

Hair Statements

Coifs tell the world who we are, or want to be.



A 1785 painting of Marie Antoinette and her children by Adolf Ulrik Wertmüller (1751–1811)

For Marie Antoinette (1755–1793), the last Queen of France before the French Revolution, her hair was a tool of politics and statecraft. She used her elaborate hairstyles to mark significant events, acknowledge political alliances, and indicate who was in and out of favor at the court of Louis XVI (1754–1793; reigned 1774–1792) at Versailles. Her hair and clothes sought to demonstrate her pre-eminence among the women of France and the courts of Europe. Born in Austria, the daughter of the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, she used her hair to show that her allegiances were with France and not Austria, and at times to signal her support for the newly independent United States and not England.

She lured the most famous hairdresser in Paris away from her courtly rivals, and together she and Léonard Autié (1751?–1820) created some of the most elaborate hairstyles the world has ever seen, sculptural creations that rose over two feet above the top of her head. They were built of a substructure of wood, wire, and clay, yards of fine fabric, her own long, blond hair, and hairpieces and extensions from other people. Her coiffures sometimes had statuettes, flags, feathers, ribbons, flowers, and jewels woven in among the tresses. She might have agreed with American actress Joan Crawford that, “the most important thing a woman can have—next to talent, of course—is her hairdresser.”

The people of France were increasingly incensed by the costly excesses of the nobility, and Marie Antoinette’s clothing and hair became a subject of scandal and ridicule. The competition that revolved around clothes and wigs became an arms race for status and favor, all of it supported by taxpayers in France and its colonial empire.



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Satirical cartoon, titled "Fashions in hair, 1788—the Academie de Coiffure, Paris"

The eighteenth-century craze for elaborate wigs pre-dates Marie Antoinette, and likely arose from a practical cause. Her husband's grandfather, Louis XIV (1638–1715; reigned 1643–1715), the "Sun King," was known for his elaborate wigs. Like his father, Louis began to lose his hair in his teens and started wearing more and more elaborate wigs. Louis XIV suffered greatly from many diseases throughout his life, including smallpox, measles, gonorrhea, typhoid fever, and gout, and for many of these the treatment at the time was liquid mercury, taken internally or applied as poultices (see "Cultures in Contact: Mercury's Promise and



Cotton-top tamarin monkey (*Saguinus oedipus*)

HARALD HOYER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Poison,"11/23). One of the pronounced symptoms of mercury poisoning was hair loss. Mercury was also the treatment for syphilis, which was rampant in Europe at the time. The wealthy had

greater access to mercury, so many in the upper classes were losing their hair as a result of this exposure to mercury, arsenic, and other heavy metals. Thus wigs became a standard fashion accessory. Louis XIV was five feet, four inches (163 centimeters) tall and favored high heels and tall wigs. He is said to have had over 1,000 wigs at the court of Versailles. He was the definition of a "bigwig."

Humans care a lot about hair and hair styles and always have. We are the only species of mammals whose hair grows continuously (although that trait has been bred for in other species). The hair on our

heads grows much longer than the hair on any other part of our body. A woman from China, Xie Qiuping, has the record for the longest hair, having grown hers out to 18 feet, 6 inches (5.6 meters). This does not happen with other mammals, whose hair goes through a growth phase and then stops growing. Animals that have evolved spectacular mops of hair, such as the cotton-top tamarin (*Saguinus oedipus*), never need a trim.

The reasons for humans' ever-growing hair are not completely understood, but it is a fairly recent trait in our evolution, and it almost certainly has to do with sexual selection for long hair in women and men. In a great many societies, long hair is a sign of health, strength, and beauty. In the biblical account of Samson, the Philistine woman Delilah, having discovered that Samon's long hair was the secret to his extraordinary strength, shaved his head as he slept, rendering him powerless against his adversaries. Confucius (551–479 BCE) taught that hair was a gift from one's parents, and for reasons of filial piety it should never be cut. Similarly, the seventeenth-century guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708) told Sikhs to let their hair grow long, because long hair was a manifestation of the eternal guru.

Hair styles and statements are constantly



Detail of painting (1468–1484) by Benozzo Gozzoli of Saint Thomas Aquinas

evolving and are as diverse as the human species, from beehives and pompadours (named for Madame de Pompadour [1721–1764], a mistress of Marie Antoinette's father-in-law), to cornrows, dreadlocks, patterned weaves, mohawks, mullets, and the shaved-top tonsures of monks. We have worn it to our waist and shorn it in crew cuts and fades, collected it in braids and modeled it into spikes, buns, and ear-spools. We have fried and burnt it with chemicals and hot-irons, sometimes to make it straight and other times to make it curl. We have shaved our hair into patterns



Chinese men with queues eating in Chinatown, San Francisco, ca. 1880

and bleached and colored it in every way possible. Some of these styles are quite ancient. In 2003, a well-preserved man was found in an peat bog in Ireland with a spiky Mohawk-style hairdo; he lived around 300 BCE. Dreadlocks were worn by the ancient Greeks, South Asians, Vikings, and some indigenous people of North America, including Cree Chief Pitikwahanapiwiya, or Poundmaker (ca. 1842–1886).

