

FRESH SETS

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Contemporary Nail Art from Around the World

TEMBE DENTON-HURST

PRESTEL

MUNICH LONDON NEW YORK



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INTRODUCTION: THE EVOLUTION OF NAIL ART

Nail art may have been invented thousands of years ago, but my journey with the craft started in Brooklyn in 2001. I was six years old, living on East Eighteenth Street, near Cortelyou Road, in a small one-bedroom apartment with my mom and sister. My mother, who I'd always known to keep her beauty routine simple, came home sporting a long, square French manicure. I found myself entranced, for the first time, by her hands. I asked how her nails seemingly grew overnight, and she explained, with her hands in mine, that she was wearing acrylics, fake nails that could make her own nails as long as she liked. Naturally, I asked for the same. She told me I was too young and bought a bottle of nail polish to pacify me, but it was too late: I was in love.

Once I'd noticed her hands, I started seeing long nails everywhere and on everyone—shaped, polished, and glossy. Some wore designs. It was the early 2000s, so nail art options came on a card or a mannequin hand at salons, each finger showcasing a different look. Airbrush styles, tropical magnolias, and zebra stripes with a strip of glitter abounded. The truly fly would get their toes painted to match. The nail salon was a wonderland, where pungent scents were tolerated because a transformation was taking place. In you went, with naked nails or due for a fill-in, the exposed half-moons replaced with a fresh coat of acrylic, spat out shiny and new.

I wouldn't get my own set of acrylics for another twelve years, until my freshman year of college. As soon as I got my first school refund check, I marched into Kim's Glam Nail & Spa on Union Turnpike and asked for a long, dark purple set to match my favorite lipstick, MAC Cyber. After an hour or so of shaping, filing, and painting, I left with my newly adorned hands, and for the first time, I considered my utilitarian appendages beautiful. My obsession with nail art continued, and since that fateful day, I've rarely missed an appointment. My long

nails have become part of me, as identifiable as the brown of my skin or my loud laugh.

As important as my nails are to me, they've held significance in my community for decades, from model and actress Donyale Luna's carefully lacquered nails on her legendary *Vogue* cover in the late 1960s, to the metallic-tipped manicure Mary J. Blige sported in the iconic photo of her wearing a cowboy hat and an all-pink outfit in the early 2000s. But nail art started long before that. Indian women were adorning their hands with henna in 5000 BC. Egyptian mummies have been found wearing gilded and hennaed nails around the same time, and the Chinese wore manicures dating back to 3000 BC.

The modern manicure parlor originated in 1877 in Paris, and the first American nail salon was founded in 1878, when Mary E. Cobb opened Mrs. Cobb's Manicure Parlor in New York City. She charged just \$1.25 (£0.95) per nail service. Within a decade, her salon became popular and she attracted customers from all over, from socialites to showgirls. Her focus was beautifying the hands, which was not dissimilar to today's standard salon manicure.

Almost forty years later in 1917, Cutex launched a clear lacquer: the first commercial nail polish. Fast forward to the 1920s, and French makeup artist Michelle Menard released the first bottle of colored nail polish, inspired by high-gloss car paint. She created it in collaboration with her employer, the Charles Revson Company, which would later become Revlon.

Acrylics wouldn't exist until 1957, when a dentist, Dr. Fred Slack, accidentally cut his thumbnail and tried to re-create it using the materials he had in his office. He used dental acrylic to fix it and a piece of aluminum foil to shape the nail, eventually leading to the patent of the first nail form, a platform used to create the nail shape.

The powder and liquid system used to make acrylic polymer, the material acrylic extensions are made of, was invented by a different dentist, Dr. Stuart Nordstrom. His creation, SolarNail, was the first of its kind, and changed the industry. Nordstrom would go on to found the brand Creative Nail Design, better known as CND.

By the 1970s, acrylic nails had become popular, but were the domain of the wealthy—manicures were expensive, and long nails were impractical, making them an inaccessible luxury for working women. At the time, long, neutral-looking styles were in, as were gold nails and nail charms. However, things changed in 1975 with the advent of the French manicure. The timeless design—which features a nude nail and white tip (though it has been remixed and riffed on since then)—was invented by Hollywood makeup artist Jeff Pink. It was originally invented for actresses to work well with multiple wardrobe changes. Pink brought the look to runways, transforming it into a phenomenon and a mainstay in nail art. He would later found the popular nail polish brand Orly.

