

# Wild and Wacky World of Wigs

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# Wild and Wacky World of Wigs



**MULTI  
level  
S•V•Y**

Written by Mary Ann Marazzi

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## Glossary

- aristocracy** (*n.*) members of a society's highest social class, who are usually wealthy and powerful (p. 14)
- elaborate** (*adj.*) having many parts and details; complicated (p. 12)
- elite** (*n.*) the most successful, wealthy, or powerful members of a society (p. 10)
- embellish** (*v.*) to add special details that increase the appeal or attractiveness of something (p. 11)
- extensions** (*n.*) lengths of hair or fiber that are attached to wigs or natural hair with pins, clips, or glue (p. 5)
- fashion** (*n.*) popular or current styles or customs of appearance or behavior (p. 6)
- obsession** (*n.*) an extreme interest that results in thinking about someone or something far more often than usual (p. 4)
- ornate** (*adj.*) decorated with great detail (p. 9)
- rancid** (*adj.*) having the unpleasant, sour taste or smell of oils and fats that have gone bad (p. 13)
- resin** (*n.*) a fragrant, sticky substance made from tree sap (p. 6)
- toupees** (*n.*) fake pieces of hair that cover parts of the head, generally to hide hair loss (p. 5)
- wigs** (*n.*) head coverings made of hair or hairlike materials (p. 4)

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Front cover: A runway model dons an outrageous wig for a high fashion show.

Back cover: A boy wears a wig made for the celebration of the 2010 World Cup in Cape Town, South Africa.

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## Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow?

As technology improved in the twentieth century, people began to create wigs out of nylon threads, which resembled real human hair but cost quite a bit less. Nylon also allowed for a larger color selection—wigs could be any color of the rainbow, which gave people access to an even greater variety of looks and locks.

Today, people continue to wear wigs for many reasons. They wear them to appear fashionable and stylish or simply to change their appearance. People who are bald or losing their hair wear wigs to boost self-esteem. Performers such as clowns or actors might wear wigs as part of their costumes. Styles have changed, depending on the fashion of the time, but whether they are long or short, fancy or plain, wigs have played an important role in human history. Who knows what the next great fashionable hairstyle will be?



## Hair Donation

Some illnesses or their treatments can cause hair loss. Many doctors prescribe wigs for these patients. Wigs may help patients feel more positive and respond better to treatment. Today, some people donate their long hair to nonprofit organizations like Locks of Love, which makes wigs for children who have lost their hair.

Toupees came into fashion during the eighteenth century, too. While still ornately curled and powdered, they had one major advantage—they were much cooler and lighter. Full wigs were extremely hot to wear as well as quite heavy.

In 1795, the English government imposed a tax on both wigs and wig powder. The tax only lasted a few years, but raised a lot of money for the government. However, the tax also caused the end of the wig-wearing trend in Britain.

By the 1850s, many people in Europe had stopped wearing wigs. Common people often saw them as an unnecessary luxury that only the **aristocracy** could afford. Some enterprising people collected old wigs and sold them in the streets for small sums of money. People bought them to use as floor mops and polishing rags.

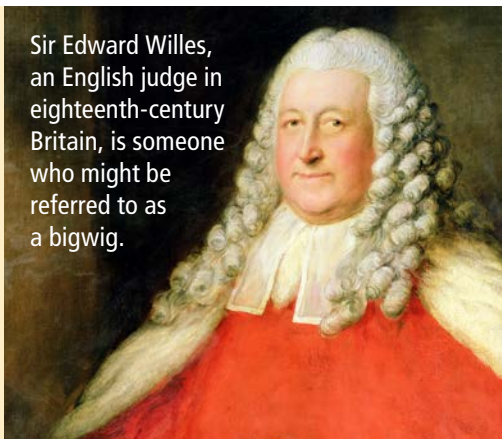


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### Bigwig

The earliest known use of the word *bigwig*, meaning an important person, was in a 1703 English journal called *English Spy*. The richest and most influential people at that time wore the biggest and fanciest wigs.



Sir Edward Wiles, an English judge in eighteenth-century Britain, is someone who might be referred to as a bigwig.



Wigs made from human hair are the most durable and are easier than synthetic wigs to cut and style.

### Welcome to the World of Wigs

Throughout recorded history, people have had an **obsession** with hair. From ancient Egyptian culture to modern civilization, **wigs** have played an important role in this obsession. People have worn wigs for many reasons ranging from personal vanity to a display of one's social standing.

The lard used to set these hairstyles would become **rancid** over time and attract cockroaches, mice, and, in some cases, rats that would build nests in the hair. Women carried a long stick with a claw on the end so they could scratch inside their hair without disturbing the hairstyle.

By the eighteenth century, wigs were used by almost everyone in Western Europe—at least everyone who was involved with the royal courts and certain professions. Wigs became an integral part of a uniform signifying that the wearer was a doctor, barrister (lawyer), judge, or a member of the clergy or nobility. The wigs were often made from horsehair, which was stiff and thick but was also cheaper than human hair. Even when large, curled, powdered wigs fell out of fashion, people in these professions continued to wear them in public. To this day, judges and barristers in the United Kingdom court system wear wigs as part of their uniforms.



Then and now: (left) a depiction of the English court in the eighteenth century; (right) judges attending a meeting at Westminster Abbey



## Wigs Go Over-the-Top

As clothing fashions at the royal courts became more and more **elaborate**, the need for fancier hairstyles also grew, which meant an increased demand for wigs and extensions. Women would style their hair, both real and false, over a frame or pillow on their head to create shapes. Then the style was set with lard (pig fat), and the whole thing was powdered with starch to set the style.

