assemblage of graces, or proportion of parts, which pleases the eye." It is that "proportion of parts" which is the chief concern of those people who practise artificial deformation of the head as an aesthetic measure.

Some prefer heads that are flattened in front and abnormally elongated towards the back. Others favor the domed variety, flattened at the back and growing upwards, sometimes into an actual peak. There are many variations of these two extremes and many methods by which they are achieved.



Photo copyright Field Museum

#### Mangbetu

Woman of African tribe with head peculiarly deformed for aesthetic reasons. A bronze sculpture by Malvina Hoffman, in the Hall of the Races of Mankind.

the head to grow into the desired shape. Another familiar method is the use of the cradle-board.

#### ELONGATION MARKED NOBILITY

The peculiar custom of artificial cranial deformation dates back several thousand years, at least to the Late Minoan III period in Crete and a contemporary age in Egypt. Ikhnaton's skull is an outstanding example, and many people believe that his wife, the beautiful Nofretiti, and their daughters also had deformed heads. Others are of the opinion, however, that the apparent abnormality of the heads of the queen and princesses was nothing more than a built-up coiffure.

Hippocrates, who died about 350 B.C., stated that there were peoples living in the Caucasus who elongated their heads artificially, and he added that a head so deformed was a mark of nobility. There is abundant evidence—in India, China, Celebes, and Madagascar, to cite only a few localities—that the practise originated among persons of high rank. It has been suggested that the desire to simulate the majesty and wisdom of Ikhnaton started the custom in Egypt, and that it spread to other parts of the world. This theory loses weight, however, when one considers that the custom has been practised on every

continent except Australia, from very early to modern times.

The Indians of Peru had long deformed their children's heads before the Spanish conquerors arrived during the sixteenth century and issued decrees against the practice. Two hundred years later, Lewis and Clark reported that the Chinook tribes of our Northwest Coast had their heads flattened "in a most disgusting manner." From China comes the story that during the massacre at Nanking the final test of identity of a Manchu was the shape of his head. Any soldier found with a head flattened in the back was promptly executed. Deformation has been practised throughout Europe, especially in south Russia, at various periods, and is still current in certain parts of France and Holland. I was told in Marken, Netherlands, that the grandmother generally molds the infant's head by massage and that a tight cap is also used, the object in this instance being to make the head rounder. Among the Mangbetu in central Africa, children's heads are still bound, with bark cloth, string, fibre, or the hair of the giraffe.

#### MENTAL ABILITY UNIMPAIRED

In southwestern Asia the "Armenian" cradleboard is used in parts of Syria, Anatolia, Iraq, Iran, and the Caucasus. The head is deformed, generally without intention, as a result of the hard pad upon which the child's head rests. The child remains fastened in the cradle for the first two years of its life, or even longer, the only respite being the occasion of the weekly bath. The reason usually advanced for this confinement is that the child keeps in better health than otherwise, and that it can never be stifled by being carried around in its mother's arms.

Although there are reports that some of the more severe methods of misshaping



Cradle-board for Head Flattening

Method of deforming child practised by Chinook Indian tribes of the Northwest Coast (illustration after Collin). The mother's head shows how the changed shape—considered "beautiful"—continues in adulthood.

the skull are painful, and that the brain is inevitably injured, comparative examination of numerous deformed and undeformed skulls has shown that cranial capacity is not affected. The head merely grows in unrestricted but abnormal directions. Proof is also lacking of any change in mental ability.

Thus, the results of intentional deformation of the head seem to be merely the satisfaction of vanity, on the one hand, and on the other, the confusion of anthropologists in their search for accurate indications of race. Head shape is one of the most constant of physical traits, and by means of measurements which determine the relative length and breadth of a head, the cephalic index (dolichocephals are long heads; brachycephals, short heads), we are able to trace certain racial affinities more positively than in any other way. But the "sugar-loaf" skull of an ancient Peruvian or the streamlined head of a Nofretiti baffles the best anthropologist, and scientific accuracy must bow to the supremacy of beauty.

According to E. J. Dingwall, author of a text-book on this subject, some of the finest examples of artificially deformed skulls are those from Peru and the Northwest Coast on exhibition in the section devoted to physical anthropology in the Hall of the Races of Mankind (Hall 3) at Field Museum.

#### New Data on Orbicular Jasper

"A Study of Orbicular Jasper," by Dr. Albert J. Walcott, appeared in the February issue of *The Mineralogist*. Dr. Walcott, basing his thorough study on material in Field Museum's collections, has determined that this unique stone, highly prized by lapidarists, is not a jasper but another form of quartz.

Dr. Walcott recently lectured on asterism at the convention of the American Gem Society at the Stevens Hotel. A party of sixty-one delegates from the convention was conducted on a tour of the Museum's geological exhibits.

#### DESERTS

—by Gayle Pickwell

"A volume notable for its fine illustrations of the physical, botanical, and zoological features of the deserts of the southwestern United States," says Mr. Karl P. Schmidt, Curator of Amphibians and Reptiles at Field Museum. "Sixty-four full-page illustrations, with the colored frontispiece, give the reader landscapes, and plant and animal portraits, of great distinction."

On sale at THE BOOK SHOP of FIELD MUSEUM—\$3.50.





Field, Henry. 1939. "Artificially Deforming the Human Head for Beauty." *Field Museum news* 10(6), 4-4.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25712>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/364584>

**Holding Institution**

Field Museum of Natural History Library

**Sponsored by**

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.  
For information contact [dcc@library.uiuc.edu](mailto:dcc@library.uiuc.edu).

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.