

The belly beautiful: Unveiling the pregnant body

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Pregnancy is a testimony to the good health of women, couples and society. Women are said to be at their most beautiful when in the 'glow of pregnancy'. Pregnancy is also seen as a time of danger; for generations the woman 'with child' must be protected from malevolent forces and in contemporary obstetric practice the label 'high risk pregnancy' hovers over the months of waiting. Women are expected to be vigilant about their body during pregnancy, attentive to clinical tests and ultrasound imagining of the foetus in order to identify risks and be compliant with obstetric protocols during labour and birth. The tenuous and complicated relationship between health and beauty during pregnancy is intertwined with the umbilical cord of the intrauterine environment and the gravid belly with its own navel. Pregnancy is disguised by metaphors and euphemisms; alluded to in fairy tales; brought out into the open in creation myths and then covered again in mystery. The expecting belly appears in art through veiled strokes just out of the corner of the eye. The swelling belly is cloistered so as not to invite attention, admiration and even danger from envy and the evil eye. Billowing attire obscures the contours of the blooming body and neutralizes suggestions of sensuality. This article explores the emergence of the pregnant belly into the spotlight (initially in the celebrity world of the early 1990s) and discusses why and why now the pregnant belly can – or must – be unveiled.

[beauty, body, pregnancy, sexuality, aesthetics, Greek ethnography]

Women's pregnant bellies are currently enjoying great popularity in parts of the world where they were previously disguised, protected and shrouded in silence under the folds of everyday apparel. In the last twenty years, ways to embellish, adorn, stylize, decorate and expose the belly have reached a level of elaboration previously unknown in the clothed body of western civilization. Surfing the internet using key words such as 'belly – beauty – maternity fashions' reveals a glimpse of the new world of the belly beauty. An astounding array of new consumer accoutrements, aside from the already-popular gels, creams and cocoa-butters, are available to enhance the expanding abdomen and to assure women that pregnancy is beautiful – and, in particular, the belly. Collections of aesthetic art photography of pregnant figures are advertised on well-known book order links and more down-to-earth impromptu snapshots of bellies are posted in chatrooms. Orders can be placed for rings for pierced navels, belly-

emphasizing t-shirts complete with slogans such as 'baby below', and 'b-belts' (noted for their appeal among pregnant pop singers and starlets) which cleverly camouflage the partially open zippers of designer jeans. Kits may be purchased online to create one's own plaster belly cast, complete with paint for embellishing; and, speaking of paint, advertisements of belly painting beauty contests held are in the United States, Australia and China.

The trendiness of the exposed pregnant belly cuts across contemporary geo-political boundaries and possibly historio-culturally defined collectivities. Exceptions are provided by the high fertility cultures and social strata of populations where pregnancy is less of a unique event than in 1.2-child families or where reproduction is absorbed by the fulfilment of men and women's responsibilities to procreate as a sign of allegiance to ideology, the social unit or the state. The aesthetics of pregnancy are not always focused on the photo album tracing the growth of the embryo in ultrasound snapshots or the blooming belly art photography. The belly-in-profile publicity is usually traced to the nude photo of the movie actress Demi Moore in her late months of pregnancy which appeared on the cover of a popular magazine in 1991 (Figure 1). The montage provoked heated moral and ethical debates and eventually a series of similar photos of other personages during pregnancy – including two of men with computer-graphics bellies mimicking the original posture. Thus began an era of fashionably-draped, but clearly outlined bellies of movie stars in the bloom of pregnancy posing for the media. Celebrity bellies peeking out from under t-shirts are monitored by paparazzi – or on the red carpet of film premieres draped in caftans.

Times have certainly changed from the days when proper maternity wear in western society had a pleated, tented and starched look about it. The actress Lucille Ball made media history in the 1950s by continuing to appear on her US television series throughout her entire pregnancy. Even though her comic repertoire was enhanced with exaggerated stances where the belly was suggested, it was still under the wraps of her rotund maternity dress. Nearly 50 years later, the heroine of a US action series (*Alias*) carried her real-life belly with her throughout the entire season of filming and story lines centred on her contours. Not to be outdone, women moderators on morning television talk shows in Athens (Greece), beginning in the early 2000s, successfully popularised new visions of pregnancy for their audiences. Their flair for revealing their expanding waistlines in trend-setting, youthful frocks has probably done more to help the country's 'demographic problem' than the last 20 years of state-budgets to curtail the plummeting birth rate. Video clips of celebrity mothers-to-be from around the world are a feature of daily chat shows along with segments entitled, for example, *Sexy Mamades* (sexy mummies) shows celebrity moms with their new infants and toddlers, and proving the speed with which the body 'returns' to its pre-pregnancy shape. This is tempting line to follow-up in analysing the question of 'why now?' does the spotlight fall on the belly beautiful in women's magazines, in health advertisements, in messages on soap opera plots and making pregnancy a fashionable choice for the 'modern' woman and the main-stream family. However, this article is intended to be a pomegranate; hopefully full of seeds for thought and expansion by other researchers.



