

COMPELLING COMMENTS

The History of Cosmetic Nail Treatments, From Babylon to Beyoncé

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Cosmetic nail treatment refers to the stylization, embellishment, or enhancement of one's natural fingernails or toenails. While often seen as a leisure activity, these treatments can pose significant dermatologic health risks including traumatic onycholysis, mycobacterial infections, and contact dermatitis¹. Modern enhancements such as the gel manicure, ultraviolet treated nails, and acrylic nails each come with their own host of dermatologic complications. Nonetheless, the demand for these nail beautification services has continually grown into what is now a multibillion-dollar business in the United States.¹ This large, dynamic, and fascinating industry had humble beginnings dating back thousands of years.

Around 3500 BC, Babylonian male warriors adorned their nails with ground minerals as part of a pre-battle ritual designed to intimidate their enemies. The ancient Egyptians used henna to dye the nails a red-brown color while the ancient Greeks preferred a mixture of yellow flower petals, pollen, and potassium salt to color the nails a pale flaxen color. Around 3000 BC, China elevated nail art by using a crude form of nail lacquer composed of beeswax and egg whites. By 1000 BC, gold and silver were the preferred nail colors, a trend that recently came back into fashion after Beyoncé was spotted wearing gold minx nail

foils. The Chinese even enhanced their nails with gemstones, demonstrating that the intrigue of bedazzling predates the modern era.²

It wasn't until the 1920s, when the automobile industry developed new paints, that the modern-day manicure was born.³ In 1937, the creator of Tupperware (Earl Tupper), invented glue-on appliques. Less than 20 years later, a dentist named Fred Slack tried to fix a broken fingernail with acrylic leading to the unintentional invention of acrylic nails.⁴ From there, it was only a matter of time before we were left with the sculpted, studded, pierced, and stenciled nails of today.

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