

# INFORMATION

CONSUMERS

THE PERFUMES OF EUROPA ....

31/72

The Commission of the European Communities recently put forward a document entirely about cosmetics. It consisted of a draft directive proposing that the cosmetics legislation in member countries should be harmonised. It deals with the ingredients, the manufacture, labelling, use indications and the general marketing of the many products.

Cosmetics are a tricky subject, both from the scientific point of view and in relation to the health of the consumer. Just as tricky is the commercial aspect, particularly when it comes to doing away with such obstacles as may still exist in the cross-frontier trade in these products in the European Community.

It would be too easy to be dazzled by all the advertising into thinking cosmetics are ultra-modern products, typical of the modern consumer society. In fact their history goes deep into the past and they are pretty well as old as civilisation itself.

The most advanced research traces their origin back to China of old, many thousands of years ago. Technical information about the products and their application, however, is comparatively modern; but even so, it dates from about B.C. 3,000 from the days of the First Dynasty of the Kingdom of Egypt.

In those days little pots and recipients were reverently laid in the tomb beside each defunct ruler; and in them were balms and balsams, coloured powders and unguents. The handling and use of cosmetics for the hair is shown us in the famous panel in the sarcophagus of Princess Kaouit, which is dated from the eleventh dynasty around B.C. 2,000. It was in the latter days of ancient Egypt, in the reign of Cleopatra, that the fashion for cosmetics, and more especially for colourings, reached its peak. Many of the tombs and monuments of

Egypt tell us of the importance then attached to cosmetics used, alike in beauty care and for religious ritual.

Cosmetics were far from being unknown, too, among the ancient Hebrews. Readers of the Second Book of Kings will remember how, a century after the refugee Jeroboam had returned from his long sojourn at the court of Egypt, Jehu, the son of Nimshi entered into Jezreel; and Jezebel, the Queen Mother, "painted her face and tired her head" and looked out from a window at the scene. In the Koran, too, the practice of eye make-up is mentioned and "the houris are associated with their deep dark eyes.

Elegant vessels for ointment and powders, decorated with figures in the style of the times are jealously guarded in many museums throughout the world. They tell us how the Etruscan women were by no means unaware of the links between their charm and their cosmetics; and in the world of Rome, it was not until the end of the Republican period, and the beginnings of the Empire, that we have the earliest indications of such products being widely used. In the time of Nero perfume and cosmetics had an important place at the Imperial Court, and were profusely used by the Empress Poppea. Plaster and lead were ground to powder over the body to whiten the skin; Egyptian kohl, and ointment based on antimony, served for the care of blotches and birthmarks; a depilatory was known as "psilotrum"; butter and barley flour were the ideal remedy for pimples; and pumice stone was used as an abrasive for cleaning the teeth.

The unguents used were both solid and liquid. The first were made up from special perfumes based, especially, on almonds, roses and quince. For the liquid unguents flowers and plants were steeped together in olive oil or sesame oil.

In more modern times, the known users of cosmetics include Queen Elisabeth I of England and Mary Queen of Scots. In France, Louis XIV disapproved of the practice; but cosmetics came back into fashion under the regency and "poudre à la Maréchal" had a great vogue. Napoleon, and especially the Empress Joséphine, were not above using toilet products; and it was indeed in this recent period that, for the first time in France and probably in the world, a cosmetics industry came into existence working on a scientific basis.

In Italy, in the Mediaeval and Renaissance periods, the importance of cosmetics varied from one State to another; but for the most part their use was restricted by severe laws which, more especially in Florence, banned any undue show of luxury. In Spain and Portugal it was not till the second half of the XVII century that beauty products came into current use, at any rate in some social classes.

In the 19th century the strict moral codes of the Victorian period led to the banning of cosmetics in Great Britain, and this had its effects, too, in the United States. It was only because of the influence of France, where the use of make-up was maintained and growing more widespread through the whole century, that the ladies of England and their American cousins learned to set aside the ban.

