

# *The Vanity Drawer*

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## Abstract

The vanity is often considered a piece of traditional furniture for female beautification. Although it has changed form over time, some variant of the vanity drawer continues to exist in many men's and women's households. This article considers the unique roles that vanity drawers—in their various shapes and forms—can play in our daily life and the different meanings it can hold.

**Keywords:** *vanity drawer, transformative objects, private-public transition*

*Sunday morning, I step out of the shower and bundle myself into my bathrobe. Planning to spend the day in, I head to the bedroom where I briefly lean in to my dresser mirror and lotion my face. After placing the bottle back in the drawer, I dress and head downstairs for breakfast. Later in the afternoon, my partner suggests we go out for a late lunch. "Sure," I agree. "Just give me a few minutes to get ready." Heading back upstairs, I sit down at my vanity and quickly apply a thin layer of foundation, press powder, mascara, and lipstick. Looking from side to side to confirm that I am presentable, I pack away my make-up, slip on my shoes and jacket, grab my purse, and head to the door.*

As a woman, I am acutely aware of the expectation that I wear make-up. I learned it early. At age 12, I started with lip-gloss and, as I aged, gradually added various other components: mascara, then eyeshadow, press powder and eyeliner, foundation then eyebrow pencil, and finally blush and contouring. Applying make-up is part of my daily routine. I do it soon after showering and before I head out for the day. After years of practice, like many other women perhaps, I have become quite quick at it. I can complete my entire make-up regime in less than 10 minutes—five, if I am rushed and keep it to the bare minimum. There are very few days of the year when I do not wear at least some make-up and those tend to be when I am sick or spend my Sundays entirely at home—days when I see no one but my partner. The question of make-up is evident and obvious and it has been the subject of endless debate—should women wear it? What about men? Is it a feminist act to wear it or not to wear it? Does it matter if you wear it while looking like you are not wearing it? What about cruelty-free make-up. But while at first

glance my story seems to be all about make-up, I want to look beyond the make-up, to that strange, silent object that lies at the heart of the act of getting ready in the morning or to go out. I want consider that powerful, yet largely invisible and little considered physical object in many a woman's life that holds her make-up (amongst other things): the vanity drawer.

In many women's homes—as well as some men's—you can find a vanity drawer. Sometimes it is a distinct drawer housed in a desk-like structure with a mirror and seat. Other times, it can be found in a larger, multipurpose cabinet filled with socks, scarves, undergarments, and shirts. It may even reside as a bag tucked under the bathroom sink or atop a shelf. But wherever it might be located, a vanity drawer can play an essential role in the daily transition between one's private and public self.

Although a vanity drawer is physically like any other drawer—a box made out of wood, metal, plastic, or some other material—it differs significantly in important ways. Whereas a sock drawer contains socks and a shirt drawer contains shirts, and each is briefly opened, an item withdrawn, and just as quickly shut (sometimes in one fluid movement), the vanity drawer does not necessarily house this same commonality of items, nor displays such automatic and momentary engagement in the course of one's day. A sock drawer or a shirt drawer holds a series of similar items that can be emptied, either slowly over the course of a week or suddenly when the desire strikes to reorganize one's wardrobe. But the vanity drawer, from the moment it is brought into existence by its mere designation, is rarely empty. Not only are the items that are taken out nearly always replaced thereby leaving its content number the same as before, it is also a drawer that can be full even when it holds nothing, because it is a drawer that contains that which we use to “make-ourselves-up” whether that requires a multiplicity of items or absolutely nothing. In short, if a vanity drawer exists in our home, it is rarely empty because it will always contain our vanity.

The vanity drawer further differs from other drawers in that it has the strange power to alter that which is around it. When found in a dresser, the drawer turns the cabinet into a vanity proper. These are now uncommon and rarely belong to men. Instead, these are the vanities of our grandmothers. They are the vanities that displayed the beautiful accoutrements that made our grandmothers beautiful. The contemporary vanity drawer is now rarely found in the piece of furniture formally called “a vanity.” More likely, it exists as a drawer or possibly a bag housed elsewhere, often out of site. Some, men in particular, may even hesitate to call it a “vanity drawer,” preferring the more masculine term “shaving kit,” despite it holding much more than simply a razor and shaving cream. This drawer may even take the shape of a small container tucked away in a woman's purse or bag as her compact, that is: her compact vanity. But still, when brought forth or opened, the vanity drawer—whatever its form—can temporarily change its immediate environment into a vanity. Think only of the hotel bathroom sink that magically transforms with the unpacking of a woman's make-up bag or man's shaving kit. The drawer gives the surrounding space new purpose. It seems that the only consistent requirement is the need for a mirror to be located nearby. Without a mirror, it is difficult for the vanity drawer to fulfill its purpose. One must be able to gaze at oneself to achieve the nuance required when applying complex make-up or shaving, styling one's hair, and checking one's appearance. While most will have experienced trying to apply lipstick or combing one's hair without a mirror, one does so never fully knowing whether it has been completed satisfactorily. Strangely, what the vanity drawer enables is almost impossible to complete without a corresponding reflective surface.