Like all expressions of cultural identity, hair styles are often battlegrounds. In 2022, the U.S. Congress tried to pass the CROWN Act, which would have prohibited discrimination based on a person's hair style. Although it passed the House, it was filibustered and eventually killed in the Senate. In the late 1960s and 70s, the struggle was over the

permissible length of hair. In 1973, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas (1898–1980) observed that, “Nothing is more indicative of the importance currently being attached to hair growth by the general populace than the barrage of cases reaching the courts evidencing the attempt by one segment of society to control the plumage of another.”

This attempt to legislate hairstyles, and in reality to control the expression of cultural identity, is very old and often very intense. In 1644, the Ming Dynasty (1369–1644) in China was overthrown by Manchu invaders from the northeast. The Ming Dynasty had been led by native Han people, and the dynasty represented a period of growth in trade and urbanization. The Manchu established the Qing Dynasty,

which lasted until 1912. The Manchu attempted to force Han Chinese men to wear the traditional hair style of the Manchu, in which men shaved the front of their head and gathered all of the uncut hair from the back of their head into a long braid or “queue.” This contradicted the Confucian norm of never cutting one's hair, as an act of filial piety. The punishment

nineteenth century the queue, once scorned, had become so much a part of Chinese dress and identity that men also died rather than give it up. At the time, China was experiencing increasing trade and diplomatic interaction with the West and many progressive thinkers in China found the style to be outdated. This sentiment was passionately resisted by some of the

more conservative Chinese elite, who fought to retain both the queue and traditional dress. But the tide was turning against the practice of wearing a long pigtail. The Chinese educator and politician Jiang Menglin (1886–1964) described cutting his own queue before going to study in California: “When the barber applied a pair of long scissors to my hair I felt as if I were on the guillotine—a chill stole over me.

With two quick,

heavy cuts my queue fell off and I felt as if my head had gone with it.” He later became president of Peking University and Zhejiang University. It was wise that he cut his queue before going to America because the West Coast had been plagued by anti-Chinese riots from the 1870s into the 1890s. At riots in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver and elsewhere, Chinese immigrants and their property were under attack by Anglo-Americans and Latinos, who often cut off queues as a hated symbol of Chinese cultural identity.

It is interesting that just a century before this battle over hairstyles there was another fight over Anglo-American men wearing pigtails. In the eighteenth century it was a custom for soldiers and sailors to wear a short



Jamaican singer, songwriter, and musician Bob Marley with dreadlocks in 1978

for disobeying the order was death. Many fought, went into exile, or died rather than give up their traditional hairstyle. The Portuguese Jesuit priest Álvaro de Semedo (1586–1658), who had lived in China for more than thirty years at the time, commented that some men, “fought more desperately for the hair on their heads than they did for King and Kingdom.” Another European missionary wrote of resistance to wearing the queue: “This mark of bondage appeared to them more insupportable than the bondage itself.” Although the depth of the resistance to this order forced some concessions, the Manchurian queue nevertheless became the dominant hairstyle for men until the early twentieth century.

