

Inborn Beauty

Awakening the Heart's Light

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

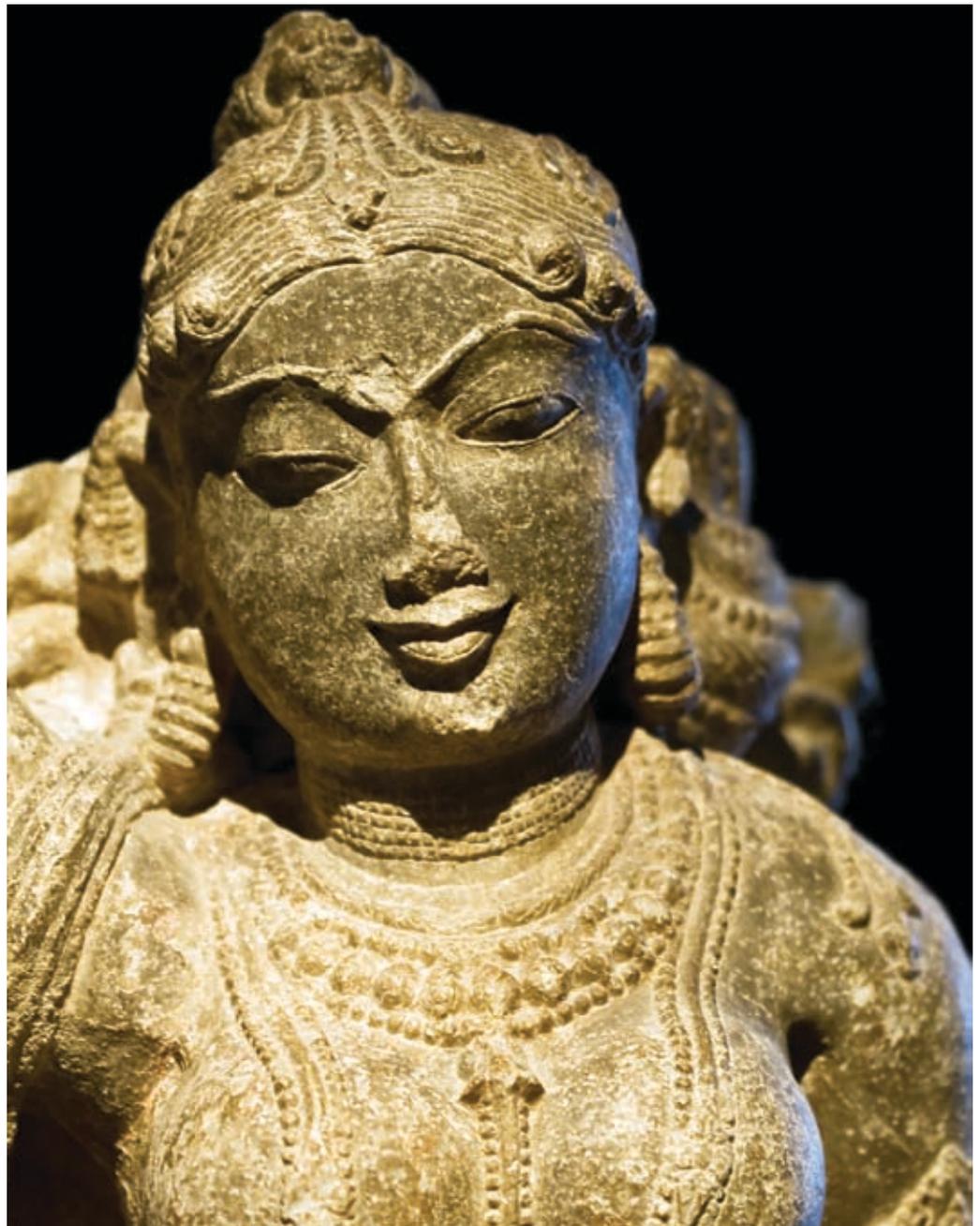
In junior high, while studying Greek mythology, I learned about Helen of Troy — the most beautiful woman in the world. Hers was known as “the face that launched a thousand ships,” and her magnetism was so strong that it ultimately led to the Trojan War. As a teenager, I couldn't help but wonder just what it was about her that people found so striking but could only surmise that, unlike me, she probably didn't have any pimples.

