



Raphael's "Portrait of a Nude Woman," circa 1518.

Carnal Knowledge *By Faye Flam*

Which breast is best? The timing matters

We are the only buxom mammal. Others don't have boobs, per se. Most have mammary glands that swell when they're lactating. What sits or hangs or juts out from the human female chest is mostly fat — not just ordinary fat but fat packed with evolutionary mystery and cultural baggage.

Why do men love certain types of breasts? Are women drawn to breasts as well? If not, why is so much cleavage displayed by women's magazines?

To answer those questions we must go back in time — before Victoria's Secret, before even the breast-shaping influence of Hugh Hefner and Helen Gurley Brown.

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, perhaps in our Neanderthal or Homo erectus ancestors, a coordinated burst of evolution took place that transformed the female body and redirected the male sex drive toward that

The ideal size and shape change. Early man preferred his woman fleshy — it was a key to survival.

new body.

The details remain sketchy, but evolution can give us a plausible account, says Bobbi Lowe, a biologist at the University of Michigan. At some point it all goes back to fertility. Women who could pack on fat reserves were more fertile, and men who chose them had more offspring. Men with a taste for fat reserves and their fat-loving genes proliferated. Faced with this, women who could create obvious, showy pockets of fat also left more offspring because they attracted more devotion from males. They began to put fat on the buttocks, hips and breasts.

The process behind all this is called sexual selection, a concept discovered by Darwin and detailed in his *Descent of Man*. It explains the tail of the peacock and other sexual ornaments. If enticing enough, such ornaments can evolve even when they detract from a creature's ability to get food or escape predators.

But why do women pay attention to breasts? Because breasts have been subject to the tyranny of fashion for centuries. Your powers of attraction and class status depend on the lacing of your corset, the wiring in your bra, or the skill of your surgeon.

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