Fig. 1 Demi Moore on Vanity Fair Cover

Inspired by Alexander Edmonds' question "Why does beauty sell so well" (Edmond 2008), we might ask, Why does the *belly beautiful* sell so well? How has it taken stage centre, not only figuratively as in the past, but in a very material and physical way? This is quite different from the image of women as glowing with health during pregnancy; instead the focus is on the belly which is distinctly singled out as *the main element* of beauty. This provokes anthropological questions such as what does the idea of the belly beautiful illuminate about contemporary western culture, women and pregnancy, couples and childbirth, and the future of reproductive technology ... and desires. Where are we taking women's bodies – where are women's bodies taking us? At least four perspectives can be explored in attempting to answer these questions, each encased in allusions to sexuality:

- 1 Unveiling the female form to uncover the secrets of nature.
- 2 Scripts for revealing pregnancy (or not).
- 3 Maintaining health / enhancing the healthy body as a moral obligation.
- 4 Verification of health, technology, transparency and aesthetics.

Unveiling mysteries

The unveiling of the female form, whether real or metaphorical, usually evokes images of mystery and the unknown. The female reproductive anatomy is imagined as full of secret chambers and deep caves which are essential to human life. Electron

microscopes and fibre optics leave little to the imagination; even so, photographs of the interiors of women's reproductive surfaces provide exquisite photos of the 'aura' of the ovum, its attraction for the spermatozoa, the moment of fertilization, the first cellular division of the forming embryo.

The 18th and 19th centuries were pregnant with scientific representations of women's bodies and discoveries about their 'True' function in reproduction. For generations of interested readers, scientists metaphorically described women's reproductive organs as simply an internal mirror of men's exterior genitalia (Martin 1987: 27-30). The allure of the image held even when microbiology provided sketches of the 'female seed' which threatened to shatter the ruling theories which portrayed the 'male substance' as the generative force (Stonehouse 1999). When the dissection of human cadavers and autopsies became a legalized part of scientific curiosity, draped, semi-nude, unconscious and possibly dead women began to appear as central figures in paintings of surgeries, operating theatres, and autopsies. The male figure is rarely on display in this vulnerable manner; instead, men are the surgeons and the scientific observers of the gothic scenes painted in dark strokes (see Jordanova 1989: 98, 102).

The unveiling of women's bodies in works of art (by male painters and sculptors) during 18th century Europe was intimately intertwined with the surge in scientific investigations about the interior workings of the human body (Jordanova 1989). The gendered characterization of both nature and science is clearly stated in the bronze statue unveiled by Louis-Ernest Barrias in 1899, *Nature Unveiling her Secrets to Science* (Figure 2). The erotic overtones of the seductively draped female figure's and her coy pose make the allegorical message clear; she is *Nature* revealing her secrets to *Science*. The art of the era also brought childbirth into focus – but this was hardly new in most parts of the world. Childbirth had been depicted in the art and material culture of humans in prehistory, through ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome; throughout the Indo-Oriental world and Native American cultures (Meltzer 1981, Stone 1976). The pregnant form, the clearly gravid belly, was missing – with the exception of small clay or terra cotta 'fertility figures' with their pendulant breasts, generous hips, thick thighs and rounded abdomens. Paintings and sculptures of explicitly pregnant women with swelling bellies (and not simply chubby) were absent, but birth settings were permitted. Indeed, paintings of the birth of the Virgin Mary and Nativity scenes are abundant in the Christian tradition. A few paintings of home-birth settings are more down-to-earth and instructive; e.g., *A Greek Woman from the Archipelago Giving Birth, 2nd half of the 18th century*.¹ Even so, they could hardly be considered as candidates for illustrations in pregnancy and birth primers of their day.

Pregnancy was obliquely suggested by context, posture or expression – a woman's hand on her diaphragm, a slightly open gown at the stomach, an enigmatic smile. The 'Mona Lisa smile' is so often thought to mean pregnancy that the phrase is sometimes used to infer exactly that; i.e., the 'little secret'. Georges de La Tour, an early 17th century artist from Lorraine, painted five representations of a pensive Mary Magdalen; e.g., *Mary Magdalen with Two Flames*, the other *The Penitent Magdalen* which show a woman with a curving belly – enigmatically with a skull in her lap – seated in a chair



Fig. 2 Nature unveiling her secrets to science, L-E Barrias

looking into the flame of a candle on the nearby table.² However, de La Tour's works also depict other women, sometimes elderly, with swollen bellies; thus, it is not possible to conclude that the Magdalen drawings were of pregnant figures. The female figure in Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* seems to be pregnant and even more so the figure in *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (see Figure 3). However, Dutch fashions in the mid-17th century seemed to have encouraged a bulky silhouette; e.g., short jackets encircling padded skirts. While fine art of the 18th century European schools never seemed to have a shortage of women with a well-rounded abdomen, the reason for the curves was unclear – pregnancy or notions of beauty or both.

