

Beauty Queen

A beauty queen is a person (typically a woman) chosen to serve as a symbolic representation of a collective identity by a group of people to represent them (or some of them) to a larger, often national, audience. As such, beauty queens are chosen through beauty pageants or contests, which can vary in reference to social context, setting, and judging criteria. During her reign, a beauty queen often makes appearances at public functions wearing a tiara (crown) and sash (often emblazoned with the title she holds and/or her sponsors' names).

Recently, analyses of beauty queens have spanned the globe as they are increasingly seen to represent socially defined collective identities such as nations, ethnic/racial groups, or organizations. From the local "Miss Snake Charmer Queen" of Texas to the internationally broadcast "Miss Universe" contest, beauty queens remain a popular symbolic vehicle for the assertion and definition of collective identities over time.

Criticism of beauty queens has been fairly consistent as feminists have argued that pageants reify patriarchal idealizations and unattainable female beauty standards, which are judged predominantly in heterosexist terms through a patriarchal lens that objectifies women as symbols and not thinking, feeling human beings.

Not all beauty queens are the same, however; both queens and pageants vary widely. Large, pyramidal pageants (in which women graduate after winning local, regional, national, and worldwide contests) often have very narrow definitions of beauty, generally premised on White, western, industrialized ideals, underpinned and promoted by large cosmetic companies intent on expanding their markets, particularly in the developing world. Other, more local pageants—Miss Cherry Blossom in Honolulu, Hawaii, for example—use the beauty queen to draw

people to festivals, to celebrate local culture, and to define collective their identity in symbolic terms. Local beauty queens are often judged not solely on the attractiveness of their faces and bodies, but also on their cultural competence (usually measured through cultural talent performances), educational achievements, service to the local community, and speaking ability.

Local differences may be reflected in the “eligibility rules” that determine who can and cannot participate in a pageant. Most pageant contestants must comply with rules that require them to be unmarried, childless, of a certain age (typically 18-26), and sometimes of a certain racial/ethnic background or blood quantum. **For example, up until 1998 the Cherry Blossom Queen pageant in Honolulu, Hawaii required that contestants be of 100% provable Japanese ancestry. With increasing rates of interracial marriage in the Japanese American community, the pageant currently requires contestants to be of 50% Japanese ancestry as do most other Japanese American pageants.** These rules send strong messages about the image that the beauty queen chosen must undertake such as sexual purity, youth, beauty, and racial authenticity, but they are also ways that groups who chose queens to represent them define not just the queen but the group itself. As the rules change over time, the criteria by which queens are produced also change to reflect the issues, anxieties, and feelings of the larger collective.

Beauty queens themselves undergo an often gruelling, and at times, unappreciated role when they make “visitations” to their public; and they must be trained to be royal by consultants and advisors. At the national or international level, beauty queens often use their “reign” and “visitations” to further their careers in public speaking, newscasting, acting, and clothes modelling.

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See also: Aesthetics; Beauty; Beauty Contest; Chastity; Cosmetics; Diet Culture; Ethnicity; Race

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