

# Thoughts on Beauty and Facial Portraits

by Carol Ann Dwyer

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If you have two sisters side by side, and one is ugly and one is beautiful, you notice it, but you would never talk about it out loud. That is taboo. You would never say to one, "You are so pretty," and to the other, "Boy, are you ugly".

Why is that? Because we value beauty, and we fear the opposite. We value brains, we fear stupidity. We value mental health, we fear mental breakdowns. We value physical health, we fear disease. We value youth, we fear death. We value heterosexual coupling, we fear homosexual. We live with these things, but we don't want them for ourselves. And when we get too close to them, or talk about them, we may snicker or make jokes. The source of this snickering is fear. So if we talk about beauty or lack of it, we must be as professional as plastic surgeons at a conference on how to reshape faces. There is no euphemism in the entire language that conveys that meaning of "ugly" without having an edge of pain or insult to it.

So how do we know one sister is beautiful and the other not? We have a guideline inside our minds of the ideal. We have learned these rules from society:

- symmetry-two halves balanced.
- proportion and moderation, not extremes
- ears moderate, not big
- ears flat to head, not stuck out
- eyes big, not small
- eyes same size, not different
- eyes set in center, not too close together or too far apart
- eyes not bulbous
- forehead moderate, not too high to much, or too low

- want nose straight not crooked
- nose without a bump
- nose not too big or too small
- nose width, not too wide, not too narrow
- tip not too pointy, not too round
- nose not too turned up
- teeth white not yellow
- teeth straight not crooked.
- lips not too huge, not too thin
- skin smooth—avoid scars or pock marks
- skin clear not blemished
- skin smooth, not too many moles
- cheek bones visible, not too round
- chin nicely defined, not too pointy or “chinless,” recessed
- neck not too short, not too long
- neck tight, not loose flesh, neck firm not double or excess weight
- hair not too fine or too coarse
- hair not too thick or too thin,
- hair not too curly or too straight
- youth, not old, don't want wrinkles.
- hair, not bald.

People are very sensitive and defensive about this. You must know how to help people relax. Beauty is not a line drawn in the sand. Beauty is on a continuum of more or less, and beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We often see subjects who are gorgeous but have no clue they are pretty. All humans want to be beautiful and attractive.

What's in that word? ATTRACT the opposite sex. As long as there is procreation in this world, done the natural way and not in a petri dish, then professional photographers will have a job. Beauty gives us so much joy in life. But also causes us a lot of pain, because none of us feel we have enough of it. It makes me jealous when I see beautiful people having advantages in life, including financial!

What percent of the population thinks they are beautiful enough to jump in front of the camera and not worry about the outcome? Maybe 2%? Maybe Brad Pitt & Angelina Jolie. I believe fear of not being handsome enough is what lies behind that dread of posing for a portrait. And men have it worse than women. Many portraits are made primarily for love, like family portraits. But that fear of not being handsome enough still trips us up.

The photographer has three main skills: lighting, posing and expression. The only reason customers call us is because we can make them a better, more flattering portrait than they can make themselves. We capture beauty, or create the illusion of beauty, for one brief moment that lasts a lifetime. It's more profitable, and more satisfying, to make a flattering portrait of an average person than of a "beautiful" person. We want that normal customer to go out to the car and cry tears of joy . . . "you made me the best picture of my life!" If you get a pretty face you can "shoot the garbage out of them" and give 150 proofs. But, average faces have fewer options.

All little children are beautiful. You try for exact placement of the light on the child, but in reality get assorted light because kids don't hold still. As long as you have delicate shadows with your high key shots, and a little darker shadow with low key, you are doing great with children. But by age 17, adult features come out. We start to deal with more weight, then drooping and wrinkles. Things are falling. By far our greatest challenge is the percentage of overweight subjects. 60%? Adult head shot subjects will hold still. You can have everything perfect. When you are good enough to get exactly the ratio and placement you want, and repeat it over and over, then you are truly a professional. Creativity is impossible without precise control. It goes without saying you need a good camera and lens. And for studio work, you need lights and a meter. Make friends with your meter and read the book.

The face is the essence of the human. The personality is captured in the eyes and expression. A waist up or closer with great light on face & eyes will beat a full length every time.

When you are out of your element and don't know what is expected, you feel so stupid. Subjects feel that way in the camera room. Explain at the start: "I will tell you everything you need to do, where to look, where to put your hands. You won't have to ask me any questions, like "where should I put my hands." If we have silence, just chill and enjoy. When you are setting up or fixing camera, look and make sure they are not smiling at you in the ready position. Ask them to look down, look away. Once you are ready, get an expression and SHOOT IT FAST. Don't make them wait. Eyes start watering in 5 to 10 seconds. Everything after that is torture. If you don't get the expression you want, tell them to look down or close their eyes and rest. Don't shoot more than 2 or 3 in a row. Give them a rest, time to blink. Have real conversations, not glib phrases, to get real expressions.

You can make great portraits of ordinary people, and flatter "challenged" subjects. It takes knowledge, thoughtfulness, patience, and practice.

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