

HIS 'N' HERS

Coco Chanel once declared that “women should not smell like flowers”. And yet one whiff of our face creams tells us the exact opposite is true. Historically, the worlds of skincare and fragrance have been a decidedly girly affair with pink packaging and peonies as a unifying theme. But just a few hours north-east of the UK is a country where a simpler attitude to life has fuelled an entirely more modern approach to beauty. Following cool unisex denim lines by Acne, and a gender-blurring ‘hen’ pronoun, Sweden is at the forefront of another burgeoning trend: genderless beauty.

To be clear, this isn’t about androgyny; girls’ products looking like boys’ or vice versa. It’s about a beauty industry that has been created to meet the needs of both men and women – one product for all – to challenge sexual stereotyping and be as fashionably gender-neutral as a smoking jacket. “If you were to snoop through the bathroom shelves of my friends, you’d struggle to work out if the products belonged to a male or female. That’s typical,” says Stockholm-born make-up artist, Linda Öhrström.

In many ways, this is hardly surprising. The Swedish take aesthetics very seriously so a verve for minimalist and modernist design has naturally transcended into the beauty sphere. “There is a distinct lack of floral patterns or gender specific colouring on our packaging,” notes Öhrström. “Swedes like things to be straightforward and functional so there’s no giveaway as to who the end user is.” Think dark apothecary bottles with tasteful cream labels and simple typeface; or monochromatic tubes like Verso’s Super Eye Serum, £65, you’ll want in your bathroom for their aesthetic alone.

FORM AND FUNCTION

The simplicity of bottles like Maria Åkerberg’s best-selling Dark Chocolate Mask, £17.50, with their fuss-free designs that speak volumes about their effectiveness for both sexes, impart an important cultural message: beauty is no longer a playground for woman alone. “Swedes have a long-standing tradition of using the pharmacy or ‘Apotekat’ for their beauty needs,” explains Öhrström. “For us, pharmacists signal authority and that is reflected in the look of the products.” Not that Swedish women place much emphasis on complex formulas trading on emotive language such as ‘collagen boosting’ and

‘wrinkle improving’. In fact, Swedish women have the lowest per capita spend on anti-ageing products in Europe, preferring a more pared-back approach. “Scandinavians use fewer products and are realistic in their expectations,” explains Verso founder, Lars Fredriksson. “I strongly believe that skin routines are too complicated. Most people only need a good day cream and a good night cream.”

That these simple formulas work on all skins – both men and women alike – and have natural aromas merely adds to their universal appeal. Take L:A Bruket’s Facial Oil, £18. It has achieved cult status courtesy of its apothecary packaging and nourishing petitgrain and thistle oils, ideal for any skin exposed to Sweden’s harsh winters. Solaris, £85.50, by unisex fragrance house Agonist Parfums blends citrus fruits with wood and amber. It is neither sweet and cloying nor is it overwhelmingly masculine. It smells like damp, bare, sun-kissed skin. While Björk & Berries Dark Rain, £50, takes an unapologetically dark approach. Spiked by witch hazel, as well as earthy amber, the effect is wet leaves in autumn. Like a gamine cropped hairstyle, neither scent would seem out of place on a man or woman.

What cements Sweden’s status as the beauty landscape of the future is the fact that shared products are already the norm, not just a bandwagon to jump on. This is a market five years ahead of the rest of the global beauty industry, where personality prevails and individual taste overrides clichés about how men and women want their products to be.

New research proves the genderless trend is already spreading beyond Sweden: some 45% of men and 54% of women now admit they are switched off from gender-driven marketing and share products with members of the opposite sex in their households.

Look upon the Swedish beauty offering as a glimpse into the future. “Unisex beauty has always sold well for fragrance brands, but we’re starting to see this filtering down into cosmetics and skincare, too,” says Victoria Buchanan from trend forecasters The Future Laboratory. “For long-term relevance, brands now need to think beyond the sexes and focus on being timeless, instead.” Perhaps an end to those pink bottles is already in sight, as our bathrooms become a more democratic affair. It couldn’t come a moment too soon.



From top: Orange Blossom & Lavender Soap, £6.50, Klinta Co; Floral Memento Hand Cream, £4, & Other Stories; Papaya Peeling, £4.50, Maria Åkerberg; Wax, £16.95, Lernberger Stafsing



PAPER ARTIST: LYDIA SHIRREE. STOCKISTS: & OTHER STORIES (STORIES.COM), AGONIST PARFUMS (AGONISTPARFUMS.COM), BJÖRK & BERRIES (BJORKANDBERRIES.SE), BYREDO (BYREDO.COM), C/O DEER (CAREOFDEER.COM), KLINTA CO (KLINTACO.SE), L:A BRUKET (LARBUKET.SE), LERNBERGER STAFSING (LERNBERGERSTAFSING.COM), MARIA ÅKERBERG (MARIÅKERBERG.ND), SACHAJUAN (SACHAJUAN.COM), VERSO (VERSOSKINCARE.COM), VILHELM PARFUMERIE (VILHELMPARFUMERIE.COM)