Explicitly pregnant bodies begin to appear in art in the early 20th century. Regally elaborate in Klimt's *Hope II* (see Figure 4). Grotesque and macabre in Frieda Kahlo's *Henry Ford Hospital* (more of a miscarriage than a pregnancy). Alice Neel, an American artist (1900-1984), included the pregnant nude form in her works which were often marked by a sense of despair and poverty. Ron Mueck created a series of hyperrealist sculptures of the pregnant form (which are actually quite 'to scale' but are overwhelming in their frankness) and over-sized newborns. In 2005, a great deal of controversy followed the unveiling of Marc Quinn's nude statue of a pregnant woman in Trafalgar Square. The focus of the public upset was not only the belly of Alice Lapper. It was the absence of her arms and her short legs, a result of a rare chromosomal disorder, which however, did not distract her from becoming an artist, the mother of a son, and celebrating her pregnancy in her own photographs.

We finally meet face-to-face with the belly beautiful in everyday life – unveiled, nude or draped or in form-fitting attire – in the 1990s. Maternity fashion (or perhaps non-fashion) became increasing less bubbly and ballooned, leaning towards stretch leggings and kolans, athletic jogging clothes and lycra tops. In-vogue and everyday apparel in general became more minimalist, more revealing; e.g., low-cut jeans barely covering the upward trajectory of the hypotenuse of the pubic triangle and from the other view, permission for lacy undies to show over the top of hip-huggers. It is probably not by chance that the 'empire' line comes in and out of fashion for several generations; followed by the 'baby-doll' look for decades. Pregnant and non-pregnant women alike wear these billowing lines and both wear curve fitting t-shirts and body clinging cotton knits.

The belly was unveiled along with its adjacent curves (which helped to distinguish it from the simply chubby, uninhabited belly), beginning from the diaphragm and ending with the slope toward the pubis. The protruding inverted navel, a popular decoration of Mother Nature during the last few months of pregnancy, also found a place in fashionable view after embarrassing itself for generations. In fact, the upper slopes of the belly were probably never the target of cover-up maternity attire; it was the downward slope which needed to be obscured. The intent of 'maternity dresses' was probably not the camouflage of pregnancy – because by the time they were needed, there was little question about what was in the belly. Rather, the tenty, balloony styles were designed to obscure only specific points on and around the belly, especially the navel and ... that precarious slope towards the lower regions of the body.

The *pièce de resistance* comes from the presentation of the belly and female gravid form as it is presented in art photography, where the belly emerges as totally nude. It is photographed as a solo element, even without the rest of the body; or as a point of reflection for the pregnant woman, sometimes surrounded by other intimate figures whose gaze follows hers. The photographs are published in books with elegant covers; their content is available for 'viewing only' in internet advertisements (i.e., copyright protected from downloading). Symmetry is a central feature of the art of pregnancy photos as a 'template of beauty' (Slater 2006). The symmetrical, nicely rounded belly predominates; but the rest of the body is usually not marred by any hint



Fig. 3 Woman in blue reading a letter, Johannes Vermeer



Fig. 4 Hope II, Gustav Klimt

of the edema of pregnancy; i.e., it is as slim and unaltered from its pre-reproductive years. The legs and arms remain slender; in some photos the legs look too spindly to support the belly, the arms too ethereal to rescue a toddler from falling down. Both arms are often folded over the belly, or one (usually the right arm) is flung over the breasts and the other (usually the left) is under the belly (as in the original Demi Moore cover photo). The curve of the lower back (a nagging pain centre for most women during pregnancy and birth) has its own spotlight – responding to the bulk of the belly it supports, protruding out of a slightly open pair of blue jeans on an otherwise adolescent figure.

As if to mimic art, a flood of internet links post photos of women during pregnancy, snapped by their own digital cameras. Women from a variety of life-styles and socio-economic groups send photos of their ‘bump’ (as it is called in one of the most popular blogs) to links or create their own website to document their pregnancy and, in continuation, photos of the newborn. The sites also serve as question-answer forums and support groups for the exchange of information and experiences; e.g., care of stretch marks, heart burn, haemorrhoids and swollen feet. If the ‘first unveiling’ of women in the 18th century was a result of science searching for the secrets of nature, what is the goal of the ‘second unveiling’ witnessed in the 1900s and the new millennium? How can we explain the rush to expose the belly ... the lack of hesitation or inhibition to bare it all?

Revealing pregnancy: Myths, metaphors, media

Scripts for revealing pregnancy to family and larger society can be located in myths, fairy tales, folk sayings, metaphors, stylised vocabulary and local conventions. The secrecy and intrigue enveloping a suspected pregnancy without the evidence of a belly, and the observation of the rules and rituals for its eventual revelation, provided a fertile arena. The creation of restrictions, taboos, rewards and punishments about the perhaps-pregnant body were enough to chase Jack up the Beanstalk and provoke Rapunzel to let down her hair. Pregnancy is a repository of the solidarity and prognosis of the family and community. As a liminal phase, it is a perfect time to ask advice from elders, solidify religious commitments, consult with oracles, seek fortune tellers and perhaps even conspire with the dark forces.

The fairy tale has long represented reproductive realities (Tucker 2003: 8). Hidden within the plots, particularly the literary tales of 17th century England and France, when the authors were often women, are references to ways to identify pregnancy and to delicately manage the transmission of information about it. This was the era of a ‘new valorization of the homebound wife’ (Tucker 2003: 9), a theme which resurfaces in contemporary times with almost with circadian predictability in novels, films and television series. Versions of Rapunzel are full of allegorical references to food cravings in pregnancy, the sexual meaning of braided hair, the desire of old crones for a child of their own and implicate the peasant as a supplier of infants for barren nobility (Lurie 2008, Warner 2008).

