

Manicure Set: Polish Up on Manicure History  
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Honorable Mention, Museum of Southern History

What do Cleopatra, a doctor to King Louis XV, and Rita Hayworth have in common? Each played a role in the popularization of the manicure set. Cleopatra, with her nails painted red, was an iconic beauty who played a role in beginning the luxurious nail color craze. A doctor to King Louis XV created the modern manicure set, and movie star Rita Hayworth popularized the idea of having well-groomed nails in the 1920s. Each of these people lived lives separated by hundreds of years, yet each had a great impact on nail and manicure history. Examining the historical context of the use of manicure sets during the 1920s is important when trying to learn why a luxury of the past is still widely used today.

Before focusing on the manicure set on display in the Museum of Southern History and the values of the people in the 1920s, it is important to study the history of nail care prior to that time. From thousands of years past, the wealthy valued having well-groomed nails; however, such grooming habits did not become of importance for the mainstream population until more recent times. The article, "The History of the Manicure," explains, "4,000 years ago, the people of southern Babylonia turned to solid gold tools to achieve gorgeous nails - creating the process of the manicure. In China back in 3,000 BC, nail polish was developed and used to show a person's social status, as well as the length of a person's nails." It is well-known that both Cleopatra and Queen Nefertiti frequently had manicures and loved to wear red nail polish in varying shades. During the time of Cleopatra, different colors of nail polish represented different social standings. Red and black nail polishes were reserved for the elite while the common people had to have short nails and light colored nail polish. Further evidence of the importance the people of the past placed on having well-groomed nails is found in "the archeological

excavations of the Pharaoh Nyuserre Ini's tomb... There was indication of the slaves who were literally protecting and mastering the Pharaoh's nails in the list, which means that there were actually the manicure masters who served the Pharaoh".<sup>1</sup> Manicure sets were almost completely reserved for the upper class until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when a doctor of King Louis XV removed an inflamed burr from the royal's finger. This gave the doctor the idea to create a manicure set for the common people.<sup>2</sup> What was a fairly insignificant event marked a momentous change in the history of the manicure set. Clearly, the manicure set had significance before it became widely popular in the 1920s.

It took many years for the manicure set to grow in popularity, but in the 1920s, with women taking more care with their appearance, the popularity of the manicure set reached a new high. The "Beauty Mate" manicure set as on display in the museum is evidence of that new widespread trend. The set dates from the 1920s and is small, red, and shows heavy use. The tools themselves appear to be in good condition, but the case is worn. The owner clearly used the manicure set. It is interesting to look at some of the factors that led to the great increase in popularity for the mainstream population who would have owned and used such a case as the one on display. The popularity is due in part to the fact that "first ever nail varnish appeared in 1917 in the USA".<sup>3</sup> In the 1920s, women began to turn from their traditional morals to more liberal views. Several factors during the roaring twenties influenced women's styles and ideas. The dress and actions of a flapper became very popular and young girls began to copy flappers depicted in movies. "The introduction of Technicolor in 1922 affected more than just the film industry... As they 'oohed and aahed' over this amazing change in cinema, women were

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<sup>1</sup> Irina Rukavishnikova.. "Manicure History." *Luxury Magazine*. N.p., 4 Dec. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "History Manicure." *Beauty worth Cosmetic*. N.p., 25 Feb. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Manicure History.

suddenly treated to a spectacular sight—Rita Hayworth’s red lips and nails!”<sup>1</sup> The 1920s were about great change reaching down even to the tips of a woman’s fingernails. As the flapper craze began to fade, the importance women placed on their nails remained. New nail polishes, new views and attitudes from the roaring twenties, and celebrities greatly influenced how women groomed their nails. One study shows, “In 1911, less than 25% of the women in the U.S. used any manicure preparations on their nails—in beauty salons or at home. By 1939, 86% were using manicure products, and the manicuring business in salons flourished” (“Nail Polish History Dates Back to 3200 B.C.”). Clearly, the 1920s marked a significant rise in the use of manicure products.

Actresses from the 1920s such as Greta Garbo and Rita Hayworth helped to popularize the moon manicure or reverse French manicure of the 1920s. These moon manicures became extremely popular in the 1920s and are regaining popularity today. The March 2013 issue of *InStyle* magazine announces “the moon’s new phase.” The article proclaims, “The neutral shades of seasons past have been eclipsed on the runway by colored-moon manis done in bright yellows, pinks, and greens.” What was popular almost a century ago, is popular again.

It is interesting to study the history of the manicure set and learn that a luxury of the distant past is still today considered a tool for pampering and grooming. Very few items that existed 5,000 years ago have changed so little and yet remain in widespread use. What was a luxury of the past became a common pampering tool for the 1920s and continues to this day. The manicure sets of today cross cultural, gender, and international boundaries. Studying the history of the spread of nail grooming habits reveals that the 1920s marked a time when manicure sets were growing in popularity, and the manicure set on display in the museum is a great representation of this change.

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<sup>1</sup> "A History of Nail Lacquer: Blood Red Nails On Your Fingertips." *Beautifully Invisible*. N.p., 27 May 2011.

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