That same year, Saigon fell to communist rule, sparking a wave of Vietnamese refugees to come to the United States; many ended up in camps. Actress and philanthropist Tippi Hedren took an interest in the newly arrived refugees and ran a program for twenty Vietnamese women to help them settle in the US. The women there admired Tippi's manicure, so she got the idea to bring her manicurist, Dusty Coots, to the camp to teach them how to do nails. She also helped them get jobs in salons in Southern California. Word spread, leading many Vietnamese women to join the profession, and the number of Vietnamese salons increased dramatically. Before Vietnamese-owned salons, a mani-pedi cost \$50 (£39) [about \$430 (£330) in today's currency], unthinkable for the average woman. Vietnamese salons charged around \$20 (£15), a much more affordable price. This completely revolutionized the nail industry and made it more accessible.

The democratization of acrylic nails and manicures enabled nail art culture to thrive. The '80s was all about color, and nails followed suit. People gravitated toward bright hues and experimented with texture, shape, and airbrushing. Florence "Flo-Jo" Griffith-Joyner, for example, sported jeweled red, white, and blue nails as an homage to Team USA while competing in the 1988 Olympics.

Almost in response to the eye-catching colors of the previous decade, the '90s trended toward neutral nails. "On sets back then, they wanted plain nails—beige, sheer pink, or clear," nail artist Bernadette Thompson said in an interview with *Harper's Bazaar* in 2023. She's the brains behind Lil' Kim's iconic 1993 money manicure (a look that got so much attention that the US Treasury issued a statement about the legality of destroying cash). And while Lil' Kim's manicure wasn't mainstream in the entertainment industry, it was in line with the styles coming out of working-class Black and Brown communities. The newfound accessibility of acrylic nails, paired with the boldness of nail art, prompted the wealthy women who once enjoyed acrylic nails exclusively to leave long styles behind.

As nail art became a fixture, US salons began displaying boards that featured standard designs: hand-drawn bows, cherry blossoms on a bright-colored background, and a punchy, V-shaped French. This continued into the early 2000s, a sign of nail art's ubiquity. On the other side of the globe, intricate, maximalist nail art was becoming popular in Japan. The look was a favorite among *gyaru*, a fashion subculture characterized by tanned skin, bleached hair, and ultra-long nails. Their nails often featured lots of charms and had pointy tips, kicking off the 3D nail art trend. Japan was also responsible for exporting technological innovations, like fast-drying gel and products that were better for overall nail health.

Over the next decade, nail art would evolve. While the styles of the early 2000s never fully died out, they were largely replaced by simple graphic designs that someone could re-create at home. This was partly due to platforms like YouTube and Pinterest, which encouraged a do-it-yourself approach to beauty routines.

At the same time, nail art was becoming a medium for visual artists to explore. In 2008 curator Rita de Alencar Pinto founded Vanity Projects, which started as a pop-up in art spaces like Art Basel Miami Beach and MoMA PS1. In 2013 Vanity Projects opened a salon in Manhattan's Lower East Side neighborhood and launched their residency program for nail artists all around the globe. As the art world caught on, so did the fashion industry. Once an afterthought for designers, nails soon became part of a complete look, as much an accessory as an earring or a shoe. Manicures opened up another avenue for expressing one's sensibility and sparking trends.

The advent of social media also helped nail artists to thrive and showcase their work. Thanks to platforms like Instagram, manicurists had more reach than ever before, allowing someone creating looks in Seoul to connect with the owner of a salon in St. Louis.

New technology also had a significant impact on the industry. In 2017 Après Gel-X came on the scene, a soft gel extension system invented by Carol Ma and Albee Chen. While acrylics had offered flexibility in shape and length, filing and shaping them was time-consuming and required precision to create the same results for every manicure. The Gel-X system removed the need for tedious prep work, allowing nail artists to focus on the actual art rather than building an acrylic foundation. The full-coverage Après Gel-X overlays are preshaped and come in various lengths.

