

# Body Arts Hair

## Ancient Egypt



Ancient Egyptians of all classes wore wigs. Wigs disguised deformities, guarded against lice, and made the hair look thicker, which was considered attractive. The Ancient Egyptian nobility also favoured very elaborate hairstyles. Wigs made hairstyling simpler.

High-quality wigs were made from human hair and could be afforded only by the rich. This hairpiece, pictured on the right, was found in the tomb of an Ancient Egyptian king. Less expensive wigs, which were available to the middle classes, were made from a mix of human hair and vegetable fibres. The cheapest wigs were made from vegetable fibres only. Wigs were meticulously cared for with emollients and oils, and with scented petals and chips of fragrant wood, such as cinnamon.

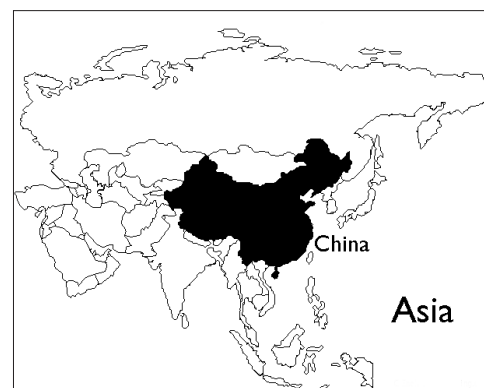


False fringe of curly hair, Egypt  
1901.40.56

## China

Hairstyles may indicate an individual's own aesthetic preference or such social differences as age, gender, or marital status. In seventeenth-century China, hair distinguished one cultural group from another.

The majority of Chinese people were from a group called the Han. Traditionally, the Han Chinese wore their hair long and bound up on top of their heads.



They believed that hair absorbed and stored spiritual power. Cutting the hair was considered a mutilation of the body. It was thought the hair protected the brain and that if it was shaved off the scalp would be exposed to the air causing illness. Furthermore, because shaving the hair was a traditional form of penalty for criminals, a shaved head was considered shameful.

In the seventeenth century, the Manchus conquered China from the north. They forced the Han Chinese to shave their foreheads and wear their long hair plaited in the Manchurian way. To be forced to shave their foreheads and plait their hair offended the Hans' self-respect. By making the Han Chinese and the Manchu look the same China's new rulers suppressed the expression of cultural difference and exacted a form of social control.



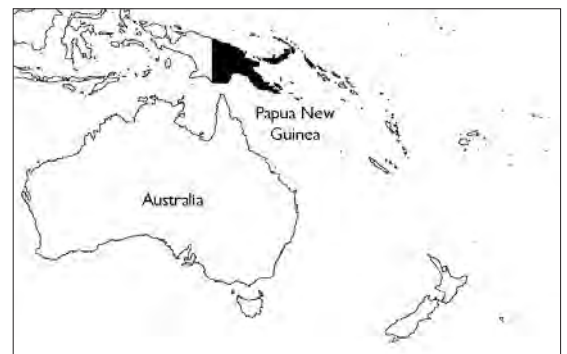
Man's plait with black silk tassels, China, 1896.62.236

In the early twentieth century the Manchu were overthrown and the new Chinese government passed a law requiring everyone to cut off their plaits.

## Papua New Guinea

Among the Huli of the Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea, men traditionally wore crescent-shaped wigs. There were two types of such wig.

The wig pictured below was of the type used for everyday wear.



Wig of human hair decorated with fur trim and yellow feathers, Papua New Guinea, 1980.3.1

The second type of wig is shown in this photograph. It is called the Haroli wig. Haroli was a bachelor cult. It involved young men spending many months in seclusion in the bush. There they used spells and rituals to prepare themselves for marriage, for Huli men consider women to be polluting. As part of the Haroli cult, men also cultivated their hair. At the end of the period of seclusion, bachelors cut off their hair and made it into upturned wigs decorated with flowers, fur, and feathers, in imitation of birds of paradise displaying their feathers. Although today Haroli is no longer practised, the wigs have become a symbol of Huli cultural identity.



Photograph of Huli men wearing wigs, by Dr Laurence Goldman

## Further Reading

Further information can be found in the Body Arts Gallery and on our Body Arts website: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts>

## Sources

CHENG, WEIKUN, 'Politics of the Queue: Agitation and Resistance in the Beginning and End of Qing China', in A. Hildebeitel and B. Miller (eds.), *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, New York: State University of New York Press (1998), pp. 123-142.

GOLDMAN, LAURENCE, *Talk Never Dies: The Language of Huli Disputes*, London and New York: Tavistock Publications (1983).

**Objects featured in this fact sheet can be found in the following cases:**

**First Floor (Lower Gallery) L51B for wig from Papua New Guinea**

**First Floor (Lower Gallery) L52B wig from Egypt and Chinese plait**

Fact Sheet compiled by:  
Jennifer Peck, Project Assistant  
DCF Redisplay Project  
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Revised by:  
Bryony Reid, Senior Project Assistant (Interpretation)  
DCF What's Upstairs?  
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