Metaphorical expressions for pregnancy only vaguely allude to the belly, for example, the embryo as 'a bun in the oven'. Food symbolism is called upon to explain what is growing in the belly – or how it got there; for example, foods containing seeds and even better, beans – seeds with a personality and even ethics. In the US, the watermelon (suspiciously shaped like the pregnant belly) is sometimes the culprit: "She ate a lot of watermelon seeds." In Greece, the watermelon is replaced by "She ate broad beans and her belly swelled up" and young women are warned "Watch out that you don't eat too many broad beans" (a veiled warning about a surprise pregnancy) (Trakas 1981). Slang terms indicate an unplanned pregnancy: e.g., in the US and Canada 'in a fix', 'preggers' and 'knocked up', in Australia and the UK, 'up the duff'. The gravid belly sets all speculation aside and puts gossip and wagging tongues to rest. Once a pregnancy is no longer possible to hide and 'out in the open', its ambassador – the belly – may even calm malevolent intentions and settle disruptions in the social fabric ... or at least hold them in abeyance.

Of all the signs and symptoms of pregnancy, the blossoming belly is usually the last to be noted; indeed, 'false pregnancies' have dotted the historical terrain of nobility and royalty – where the expanding waistline (or 'girth') of the queen is noted by her ladies-in-waiting and a focus of court gossip. Earlier signs of pregnancy can be camouflaged, kept out of the public eye or manipulated as called for in the plot; for example, dizziness and fainting are the usual clues in Victorian theatrical and literary works which signal a pregnancy in progress. The view of women of the leisure class as decorative but delicate objects (Dominguez-Rue 2004) may allow the interpretation of the 'early symptoms' of pregnancy to be interpreted as 'fragility'. The view of women as invalids, the 'weaker sex', fraught with ailments related to their reproductive organs, was elaborated in the 1700s and fit well with the expectations of the ideal Victorian, pre-Raphaelite woman.

Modern gynaecology appeared in the 1860s as the science of the human female, with the goal of uncovering the causes of women's frailty and providing treatment and cures for their diseases. Within the folds of its scientific agenda there seemed to be others; for example, controlling women's sexuality (Moscucci 1990) as well as social order and morality (e.g., see Hahn 1995). Science increasingly drew attention to women's bodies – which should be closed from the public sphere but needed to be opened to the medical gaze. Together, 'invalidism' and science constructed women's sexuality and 'nature' and held onto their hegemony when science unveiled woman (as vice versa) in taming the new woman of nature and the senses. Parallel processes emerge from an analysis of the relationship between imperialism and motherhood (see, for example, Davin 1978). Invalidism was thrust upon women, but it was also appropriated by women to their advantage; for example, to divert prying eyes from the early symptoms of pregnancy. Under this social format, women could wait until the belly clearly announced itself – a small measure of control which is not available to 'today's woman'. The first ultrasound is recommended early in the first trimester – and from then on, everything needs to become as transparent as possible. In this context, why not put the belly in the spotlight – why not bring its contours into full view?

In the world of virtual and real-time telecommunications and international mass media, prenatal health programmes have tended to create a transcultural script for revealing, discussing and protecting pregnancy. Not that all women (and men) everywhere will put it into action, but it is probably safe to say that they note the differences between what they are accustomed to and what they see from elsewhere. In the 1960s, pregnancy was clinically confirmed by the 'rabbit test' – and the announcement that 'the rabbit died' served as the metaphor of good news in middle class USA and Hollywood movies. In the early years of television, knitting booties [baby stockings] was the signal to husbands that they were about to be informed that they would become fathers. A woman waking up her husband in the middle of the night to go shopping to bring her ice cream and pickles was the signal to the television audience that the couple was 'expecting'. Soap operas in the US (which often appear in other countries) create story lines to educate the public about ways to verify pregnancy and appropriate protection of the embryo. Many a pregnancy in these afternoon series is revealed by the discovery of a carelessly discarded pregnancy test kit or a woman declining a glass of wine during a celebratory dinner.

Historical and cultural contexts provide scripts for pregnancy. The place of the belly in the *grande* culture was assisted in history by patrimonial and political issues about fertility, succession, inheritance and producing a male heir – all of which contributed to confining women's worth to their ability to reproduce (Tucker 2003). Presentations of the passive 'cult of true womanhood' and domesticity (Welter 1966), the imposition of 'invalidisation' (Domingues-Rue 2004) and the 'emptied' Victorian woman are contrasted with the Gibson Girl and the flapper of the new 20th century (see Banta 1987) – androgynous, hearty, sporty; and finally, the robust obviously pregnant and blooming women. These are not always positive images, for example, when an 'unexpected pregnancy' occurs outside of cultural boundaries; e.g., before the completion of commitments between the couple, before the 'right' time, after the 'proper' age, between couples from different social categories.