That brings me to the present, wherein nail art has fully become a medium for artists to showcase their work—from Lesly Arrañaga, who’s creating nail art inspired by her Latin heritage to Tomoya Nakagawa, who uses 3D printing to create his complex designs. Then there’s the Moscow-based nail artist Margarita Tsibizova pioneering “dirtycore,” which seeks to make nails look *worse* and incorporates materials like dust and soot to mimic bruised and damaged nails. There are infinite styles and a global community of creators, which is why I wanted to put together this book. I’ve included artists from LA to India who are pushing the boundaries of what nail art can be, and added a glossary that covers all the nail terms you need to know. It’s meant to be a snapshot of who’s doing cool stuff right now and isn’t exhaustive—that would require thousands of pages—nor is it meant to be. Instead, it’s a celebration of *Fresh Sets* from around the world. Click clack!





Kumi
Chantrill

Queensland,
Australia

Someone once referred to **KUMI CHANTRILL**'s work as "not your grandmother's nails." "Well, unless your grandmother likes chains and 3D sculptures," says Kumi. "If she does, tell her to give me a call!"

Kumi specializes in sculpted work, and many of her looks incorporate texture and puffy shapes. She draws inspiration from archival fashion patterns, *kintsugi* (the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with metallic lacquer), futuristic offices, and anything that looks like it's from outer space. She mostly creates her work using Japanese soft-sculpting gel, which she says is toxin and cruelty free. "That's very important to me," she notes. For her most ambitious (and least wearable) sets, she opts for press-ons, because it allows her to craft more intricate designs than natural nails allow. "I can just go all in and create avant-garde art," she says.

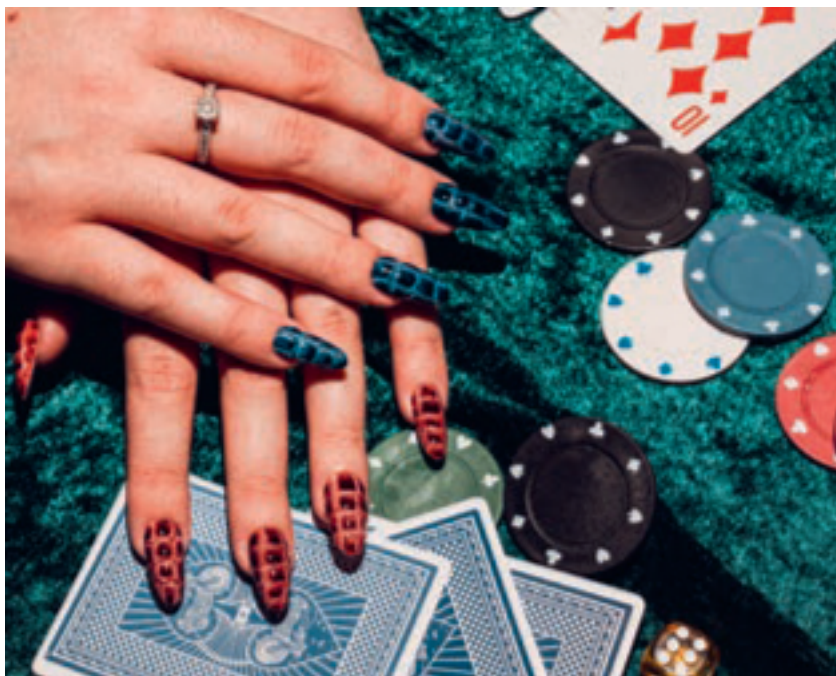
Kumi first started her nail business in 2019, at a time when her life felt like it was in a state of transition. However, nails were a constant, which she says gave her "peace and clarity." As she's built her clientele, she's learned ways to avoid burnout and maintain a love for the art form by continuing to hone new techniques and styles.

"I always try to find inspiration in my roots. Japan has a culture that spans from ancient art to the fashion in Harajuku, and there's just so much to be inspired by."





"What I love about my nails is that [they bring] all of these different people together but nurture their individuality. I hardly ever do the exact same set twice."