Beyond its ability to change its physical environment, the vanity drawer can hold a more

profound transformative power for its owner. Men and women alike tend to approach their vanity drawer still raw from a night's sleep or a shower, with a face bare, as yet unprepared and awaiting ministrations. It is a face unconcealed to the world. The face that opens the vanity drawer is our private face, the face shown to lovers the morning after. It is the face kept alone for the home and for those with whom we are most intimate. The vanity drawer helps us to conceal this private face, to put together and construct an appearance for the outer world. We approach the drawer knowing that after its use we will not merely have put on our make-up, shaved our face, or styled our hair, we will have changed ourselves. To open a vanity drawer, then, may be to open the question: who am I to be today? As we contemplate the open vanity drawer, both question and drawer can lie gaping before us.

While nearly all people engage in some form of morning ritual in preparation for their day, for a woman especially that which the vanity drawer contains seems to lie in wait until needed to conduct her transformation. At that point, the drawer's contents are called upon to appear, be opened and applied, and then be dropped back into the drawer's dark depths. With these items in hand, a woman's face can become a canvas upon which she paints the visage she wants others to see. Her private self and personal imperfections may be hidden behind a mask of perfection. She might heighten her beautiful aspects or hide and downplay her hindrances. At the very least, she may seek to make herself "presentable": worthy of being presented to the world. With each dip of her hand, she briefly takes up all that which slowly builds up her "face," the external façade that she shows the world. The drawer, it seems, contains all that allows a woman to hide her personal, private face and bring forth one of her public faces—her work face, her party face, her going-to-the-park face—into being. And yet, the drawer itself does not contain these various faces, merely their possibility.

The relationship between the vanity drawer and its contents is often intimate, with drawer and contents deeply intertwined. The objects that a vanity drawer contains are objects for its owner's own creation; they change as its owner ages and so too do they change the nature of the vanity drawer. The vanity drawer of a 12-year-old girl may hold lip-glosses, barrettes, and brushes that do less to create a significant physical change in her appearance than to as portend her future womanhood. With its sparse array of wonderful, shiny new items that the girl has carefully collected, this is a vanity of promises, of who she one day hopes to be. The vanity of a mature woman or man, conversely, is far more practical. It is likely filled with everything he or she needs to "get ready" for the day, as well as with a good deal of other items that have gathered there without conscious collection. It is a drawer filled with, and occasionally culled of, half-used make-up and facial products, combs, brushes, mirrors, tweezers, nail clippers, perfumes or colognes, extra buttons, safety pins, perhaps even a single earring beckoning the return of its partner or a receipt from a recent purchase needing to be returned. This is a vanity drawer of necessity, holding all of the small items needed for daily life, whether routine, special occasion, or minor emergency. It is a drawer created through ongoing use and replace—such as a new foundation to replace an empty bottle—but also by the unintentional catching of extra, left-over small bits of everyday life—buttons, pins, receipts—that invariably accumulate over time.

Finally, there is the drawer of the elderly woman that may differ yet again from both the youth and the mature individual. Perhaps having long given up make-up, her drawer may hold many items once used, now abandoned but not forgotten: a decades-old hair brush that is fondly remembered, a fancy brooch no longer worn, a locket containing photos of her deceased husband when he was young, a favorite perfume now rarely worn, postcards from a friend when she travelled, as well as creams to smooth the woman's dry, aged skin, and medication to take daily.

Although the elderly woman may only use regularly a few of its items, her vanity drawer may be brimming full with both objects and memories. In this way, a vanity drawer both changes as its owner changes over time, and it reflects—embodies—her relationship with the world.

But even as the drawer seems to open up possibilities—whether it be past or future selves or simply letting us choose which face to wear today—the drawer can also simultaneously foreclose them. Once a vanity drawer exists in a home, it may quickly become the route through which one always leaves it. At the mere mention of going out (such as for a casual lunch), the vanity drawer may exert a firm call. In our preparation to leave the house even for the simplest of errands, we may find ourselves stopping at the drawer to verify that our appearance is intact. Even if unneeded, we may still make a sweep of the powder, pull a comb through our hair, or apply a touch of lipstick, as if the mere act of applying something confirms our transformation into a person ready for the outside world. Oddly, a vanity drawer can exert this same call on men and women who do not wear make-up. They may likewise find themselves involuntarily stopping at the vanity's mirror to confirm the fitness of their outward appearance before heading out the door.

If, on our way out, we do not or cannot stop by the vanity drawer or at a mirror set near the exit (a mirror that, upon our glance, suddenly becomes a makeshift vanity), such as in an emergency, we may feel as if it is our private face that meets the world. In such instances, we may feel exposed until an opportune moment to quietly reach into our purse and pull out our compact or to stop at a window or washroom to check our face. Thus the vanity drawer may act as a pathway by which we move, both physically and personally, from the private to public realms.