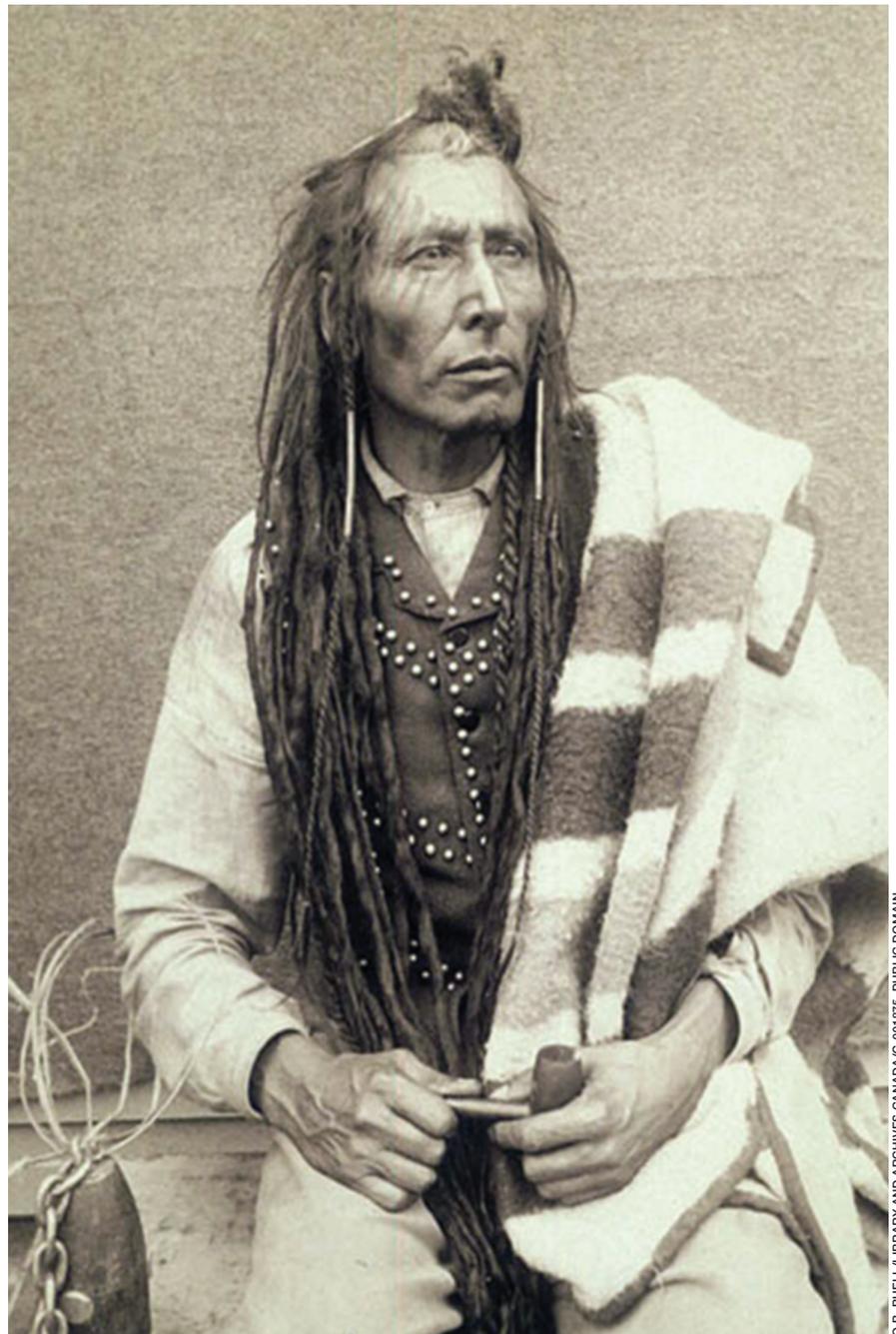
It is painfully ironic that by the late

queue. Often it was the man's own hair, but sometimes it was a short hairpiece. Fuller military wigs were also in use, but they were falling out of favor by around 1800, especially in America. George Washington wore a military queue, but did not wear wigs. (Many of the other founding fathers did occasionally wear them, including Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe). Finally, in 1801, the U.S. Army outlawed the wearing of wigs, pigtaails, and queues, and many soldiers were outraged, defying the rule and even facing courts-martial for it.

A hairless head is also a fashion choice, and it is often found in history. Buddhist monks traditionally shave their heads, and many orders of Christian monks do as well, sometimes leaving a ring of hair around the edges in a "tonsure." Head-shaving is often a part of initiation rituals or rites of passage. Women in some Hasidic sects shave their heads monthly as part of a purification ritual. There is an Islamic practice for men to shave their head at the end of the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca, the *Hajj*. In Hindu tradition, wives and other close relatives sometimes shaved their head at the death of their husband or family member.

Head-shaving is symbolic of stripping away one's personhood and is often used as a punishment. After the liberation of France in World War II, French women accused of collaborating with occupying Nazis were paraded through the streets with their hair cut off. It was a punishment that in Europe was seen as particularly degrading for women, perhaps because of the sentiment expressed by the apostle Paul that "if a woman has long hair, it is her glory."

The height of Marie Antoinette's hair rose and fell with her political fortunes. She had a sharp political mind, but after one thousand years of the existence of a hereditary monarchy in France, the old system of government was finally overthrown. The French Revolution brought down the *ancien*



Plains Cree Chief Pihatokahanapiwiyn, or Poundmaker

régime between 1789 and 1799. The National Convention of the First Republic found King Louis XVI guilty of "conspiracy against public liberty and general safety" and executed him in the Place de la Révolution in January 1793. Marie Antoinette was the last vestige of the French monarchy. She was held prisoner until October of that year, when the Revolutionary Tribunal sentenced her to the guillotine. Guards roughly sheared away what Marie

Antoinette may have seen as her most important asset, and dressed her in a plain white smock. They rode her in an open cart for an hour through Paris, amid the taunts of the townspeople, before taking her to her death.

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