The scenario for announcing pregnancy that women have in mind is mediated by the audience and a protocol for revelations. The 'wait until it shows' approach still holds as described in classic ethnographies of Greek culture (Campbell 1964, Du Boulay 1974, Friedl 1962), as well as contemporary anthropological works about gender and reproduction in Greece (Dubisch 1995, Georges 2008, Paxson 2004). Pregnancy announces itself when the belly begins to emerge. Until then, it is nurtured, protected and guarded, but not discussed. 'Symptoms of early pregnancy', unless they become severe enough to require medical attention, are stoically endured. Anything to draw attention to the pregnancy, especially 'flaunting' the belly, is considered dangerous. It invites admiration and jealousy from nearly all ages: Younger children in the family, people at the end of their reproductive time and couples committed to becoming parents, unsuccessful in their efforts, experimenting with new reproductive technologies.

Women who are now great grandmothers avoided announcing pregnancy due to their fear of the evil eye – an extremely tenacious construct which is ever-ready to be called upon to explain the unexpected and unforeseen. In this case, it complements the sense of propriety and love of honour. Contemporary grandmothers, who may have

never even seen their own belly in full view of a mirror, remember being warned about the evil eye; thus, they caution that showing off the pregnant belly is inviting danger. Mothers of teenagers ask why young pregnant women are so anxious to announce a pregnancy even before it 'shows'. The scripts about body and bellies for women in their 30s-40s who began childbearing some ten years ago tend to resemble those of their mothers; for example, complaints about the younger generation of women who 'rush' to announce their pregnancy early on or make little attempt to conceal it. Although the evil eye is not a reference, it is nearly impossible for them to fathom why young women are so blatant in allowing the contours of their belly to be visible to others.

In general, there is the feeling that there is something intrinsically 'wrong' with flaunting the belly; an idea which has less to do with issues of modesty than it does with endangering the pregnancy outcome. "Why show it off when no one is really sure what will happen?" The 'it' here refers not to the belly but to what is inside. Young women – in their late 20s – late 30s are not worried about the evil eye; instead, the lure of the belly beautiful has caught their eye. "I loved my belly when I was pregnant. I liked to walk with it out in front as much as possible."

The Greek paradigm is selected here for its long-standing anthropological presentation; e.g., the evil eye in maintaining moralities of 'honour and shame', ethnographies the 1950s based on fieldwork in agrarian societies, the behaviour of Mediterranean women. The same could be said of women in small towns in Germany or the mountains of the US where the protection of the good family name was the ultimate virtue (which, of course, automatically included the virginity of its daughters). The same could be said of women in Asia – the ideal of passivity and servitude of men – who, nonetheless, have recently organized their pregnant belly painting contests. In these contexts, the advertised and elaborated belly seems like a foreign epidemic (and epidemics always come from elsewhere, do they not?).

The moral duty to enhance the body

The exposure of the belly is almost a necessary part of a normal, health pregnancy in this generation; indeed, it has become part of a 'responsible' pregnancy. There is an expectation that the belly will be seen, will not be hidden; will be even adorned as part of attention to pampering, improving upon, taking care of and ultimately keeping the body healthy. The upkeep of the body and improving on it is a moral issue – which outweighs the fears and pressures of old wives' tales about draughts on the belly and beliefs in the evil eye.

New maternity styles and adorning the belly

Styles of women's apparel reflect the attitudes of society towards woman (see Banta 1985). The 1990s clearly began the era of the belly *as* fashion (at first the young belly, later the pregnant belly); it was a definite break from earlier epochs in two ways:

1) Fashion no longer camouflaged the belly; and 2) pregnancy itself became the fashion, in particular the belly and ways to show it off to the best advantage. This is strikingly demonstrated in a chlorine bleach advertisement (Dobscha 2006) which presents six feminine archetypes of the second half of the 20th century: the army gal, the mod girl, the businesswoman, etc. The woman of the 1990s, the only figure shown in profile, is dressed in pyjama-slacks, flip-flop sandals and ... a skimpy lycra top stretched over her belly which she is supporting with her hands. The only pregnant woman of the six figures in the advertisement seems to suggest a celebration of the pregnant body; a body which is now as normal and as generic as the others (see Figure 5).



Fig. 5 Women stereotypes in Western advertisements from the 1950s to 2000

This celebration of the pregnant body is a far cry from the attempts by previous generations to cover up their 'condition' and to go into fashion hibernation by wearing clothes designed to downplay the pregnant belly. But what is troubling about the woman of the 90s in the advert is that she is a *new* stereotype of the pregnant woman: blonde, very pretty, and very skinny. Her figure says that while US culture is willing to accept the image of the pregnant body, it is only a certain type of pregnant body that is revered. It is only the belly that should look pregnant and rotund; the ankles should not be swollen, the knees not chubby, the upper arms not flabby. Compared to women of the leisure class in earlier generations who were expected to go into 'confinement' during the last trimester, today's women are expected to be visible right to the onset of labour (or the appointment for induced birth or a scheduled caesarean section). Women celebrities who avoid their public during pregnancy are suspected by the gossip media as 'letting themselves go'.