But even as it provides the means for our transition, the vanity drawer firmly resides in the private domain of life. It is a drawer commonly found in our bedrooms and bathrooms. Even its momentary appearances outside the home tend to be in closed spaces with limited access by others: the hotel room, the public bathroom, or the car rear-view mirror. Moreover, the vanity drawer, once opened, seems to transform these public spaces into private, intimate places, places that may be intruded upon when a maid enters to clean, a stranger enters the bathroom, or our friend taps on our car window. In these moments, we might feel as if we have been caught exposed and quickly tuck away our items, thereby simultaneously tucking away the vanity drawer.

What do these individuals who accidentally intrude upon our vanities encounter? The maid may apologize, the stranger stop awkwardly before heading to a stall, or our friend sigh impatiently. These individuals are likely to recognize their intrusion, even in a public place. Likewise, partners may avoid their lovers' vanity drawer at home; aware of the intimate role it plays in one's preparation for the day. They may approach the drawer with hesitation and a tentativeness. Another's vanity drawer, especially for men, can appear as a mysterious and dangerously feminine space. To some men's minds, it might seem like a clutter of tubes, brushes, small boxes, and various tools of barbaric appearance that are employed with an uncommon deftness by the other sex and which can generate both imperceptible and the most striking of changes. Perhaps it is only those individuals who do not experience the transformation enabled by a personal vanity drawer that notice its strange contents but not the vanity drawer itself.

And yet, these individuals are not ignorant of the power of the drawer's space. Indeed, it may be readily recognized as a location where someone might store something and know it will be there upon return. The drawer's mysteriousness and forbidden-ness is what, to another, can

make it a safe place to store cherished items—for we know that others will likewise feel this hesitation. Even still, we may hesitate to touch the vanity drawer of our partner, to open and explore its strange contents, and leave for safe keeping our passports or our father's ring. The unwelcomeness of the vanity drawer to all but its owner protects against searching hands and prying eyes. This seems to be its protective factor, along with the belief that our partner—recognizing how important an item must be for us to have dared breach the vanity's hostile walls—will therefore guard it with care.

And we are often right—the vanity's extreme personalness does seem to guard its contents against those to whom it does not belong. All but our closest of friends tend to shy away from bedrooms and even more from this drawer. If accidentally stumbled upon, such as when it is located in a bathroom, the unintended intruder may shut it quickly as if a mere glance inside has exposed a most private aspect of its owner. Or, for the more daring, they may quickly rifle around, examining its contents in search of some tantalizing secret waiting to be revealed. To see inside the vanity drawer suggests we might see something private and deeply personal of its owner.

The only person for whom this hostile warding-off does not seem to have any strong effect is the child. As it does for the partner, the vanity drawer may hold a strange mystery for children. But rather than finding it forbidding and unwelcoming, children may experience the drawer as exciting and intriguing. Children are drawn to the secrets of the vanity. Within this drawer children, especially young girls, may see their womanhood and their future. In it, they imagine they will find the strange transformations of their mothers and their aunties and make those transformations their own. But the transformations that children find through the vanity drawer are not the same transformations as its adult owner. Whereas women are bound to their various social faces that the drawer enables and men are made clean cut and presentable, children can find an unlimited creative dimension in the drawer and its contents. As with other aspects of child's play, they may find in the drawer the means to become princesses, movie stars, and even witches—all possible future selves. For children, lipstick, liner, eye shadow, and shaving cream easily follow where their imagination leads. Each item's specified use readily falls away under the wide array of possibilities that the vibrant colours and textures suggest. Children have yet to discover the harsh line between their private and public selves, and the role the vanity drawer plays in reinforcing it.

How does the vanity drawer's owner experience these unbidden invasions? While we may smile at our partner's passport tucked in the drawer or at the evidence of our child's foray and see both as benign invasions, they are invasions none-the-less. Just as the vanity contains secrets not to be revealed to other adults in our lives, so too does it contain many personal items that are not for children's hands or even our partner's eyes. The vanity drawer often contains objects that are applied to our bodies that through their ongoing close proximity may quickly become ours alone. Further, they are often objects of beautification; objects intimately associated with hiding our imperfections. Just as those to whom a drawer does not belong will worry about what they see in our vanity drawer when it is opened, so too may we worry about what another will have seen of ourselves exposed therein. In finding our vanity drawer open, we know that—at the very least—another has seen evidence suggestive of our private, imperfect self. By using the drawer to make up our public face, we may therefore simultaneously place in it a potentially devastating secret: that the person the world sees us to be is not our true self but only an appearance. By its very presence, therefore, the vanity drawer can be both a means of creating ourselves and our undoing.

Despite being a simple box containing a variety of objects, the vanity drawer holds so much power: to transform, to transition, to transgress, to imagine, to expose, to tyrannize. While we may be initially seduced by the alchemy of transformation that the vanity drawer enables, many may tire of its demands, tire of needing to do one's hair, to shave one's face or to wear make-up, to make ourselves publicly acceptable each and every single day. And we wonder, can we ever escape? Can we regain the child-like self that was once simultaneously private and public? Will we ever be able to simply walk out our door without needing to check ourselves? Or have we been forever changed by the vanity drawer? As we have seen, even when we travel and leave the physical drawer at our home, we often unintentionally bring the vanity drawer with us. How, then, might we genuinely escape? What more profound personal and social transformation is required to affect a new bonfire of the vanities?