Heian society prized beauty, elegance, and fashion. To be described as yoki (good), people had to come from an important family. They also had to look nice and be sensitive to beauty in nature, poetry, and art. Individuals were judged on whether or not they had good taste. The ability to recognize beauty was valued over qualities like generosity and honesty.

Both men and women groomed themselves with great care. Small, pointed beards were considered attractive on male courtiers [courtiers: a male member of a ruler's court]. For women, long hair was an important beauty feature. Ideally, a woman's hair would grow longer than she was tall. The Japanese of this time considered white teeth unattractive, so both men and women carefully blackened their teeth. They used a dye made from iron and other ingredients soaked in tea or vinegar. Personal scent was also very significant [significant: having meaning and importance], so both men and women wore perfume. Perfume competitions were frequent and popular. People guarded their perfume recipes carefully.

For women, makeup was also important. Women used white face powder to make themselves look very pale. Over the chalky powder, a Heian woman put touches of red on her cheeks. Then she painted on a small red mouth. She also plucked out her eyebrows and painted on a set in just the right spot on her forehead.

A woman's clothing needed to be ornate and beautiful. An aristocratic woman might wear as many as 12 silk underrobes at one time. When she rode in a carriage, she might dangle a wrist so that people in the street would notice the lovely layers of colored silk.

The love of beauty also showed in Heian architecture, calligraphy, poetry, and artwork. Concern with form and beauty was so great that courtiers sometimes had to perform stylized dances as part of their official duties.