Advertising maternity apparel on the internet has globalized 'style' during pregnancy. The maternity clothes adverts of the 1950s in the US used non-pregnant models (Dobscha 2006). In some parts of the world maternity clothing is not advertised in catalogues or shop windows (or even considered as necessary), while in some countries, the advertisements use cartoon figures rather than photographs of real women. A quick Google search using keywords such as 'maternity fashion' reveals a multitude of messages for pregnant women. They are advised to proudly display their 'bump'

by avoiding the old fashion disguises of large bows on the front of dresses and show off their bellies with form-fitting clothes that acknowledge their pregnant bodies or purposely bring attention to it by taking advantage of fuller cleavage with lower necklines, showing off the belly in stretch tops that 'hug the curves' with t-shirts with slogans such as 'future mom' or 'baby below'. As for seashore apparel, pregnant women are encouraged to bare as much as they dare.³

The online advertising about the 'b-buckle', a new accoutrement in maternity fashion, reveals an entirely new mentality about what to wear and how to wear it. Favourite blue jeans can still be worn during pregnancy; simply weave the b-buckle through the belt loops, leave the zipper open and the b-buckle will cover up open space. One advertiser boasts that the b-buckle is a favourite of celebrity moms and another explains,

Necessity is the mother of invention. And mothers everywhere needed b-buckles desperately. Now, sexy mamas can wear their hottest designer jeans throughout their pregnancy and beyond. Bye-bye rubber band and scary maternity jeans! B-buckles are the hippest new maternity accessory for savvy mamas.... Oh yeah baby! Based in trend-setting Malibu, b-buckles are made with love to keep you stylish and sexy! Just loop, snap and go.⁴

Nude bellies can be enhanced with navel rings, which can also be purchased online. They use soft flexible plastic studs (rather than metal) and are thus "perfect for use during pregnancy". They accommodate the changing belly and avoid injury to the umbilicus region as the abdomen approaches and reaches its full-term rotundity. Even so, women who have navel rings have concerns (to say nothing of those of their obstetricians, one might imagine) as evidenced by interchanges in chatrooms especially devoted to the topic. The following debate on the beauty and dangers of navel rings between five women was overheard online.⁵

I have had a belly ring for about seven years now and I still love it. However, I am not sure exactly when or if I need to remove it. I guess I would have to if my belly button pops out. Anyone know about this or have a similar situation?

I had one too, and on my last appointment, the first thing my OB said when she did my ultrasound was? That thing has to come out!' So that night, my husband took it out for me. I've had mine for about seven years now, too, and it looks sooo funny without it in. My doctor said I can put it back in if I want after the baby comes.

I had my belly pierced when I got pregnant with my first child. And it has to come out. Your skin will tear and get irritated if you leave it in. I left mine in, and it did that. The infection could also harm the baby, I found out. To get it removed, just go down to a tattoo parlor and have them remove it, or take cutters to it and just cut it.

I guess I am the odd one here! I have had a belly ring for about 10 years. It has gone through three pregnancies and three deliveries. Never had a problem! I would wait to

see how your belly ring is affected by your growing belly before deciding if it needs to come out.

I asked my doctor at my first appointment whether he thought I should take mine out, and he took a look at it and said he didn't think it would be a problem. Perhaps it depends on each individual. I think the sexiness of it has disappeared with my waistline, but I'm going to try to keep it in and see what happens.

Belly painting

The 'first-ever pregnant belly contest' was advertised online in 2003 and held in San Antonio Texas. In 2005, Beijing advertised its own 'pregnant belly painting model contest' as the first ever (Figure 6). The announcement comes as a surprise: At the time of the competition, China rarely used maternity apparel adverts and, perhaps stereotypically, tended to present a sexually conservative image. Nevertheless, belly painting contests were subsequently announced in other parts of China (perhaps in preparation for the Olympics?); and the western world scrambled to keep up. 2008 may have been the first year that Halloween belly painting contests were held in a number of US cities. Predictably, the pumpkin was the most popular image.



Fig. 6 Backstage at a pregnant belly-painting competition in Beijing, 2005

At least one on-line advertisement link for belly painting kit includes a gallery where satisfied users of the kit can submit a photo of their finished product. Or they can tandem their order for the belly painting kit with a belly plaster cast kit, which, as



Fig. 7 Among the first belly casts posted online

the advert says, can be painted and preserved as a family art object. According to the American Pregnancy Association, belly casting is a rapidly growing trend, and more than 6 million pregnant women each year in the US have a belly cast made (Mata 2008). One on-line company sells 1000 belly casting kits a month. According to the American Pregnancy Association more than six million pregnant women each year in the United States are having belly casts made.⁶

Women in places in the US such as Brighton (Michigan) and Flint (Michigan), Flushing (New York), Hoboken (New Jersey) and western North Carolina have made internet sites where belly photos, belly casts and other experiences can be shared with other pregnant women. Sites have titles which use key words such as body – mother – proud – shape. One site averages 25,000 page views a day and on another, hundreds of women have uploaded photos of their pregnancy casts, some painted with sports logos or *holiday* themes, or bronzing them to look like *sculpture*.

