

NOTHING SEEMED MORE IMPORTANT TO ME THAN NORMAL SKIN

AS A TEENAGER, THE AUTHOR AMANDA FILIPACCHI
SUFFERED FROM ACNE. HER OBSESSION LED HER
TO SPEND YEARS MAKING AIRBRUSH PAINTINGS
OF FLAWLESS COMPLEXIONS

In December, I wrote an essay in *The New Yorker* online in which I confessed to having been born cross-eyed and big-chinned to a top-model mother. What I didn't reveal was that, as a teenager, I also had acne. As a consequence, I developed a passion for clear skin. I became envious of people who did not have acne. When I stood in lines, I'd gaze around and admire the people who had normal skin, which was almost everyone. Did they realise how lucky they were, I wondered. I didn't get the feeling, from the way they were acting, that they did. When it came to looks and beauty, nothing seemed more important to me than normal skin. You could have unfortunate features, but if you had nice skin, you were beautiful. You could have exquisite features, but if you had acne, you were ugly.

My love of clear skin became so strong that I became irresistibly drawn to a form of painting that enabled one to create the most perfect skin, absent of brush strokes: airbrushing. And by airbrushing, I don't mean photo-retouching; I mean entire paintings made using an airbrush instead of a paintbrush. With an airbrush, you could make portraits of women with skin so beautiful, it was almost on a supernatural level — no skin that flawless existed in real life.



Amanda Filipacchi

When I was 15, I bought an airbrush, an air compressor and instruction books, and started making paintings of my mother's beautiful modelling photos, taken by some of the great photographers, such as Richard Avedon and Irving Penn. At 16, I searched for and found an airbrushing class in Paris, near where we lived. I developed a crush on the 24-year-old instructor, who had good skin and made paintings of people with exquisite skin. I dated him for a while. He was teased by his friends for robbing the cradle. He was my first kiss, though that was as far as I allowed it to go. I admired his airbrushing technique. He would point out the tiny hairs he had painted on the heads of his beautifully skinned people.

My father, who has a passion for surrealism, also has sub-passions for photorealism and beautiful women. I was with him one day when he went to look at some photorealist paintings. They were large paintings of women's midsections, starting just above the bellybutton and going down to mid-thigh. These women's backsides and frontides were clad in lacy lingerie and sometimes garter belts, too.

I was blown away by the skin. It was fantastic; it had no brush strokes. I was excited because I was certain the artist had used an airbrush to create that skin — there was no other way he could have done it. The



artist, John Kacere, who was there, was thrilled by my enthusiasm. When I expressed my delight for the skin and informed him that he must have used an airbrush, to my amazement, he said no. He brought his face close to the giant woman's thigh and, holding an imaginary paintbrush, he said: "I used a tiny little paintbrush."

"No!" I gasped.

"Yes!" he said, delighted by my appreciation of his technical feat.

While I was in high school in France, I tried various acne treatments. There was one I saw on an American infomercial. It must have been a good infomercial, because I believed in it as if God existed and had made the product herself. I applied the cream diligently for months. It made no difference whatsoever, but I had faith that one day it would. My mother took me to one of the best dermatologists in Paris, and when I showed him the white bottles I had been ordering from the States and using for months, his look of pity startled me.

He made me switch to Retin-A, a gel that got rid of my acne and made my skin peel and turn bright red, which to others was doubtless a horrific sight, but to me was a vast improvement. In French schools, students are polite about such things. Nobody commented, which made it easy for me to nurse my illusion that looking as though I had a third-degree burn was much better than having pimples.

I wore foundation. I loved it. But perhaps it looked unusual in school. On the bus, a girl I barely knew but admired asked me why

I wore it. I was disappointed that it was obvious that I was wearing foundation. I'd hoped the wonderful, uniform, cakey appearance looked like my real skin. I told her I liked it.

Eventually, in the safe hands of the dermatologist, we found a treatment that worked [Roaccutane — see Kelly Gilbert's report overleaf]. Slowly, as the months passed with good skin, I lost my appreciation for a perfect complexion. And as my passion faded, so did my love of airbrushing. I had lugged my airbrush and big, noisy air compressor overseas when I moved to America to go to college. I had even bought a large table for my small dorm room, assuming I would continue making airbrush paintings of good skin. But in the end, I only did one painting in college. It was for a friend, and she had given me specific instructions as to what she wanted. It was not skin. It was probably her representation of her own obsession: a pink and lavender heart, inside of which was one single word: "Merde." I painted the word in black, using a tiny little paintbrush.

When you acquire that elusive thing that everyone has except you — that thing you admire and desire above all else, that thing you marvel at people for not appreciating — like all things in life, when you acquire it, you eventually forget to love it. ❖

The Unfortunate Importance of Beauty by Amanda Filipacchi (WW Norton £15.99) is out now