Formerly the making of ointments, powders and perfumes had the romantic back-room flavour of the skilled artisan; but this could not withstand the march of progress, and the production of cosmetics became an industrial matter, dealing on a large scale with the ever-present and imperishable desire for the embellishment of womanhood. Like other industries, it has raised problems of legislation and regulation, of chemical formulas, of labelling, taxation and competition.

For thousands of years the oils, powders and essences were based on only some fifteen or twenty substances; but nowadays there are many hundreds of them. At the present day, each little pot of some new cream embodies the joint work of an army of chemists, doctors of medicine, simple technicians and others, working in great laboratories worthy of the highest-grade university clinic.

Though we have now brought the product to the narrow boundaries of organic perfection, the force of circumstances has raised a number of obstacles, some scientific, some legal and some administrative. These may have only a slight effect on the trade inside individual countries; but they are apt to complicate the exchange of products between one country and another, more especially in an economic system marked by structural links, such as those which bind together the countries of the European Community.

It is for this purpose that the Commission's draft directive is aimed to do away with the differences between the national legislations. It is not solely

concerned with the technical side of the composition and methods of manufacture of individual products, or with the sale of cosmetics or the substances needed in their preparation; but it is mainly aimed at setting up a system of genuine control. The Commission document does not only seek to coordinate existing legislations, but marks the intention to substitute Community legislation for the rules which are currently in force.

The directive will apply to all cosmetic products, which are defined as products, irrespective of the substances on which they are based, intended for putting in contact with the various external portions of the human body (skin, nails, hair and pilatory systems, lips etc) or with the teeth and oral mucus.

It is specially provided that these cosmetic products, when they are applied to the use for which they are specified, must not be in any way harmful to human health. It follows that the member countries of the Community must not allow these products to come onto the market, unless they conform to the provisions of the directive regarding ingredients and labelling.

From the scientific angle the system chosen as a basis for a single system of regulation throughout the Community is the principle of the "negative list". In practice this means that all substances which are not expressly prohibited may be freely used as ingredients for cosmetics.

The draft directive has an annexe of at least 16 pages containing list of 425 or more substances which must in no circumstances be used in making cosmetics. This is couched in the most abstruse and complicated scientific language, and need not be recapitulated in detail here. There is another annexe of 7 pages describing those substances which may not be used to a greater extent than a specified percentage.

It is worth mentioning in this connection that the tragic events which occurred last summer in France, have called particular attention to hexachlorophene. In the French case a number of new-born children died as a result of the use of talcum containing an excessive proportion of this substance. It has for many years been part of the formula used for various kinds of soap, dentifrice and deodorant; and in the draft directive the Commission lays down that hexachlorophé must only be used within a limit of proportions which is very strictly specified.

The Commission proposal is aimed at the free circulation of cosmetic products throughout the Community; and another important provision is one which leaves it to the member countries themselves to impose requirements for the specific purpose of consumer protection, to the effect that labels and inscriptions regarding the ingredients and the method of use, printed on the bottle or package, or inside the wrappings, should be in the national language or languages, though versions in other languages may be used as well.

This provision is laid down because the consumer has the right to know how to use the goods he buys, and also for the sake of avoiding dangers which might result from the faulty use of a specialised product. Health protection for the consumer ranks as the main target in the directive in question.

To allow for liquidation of existing stocks of cosmetics which do not conform to the directive, the member countries will be given an interval of 36 months after the directive is officially notified; but the usual interval of 18 months for the provisions coming into force will remain valid.

The intention underlying the proposed Community legislation is clearly angled mainly on protection of the consumer against the risks which might arise from cases of cosmetic products being prepared with less scrupulous care than is required, despite the high technical levels which have been reached. It also aims to alert the user to the dangers inherent in wrongly interpreting the indications given in the formula and the method of utilisation laid down. This is important because, with the rapid development of the present-day consumer society, the products in question are within the reach of social sectors which, until comparatively recently, had little practical knowledge of their existence.

It only remains to be hoped that the Council of Ministers, which often has the task of deciding on economic and political questions of a much more complex character, will be able to give quick approval to what the Commission has proposed. In this case the Europe of cosmetics will be another of the many "europes" which have been created during the last 15 years. After all, Europa herself was a lady.