For an event that used to be so private in culture, to now a personal pregnancy belly cast hung on the wall marks a significant development in how pregnancy is being viewed in society. Now it's something to be talked about and shared and enjoyed by everyone.⁷

Is pregnancy art photography and painting the belly (the real one or its plaster cast) liberating women, men, couples and families in formation – or is it more of the 'same old same old' in a new frame? More taming of the body under the pretence of presenting it as free, wild, natural? Chubby arms and thighs, swollen ankles and fingers are left out of the picture. In fact, the belly is the only item which seems to be thriving in photos of pregnant women. This would be the intersection to bring in the well-travelled road of the commodification of the body – and I will leave that to other colleagues to develop.

Transparency: The belly as verification of health

In the contemporary world of high-tech reproduction, health in pregnancy must be continually re-affirmed – the health status continually tested, scrutinized, evaluated. Even to the last minute of an otherwise healthy pregnancy, the idea that something can go wrong is central in the practice (and philosophy) of modern obstetrics. High tech makes it possible for monitoring all along the way and obstetricians breathe easier than they could in previous generations; it also allows for the detection of 'risk' and 'high risk' pregnancies. For the layperson, for expectant mothers, the labelling of risk which technology brings is over-ridden by the sense that everything is under control. Science reigns over the old superstitions which, in some cultures, kept pregnancy

under wraps for as long as possible. Instead of concealing the belly, it can now be shown; moreover, it should be – or must be – shown, lest the impression is conveyed that all is not well.

Ultrasound visualizes the belly from the inside ... not only the embryo, but the condition of the amnion, the attachment and mobility of the placenta, and other membranes involved in nurturing the embryo and preserving the integrity of the uterus. Technology has unveiled sub-microscopic views of fertilization and cell division. Aesthetically beautiful photos revealing the process of conception at the cellular level are so exquisite and ethereal that an interpretation of what is 'really' taking place requires a guidebook or at least an explanatory label. The inner workings of the body and the gymnastics of conception are exposed; the belly is simply the shell where the generative mysteries take place. There is still room for imagination in the inexperienced eye of a person looking at an ultrasound photo of a tiny human being – but science can step in to correct that.

Our demand for transparency parallels what technology can reveal to us. For centuries women created their own transparency about pregnancy; women learned to listen to their body for signals of pregnancy, other women monitored the pregnancy with vigilance (in the leisure class, not always charitable) and midwives developed their craft based on empirical details. Transparency disappeared when men took over obstetrics; they rarely viewed the pregnant body, the belly, or perineum – or had anything to say about their health or beauty (see Oakley 1984). In the leisure class, pregnant bodies were covered and secluded; and it is the leisure class (and celebrities) which presently informs us about the belly beautiful.

The pregnant belly is the residence of two bodies in one. An affliction of even a small part of the body when it comes under the scrutiny of the medical eye is more than it seems, as Ann Oakley writes of a broken arm. In general the pregnant female body has been disturbing to society (Oakley 2007). We are conditioned by the image of the perfect body – and by the notion that we are morally culpable if we don't achieve this (Edmonds 2008). We have cultivated an image of the perfect belly as a moral obligation to keep fit, balanced, and symmetrical. Women who do not follow this and do not 'display' that they have accomplished this, have a lot to answer for.

Women are usually said to be at their most beautiful when they are pregnant; 'glowing with health'. The belly is 'more' than an expectant and blossoming abdomen; it is a metaphor for health, a commentary on health status and if not properly cared for, it can be a crisis of embodiment and the perfect self or a confusion between body and identity. Aesthetic health is not simply the decoration or enhancement of the human body – but the "way in which aesthetics and the physiological health of the organism become linked" (Edmonds 2008: 153).

Obstetricians advise low weight gain in pregnancy for health reasons but also to reduce the need for 'postpartum corrections', repairing health and beauty threatening changes which result from pregnancy. From here it is easy to see the "romantic notion that one's life can be turned into a work of art" (Edmonds 2008: 155). Pregnancy becomes a work of art – beyond medical technologies and marketing, but in terms of larger meanings and moral frameworks of health and the appearance of the modern

subject (ibid: 156). The meanings of the belly beautiful are multiple and involve the expression of core values about social reproduction, dreams of female fulfilment, couple solidarity, the future, immortality ... all extremely strong symbols.

But the belly beautiful has several contingency clauses; for example, its fullness should not extend to the rest of the body – which should return to ‘normal’ soon after the birth and the belly should become flat again. The belly is perceived as beautiful only so long as it believed to be carrying a beautiful, healthy, viable, perfect child-to-be. The attractively rounded gravid belly attests to the good health of couples and the viability of their relationship. And in some societies, the mutual social acceptability between their families and the ability of the woman to provide a continuation of the family. Health is defined here by viability, acceptability, ability – in turn related to other factors such as timing of the pregnancy, mother’s age, marital status, health status of the parents, life style.

Some observers express the idea that the belly needs to be returned to undercover or at least restrained (... and women’s sexuality needs to be brought under control). It is probably too late to re-veil women and all of the values related to sexuality, choice and freedom. The first unveiling of the female form was a metaphor for understanding nature and embracing science; this second unveiling particularly related to the belly goes beyond science to the virtue represented by the belly, the fulfilment of desire and proof of love. Or, as one young woman puts it, in more everyday terms ...