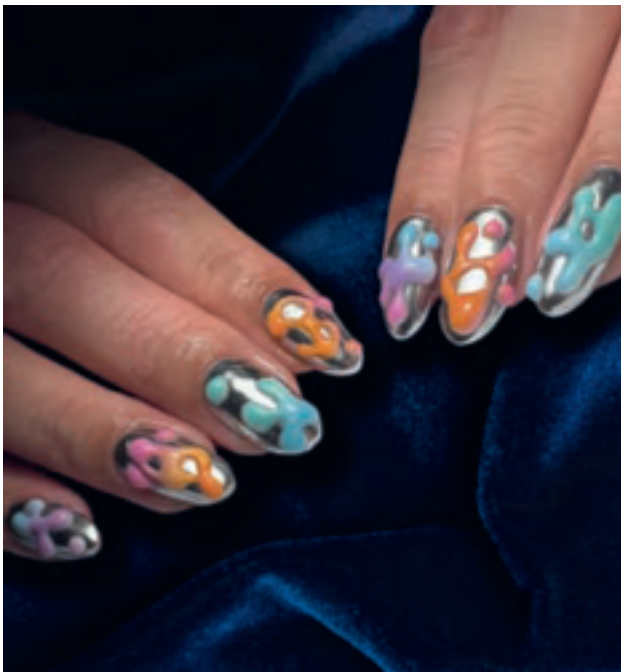
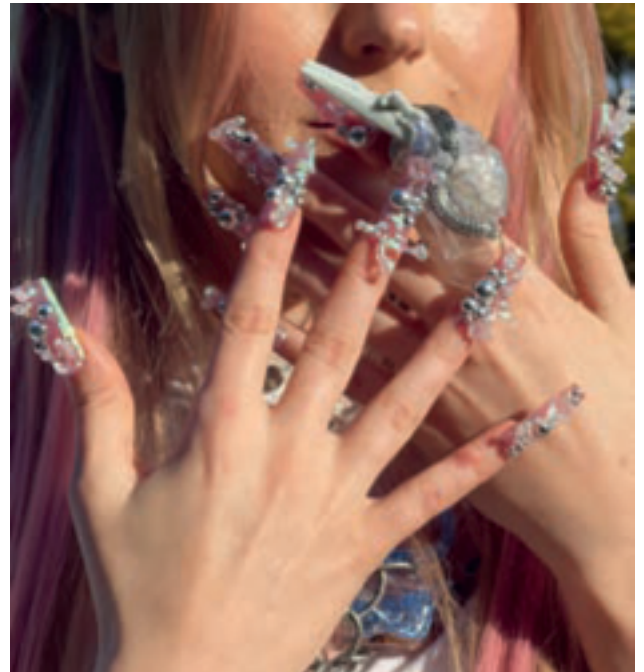
"My signature look is probably something chrome-y, definitely 3D. I love when I just decide to sculpt an animal, like the dragon I did for New Year's. My clients and I have jokes about how, at some point during every set, I say, 'Oh, I love nails!'"

"I love finding inspiration in organic things, in nature, in animals and people, as well as technology. I love the look of elevated nature, like sharp glass, ice, the irregular pearls of oysters, the patterns of venation on a leaf, light refraction. I think there's a heart-stopping beauty when you look closely at anything."



"I love collaborating with like-minded artists, and the idea of supporting other artists—helping them complete a vision—is exciting."





"I would really love to work with more fashion ateliers and musicians for editorial nails, runway, and music videos. Brands I would like to work with are Rick Owens, Nepenthes, Issey Miyake, Junya Watanabe, Margiela, Ann Demeulemeester, and so many more."





Beatriz
da Silva Lins

Curitiba,
Brazil

BEATRIZ DA SILVA LINS spent much of her childhood drawing, so nail art was a natural next step. “I needed to support my family, so I began to use my artistic skills to specialize in nail art and earn extra money,” she says. It wasn’t long before friends noticed and started asking her to do their nails.

After working out of her apartment’s living room for a while, she eventually saved up enough to open her beauty studio, Beauty Team. There, she specializes in creating unique, one-off sets that incorporate vibrant colors, intricate details, and fine lines inspired by Brazilian culture. Her process is often collaborative and starts with a client bringing in a reference photo or general idea. From there, she translates their vision into a work of art. Many of her clients are also creatives and artists, mainly in Brazil’s audiovisual industry. “My clients are highly invested in my artwork, and they always motivate me to create diverse pieces,” she says. That includes Brazilian celebrities like MC Carol, the singer Vitão, and Maria Dolores, a jewelry brand that incorporates natural stones into their designs.