Cosmetics have been used throughout recorded history. Some of the earliest records date back to the 1st dynasty of Egypt (c 3100-2907BC). Tombs of this era have yielded ungent jars and from remains of later periods it is evident that the unguents were heavily scented. Such luxurious preparations, as well as perfumed oils, were used extensively by both men and women to keep the skin supple and unwrinkled in the dry heat of the desert.

The word 'cosmetic' derives from the Greek word 'kosmein' which conveys the thought of ~ to decorate, to care for, to produce harmony between body and mind. The beauty of the external appearance in harmony with the mind was regarded by many in pre-Christian Greece as being the basic requirement for a deep inner feeling of happiness.

By the middle of the 1st century AD, cosmetics were being widely used. The Romans for example, employed kohl (as did the Egyptians) for the eyes, chalk for whitening the complexion, rouge for cheeks, depilatories for hair removal and pumice for cleaning the teeth. They also used oil-based perfumes in baths and fountains and even applied them to their weapons. The Roman Lucian is noted to have talked about women and cosmetics in his time, referring to them polishing their teeth and eyebrows.

For most of this period, the history of cosmetics must be traced through the history of medicine and pharmacy. Included were activities relating to bathing, arts of make-up and hairdressing, hair dyeing and waving, and embalming – perhaps not a practice we would readily associate with our daily beauty regime today. It was in fact the philosopher Hypocrites, who advanced the study of dermatology and advocated correct diet, exercise, sunlight, special baths and massage as aids to good health and beauty.

Pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon grave finds show that both men and women were using a whole host of toilet-accessories. Artifacts from this period include ornately carved combs, tweezers for plucking out splinters or unwanted hairs, minute metal ear scoops and personal wash basins. Tree twigs were used to clean the teeth and perhaps chalk, like the Romans, which was abundant in the south. Hands, feet and face were washed daily and the prosperous rubbed scented oils into their skin and hair. Soothing emollients, often compounded with herbal matter, were created in every household and were used to relieve chapping a chafing and undoubtedly to help soften the skin. Wool-wax, butter or vegetable and nut oils served as a base. Colourants made from walnuts and chestnuts were used for the eyes and soft-bodied fruits such as berries were used for the lips. Flowers of baptisia and woad leaves were used for blue colourants.

There is also evidence that the Vikings liked to wear make-up as the Arab traveller Ibrahim Al-Tartushi who visited the Viking trading hub of Hedeby in what is now Northern Germany in 950AD wrote: "there is also an artificial make-up for the eyes, when they use it beauty never fades, on the contrary it increases in men and women as well". What he was observing was probably kohl which he would have indeed already been familiar with, however, it was customary for travellers at that time to spice up their travel notes – often to the point of endowing their hosts with mystical qualities.

Romanised Celts adopted many cosmetic practices from their conquerors, including face whitening with chalk and white lead, rubbing tartar from teeth with pumice, colouring fingernails with a mixture of sheep's blood and fat and bleaching their hair blonde. One is led to wonder whether the Roman's beauty tips were in fact really a bizarre attempt at a practical joke.

Arabs living in the desert and later, the Turks, were perhaps the first societies to recognise the value of soap and after the Turks invaded the Byzantine Empire soap became a more widespread
commodity. The crusaders found that cosmetics were widely used in the Middle East and spread their use even further, however, isolated tribes of Vikings and Celts discovered soap independently and in fact the Celts are credited with introducing soap to England around 1000AD.

It is not until the C13 that soap making became more popular and developed into a viable and profitable industry. Marseilles in France emerged as the first great centre of soap making and remained an important producer throughout the Middle Ages, later being rivalled by Italy and Spain. The main reason for this being the plentiful supply of olive oil and barilla (a fleshy plant whose ashes were used to make lye) in these areas. This formulation became the standard used throughout the regions and remained so right up until the nineteenth century.

During the early Middle Ages the dominance of the church kept the use of cosmetics to a minimum. Cosmetics as a speciality in and of itself began separating from medicine during the period 1200-1500. Following this, there appears to have been a separation again into two branches of cosmetics: those used for routine beautification of the skin, and those used for the correction of cosmetic disorders of the skin, hair, nails and teeth. Noble ladies who wished to achieve the fashionable pale complexion applied white powder and water-soluble paint. Some even used leeches to drain the blood from their cheeks, which no doubt served a dual function as even the least attractive of the male species could be guaranteed a swoon at some point in the evening. Lipstick and rouge were reserved for women of bad character, whilst some rich Italian women wore pink lipstick to show that they could afford synthetic make-up.

In the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, cosmetic literature was limited to the 'books of secrets' devoted not only to bodily embellishment but also to medicine. The first Pharmacopoeia of London, published in 1618, showed that the pharmacists had all the necessary equipment and skill to make and sell cosmetic products, but the increasingly stringent regulations governing their work kept most of them exclusively occupied with the compounding of medications.

During the Italian Renaissance, women wore lead paint on their faces. The damage inflicted by the lead was unintentional – however arsenic face powder certainly was not: Aqua Toffana, named for creator Signora Toffana, was a face powder designed for women from rich families. The container directed women to visit the signora for proper usage instructions. During the visit, women would be instructed never to ingest the make-up, but to apply it to their cheeks when their husbands were around. Six hundred dead husbands (and many wealthy widows) later, Toffana was executed.

By the reign of Elizabeth I of England, cosmetics were everywhere and everyone was enthusiastically joining in the fun. Popular beauty treatments included rosemary water for the hair, elder flower ointment for the skin, sage to whiten teeth, bathing in wine, an egg and honey mask to smooth away wrinkles and geranium petal rouge. Other, more dangerous concoctions included the by now obligatory white lead for the face, but also rouge made from mercuric sulphide, mercury sublimate for removing blemishes and a hair dye of lead, sulphur, quicklime and water designed to match the queen's natural red. Preparations such as these undoubtedly set the wheels in motion for the development of less fatal cosmetic products.

They also serve as a reminder of the extraordinary lengths human beings will go to in the pursuit of beauty, and though we may scoff at their apparent lunacy, one only has to look to the surgical cosmetic practices of today's rich and famous to see that nothing has changed.