I am pregnant and feel like crap most of the time. I can’t wait to see my baby boy but damn I don’t know how some people can do this more than 3 or 4 (or 9) times. The good thing about it is that my husband is being super sweet and protective of me and he talks to my belly which is so cute.⁸

A few words to round things out ...

Some may argue that by putting the belly in the fashion spotlight has nothing to do with choice and freedom, and is actually one more conspiracy to control women. The glamorisation of pregnancy, the decorated belly, the ethereal beauty of mother and child, can be seen as an excellent growth programme in family planning and population policy. The belly beautiful replaces the need for images used by antiabortion groups and subconsciously keeps the human race going. It may be going out on an interpretative limb to comment that one of the reasons that the belly is receiving so much attention is because it is the last ‘cry’ of a world where, in the next few generations, pregnancy as we presently know it may cease to exist.

New assisted reproductive technology interrupts the dyadic tensions which anthropology has been so fond of analysing (dating to the days of Lévi-Strauss). It profoundly destabilized the nature-culture arguments about conception and kinship (Strathern 1992) – but reaffirmed anthropological thought on issues of gender, kinship and reproduction. Pregnancy is no longer an accident or a surprise; after successful IVF, it’s a celebration of science over nature. Unexpected pregnancies have faded

from view or at least the unmarried pregnant woman is no longer condemned to wear a wooden letter on a cord around her neck. Pregnancy – appropriately worn – attests to leisure, wealth, good health and good sex. The display of the belly affirms the success of obstetrical science, the relaxation of codes about sexuality, the concern about decreasing fertility rates ... and, perhaps, the realization that since sex and reproduction ‘seem’ to be connected a concern about the future which, for the time being, rests on the belly beautiful.

Notes

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A draft of this article was presented at the ‘Beauty & Health’ Symposium held at the University of Amsterdam, December 2008. I want to thank Alexander Edmonds who commented on the presentation, the other participants who added their support in a lively discussion, and the reviewers from *Medische Antropologie*. Peter Loizos and Evgenia Georges graciously commented on the revised draft, and this is a good place to publicly thank them for their scientific camaraderie through the years. A special thank you is for Sjaak van der Geest who encouraged my initial thoughts about the ‘belly beautiful’ and insisted that the article be accompanied by pictorial materials.

- 1 For the painting of a woman giving birth on the island of Chios, see © Bridgeman Art Library / Bibliotheque des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, France / Archives Charmet http://www.bridgemanartondemand.com/art/143260/A_Greek_Woman_from_the_Archipelago_giving_birth_2nd_half_18th.
- 2 La Tour’s several renditions of Mary Magdalen can be located on the following site: <http://www.ladysmaidjewels.com/MTblog/archives/000847.html>.
- 3 For example, see: To ‘bare’ or not to ‘bare’ <http://www.modernstork.com/content/002500.shtml>.
- 4 <http://www.stylehive.com/bookmark/buckles--shop-229719>.
- 5 <http://pregnancyfashion.com/tips/look/87.htm>.
- 6 http://www.mlive.com/flintjournal/community/index.ssf/2008/04/oh_baby_these_days_pregnancy_g.html.
- 7 From an interview with Laura Tropp, associate professor of communication arts at Marymount Manhattan College who is writing *A Womb with a View: Pregnancy in Changing Media Environments*. http://www.mmm.edu/cgi-bin/MySQLdb?MYSQL_VIEW=/faculty/view_one.txt&webid=176.
- 8 <http://www.experienceproject.com/uw.php?e=22403>.

Appendix: List of figures and their origins

Figure 1: *Demi Moore on Vanity Fair Cover, August 1991*

The citations for Demi Moore on the August 1991 cover of Vanity Fair are numerous. For example: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/More_Demi_Moore

Figure 2: *Nature unveiling her secrets to science*, L-E Barrias 1899.

From the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, California
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_Unveiling_Herself_Before_Science

Figure 3: *Woman in blue reading a letter*, Johannes Vermeer, late 17th Century

<http://vermeer0708.wordpress.com/2008/06/02>
http://www.essentialvermeer.com/women's_faces/vermeer's_women.html#Pregnant

Figure 4: *Hope II*, Gustav Klimt, 1907-1908

Hope II by Gustav Klimt (on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York) is made available on a number of internet sites, including:

http://www.artchive.com/artchive/K/klimt/klimt_hope2.jpg.html
http://www.fulcrumgallery.com/Gustav-Klimt/Hope-II_25944.htm

Figure 5: *Women stereotypes in Western advertisements from the 1950s to 2000*

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/asr/v007/7.3dobscha.html>

Figure 6: *Backstage at a pregnant belly-painting competition in Beijing, 2005*

Photos of the Beijing belly-painting beauty context can be found at:
http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200507/05/eng20050705_194227.html
<http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/cw/139641.htm>

Figure 7: *Among the first belly casts posted online*

The belly cast in the photo is one of the first posted online, courtesy of Proud Body.
<http://jscms.jrn.columbia.edu/cns/2008-03-04/hoos-bellycasts>

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