Despite the different conceptions of what beauty is, one thing is certain: Most of us crave it. Throughout the ages, women have gone to great lengths to achieve our idealized image of beauty. Roman women bathed in crocodile feces and mud for soft skin. Others used highly toxic concoctions of sulfur and lead to color their hair and powder their faces. Today, we continue to modify our bodies to look more attractive, whether through clothing and cosmetics, or piercings and tattoos. Often at a steep price, many of us subject ourselves to all manner of plucking and pruning to be beautiful.

But what exactly *is* beauty? Of course, most of us are familiar with the now-clichéd observation that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But is it?

There is no question that standards of beauty vary across cultures. During the Victorian era, for instance, voluptuous women graced many works of art with their curvaceous figures. Today, women thinner than pine needles strut down the catwalk. In some countries, like Vietnam, dark, lacquered teeth are considered appealing, unlike the bleached-white chompers that we so covet in the West.

Beauty, it seems, is socially constructed. But such cultural preferences often point to something more significant, such as a woman's health or fertility. After all, beauty is a kind of biological marker, an evolutionary cue that



suggests one is fit to reproduce. Even animals try to woo their mates with beauty, like the bowerbird, who builds an elaborate and colorful love nest out of twigs, flowers, feathers, and shells as part of his courtship.

While standards of beauty may be culture-specific, studies have shown that certain characteristics remain constant across a wide spectrum. For example, the more symmetrical a face is, the more attractive it appears. Even babies spend more time staring at pictures of symmetrical faces than they do at asymmetrical ones. But that's hardly a definition of beauty. After all, the way a woman acts often impacts her attractiveness, and a meanie simply isn't as appealing as a mensch, no matter how symmetrical her face may be.

Despite all of this, society likes to tell us what is beautiful and, knowingly or unknowingly, we often believe what we see and hear. We need only open our eyes to observe the messages that the media spoon-feeds us about beauty. It looks *this* way, we are told: Women should be slim and sexy. But what is sexy? The way we walk? The lingerie we wear, or don't? The glimmer in our eye? Maybe. But maybe it is something far beyond that — say, a woman who is comfortable in her body, owns her power, and knows she is beautiful simply because she exists.

One who appreciates the beauty of a woman appreciates *all* of her. He sees every blemish, scar, and stretch mark as a story — a gateway into her authentic being. He recognizes that

she is the totality, light and dark, confused and clear, fearful and forthright. She is love embodied. And when she relaxes into this knowing, she is — and can only be — pure beauty.

Though it may seem superficial, beauty is actually a deep expression of our feminine nature. The feminine *is* beauty, in all of her wild splendor: rolling waves and drifting clouds, twinkling stars and tousled hair. Even if we don't spend much time refining our appearance, as women we know that beauty is what we are.

Such beauty, however, has little to do with our skin. True beauty is a kind of radiance, an indefinable light that shines from some mysterious place. When we meet it, it halts us in our tracks and stills our crazy minds. As Jiddu Krishnamurti said, "Beauty is, where you are not." When our gaze falls upon something beautiful, we lose ourselves in it; we forget ourselves. Whatever we find stunning truly stuns us into silence — and in that space there is no longer an "other." We simply want to stare with wonder into the presence before us, whether in the form of a woman, man, or mountain.

Despite all of this, if we don't *feel* beautiful, it doesn't matter what anyone says. Our lover's words of appreciation and praise may fall right through us if we don't experience our inner and outer light. To truly appreciate something lovely, we have to be in the present moment. We have to claim our uniqueness and give up our obsession with what others think, because ultimately it is comparison that destroys beauty.

Yes, my female friends, we must love what we are, for one who loves can only be beautiful, as beauty is the form of love. When we see something beautiful, we can't help but love it. The sunrise or falling leaves in golden light — how can we *not* love such things? When we do, we want to merge with them, to dissolve into their vast, indefinable, and excruciatingly ephemeral nature.

True beauty is a kind openness, an ease. Such qualities often deepen through the passage of time, unlike the fleeting features of the human form. As we become more and more authentic, the beauty of our essence emanates effortlessly. We needn't force this process but can allow it to unfold naturally through the cultivation of genuine self-acceptance. We certainly don't have to give up our efforts to be beautiful on the outside, but let us also tend to the radiance within. As we do so, we may come to understand the real meaning of Khalil Gibran's words: "Beauty is not in the face; beauty is a light in the heart." May this light ever increase and thus illuminate the world. 🌿

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