The starch was sometimes scented with lavender or orange blossom.

Certain styles were three feet (0.91 m) tall, even before hats and ornaments were added! Some women had elaborate model ships mounted into their hairstyles. These styles were so complicated to create that women would leave them in for up to three months without combing or washing their hair.

A 1778 cartoon shows an example of the crazy wigs popular in women's fashion in France.



## What's a Wig?

Wigs come in many styles, from full wigs to **toupees** and **extensions**. Full wigs, also called *periwigs* or *perukes* (puh-RUKES), cover the entire top and sides of the head down to the neck. Toupees only cover part of the head, from the forehead to the top of the crown and from one ear to the other, with the wearer's own hair exposed at the back of the head. Extensions are sections of hair or fiber that are attached to an existing wig or natural hair with pins, clips, or sometimes glue to create a fuller or longer look.



Double-sided toupee tape is used to attach it to the scalp.

Wigs can be made of many different materials: wool, goat or horsehair, straw or grasses, and even certain kinds of plastic, such as nylon. They also come in every color of the rainbow. For centuries, wigs made from human hair were frequently the most desired because they looked the most natural. It often took between six and ten heads of human hair to make one wig. Those wigs were also more expensive than the other options, which meant that only very wealthy people could afford them. Today, many people prefer nylon wigs because they are less expensive and easier to take care of while still looking like real hair.

## What's in a Wig?

Until the 1700s, wigs were often made for a specific individual, which made them so expensive that most people could not afford them. A tight-fitting mesh cap with a fabric base was usually made to fit the head. The hair or other material was then looped over the mesh, tied off, and secured to the base fabric with beeswax, **resin**, or glue. Once secured to the base, the “hair” could be styled according to the **fashion** of the times.

In the 1700s, wigs that could fit anyone became popular. These wigs had a ribbon at the edge of the cap that could be tightened to secure it to the wearer's head. Because these wigs could fit many different sizes of heads, the prices dropped and more people could afford them.



The tool used to weave wigs is called a *ventilating needle*. The needle secures hair to the wig's base by pulling the hair through the base's holes and then knotting the strands.

## Fashionable French Hair

From the end of the Roman Empire through the next several centuries, wig use fell out of fashion. Then, in the early seventeenth century,



King Louis XIII, ruler of France, brought wigs back into fashion when he began to lose his hair. Only twenty-three years old, he worried that people in the royal court would not respect him if they thought he was

going bald. To hide his hair loss, he wore wigs that looked like his natural hairstyle. They had a part in the middle and well-groomed hair smoothed over the scalp and falling to the shoulders in soft waves. Many noblemen wanted to look like their king in order to be considered fashionable, so they began to wear wigs in similar styles.

During this time period, it was mainly men who wore full wigs. Some men added extensions to their wigs to make them even fuller and thicker. Some women who were losing their hair also wore wigs. Women who had a full head of hair wore extensions to **embellish** their hairstyles, known as *coiffures* (kwah-FYURS).



To achieve volume, women wore wigs made of human hair, and some used extensions to create even more volume. The preferred hair colors were blond and red. Some of the Roman **elite** even kept blond and red-haired Germanic slaves on hand in order to have a ready supply of hair for their wigs and extensions.

The wealthy men and women of Rome wore wigs to hide their bald spots, which were considered unattractive. On rare occasions, a few Roman emperors wore wigs to disguise their appearance so they could go outside the palace and mingle with people on the street without being recognized. Their disguises helped them get an idea of what everyday people really thought of them.

## The Bald and Mighty Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar, emperor of Rome (100–44 BC) was losing his hair and was not happy about it. First he tried growing it longer in the back and brushing it over his scalp, but that didn't work. Then his girlfriend, Cleopatra (the last pharaoh of Egypt), suggested a recipe for hair loss that included ingredients such as ground-up mice, horse teeth, and bear grease. Unfortunately for Caesar, this potion didn't work, either. He decided that wearing a laurel wreath was easier and more effective. Not only did the wreath symbolize victory in battle, but it also proved to be a pretty good cover-up for his baldness.



Intricate wigs are depicted in both ancient Egyptian tomb art and sculpture.

## The First Wigs

The oldest-known wigs date back to 1400 BC in Egypt. Many people in Egypt wore wigs to look like their gods—and to cover bald spots, which were considered unattractive. A full head of hair meant that a person was strong and healthy. The Egyptians believed that their gods had fancy, thick, braided hair, so they made wigs in a similar style.

Even back then, the lengths varied. Some wigs were neck length, some shoulder length, and others fell to the waist, but all of them were thick, with curls and braids. Some people added extensions to their wigs to make them even fuller. The hair of all these wigs was often set with a light coating of beeswax, much like modern hairspray, so it would hold its shape.



In the film *Cleopatra*, Elizabeth Taylor had many different hairstyles, each requiring three wigs.

In Egypt, people at every level of society wore wigs. The king and his family wore wigs made of human hair and decorated with ivory and silver ornaments. They had hairstylists who maintained their wigs. The wealthy classes could afford wigs made from wool or goat hair, while poor people could only afford straw wigs.

## Wigs in Asia

People in Asian cultures have rarely worn wigs in daily life. However, wigs have been an important part of costumes in Japanese and Chinese theater for many centuries.



The hairstyles of Greek goddesses, such as Aphrodite (left), may have influenced the elaborate wigs of Greek women of the times (right).

## Banishing Baldness in Greece and Rome

Wealthy people in two later world empires also wore false hair. The noblewomen of ancient Greece and Rome wore complicated wigs with multiple braids and curls pinned on top of their heads. To keep larger curls in place, the women used hairpins. The more braids and more **ornate** the style, the higher their social status.