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Wild and Wacky World of Wigs

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Written by
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Table of Contents

Welcome to the World of Wigs	4
What's a Wig?	5
What's in a Wig?	6
The First Wigs	7
Banishing Baldness in Greece and Rome ...	9
Fashionable French Hair	11
Wigs Go Over-the-Top	12
Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow?	15
Glossary	16



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

Welcome to the World of Wigs

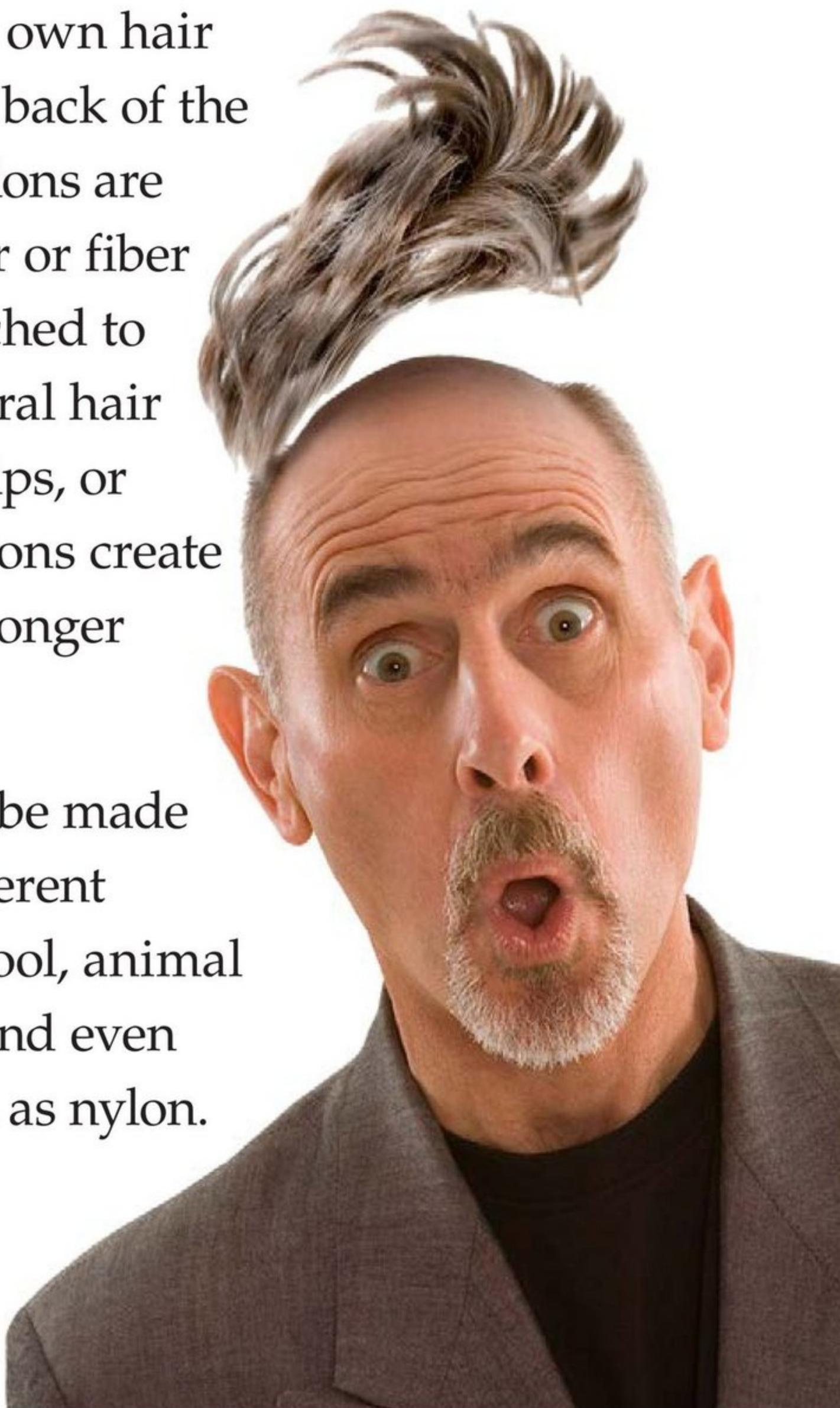
Throughout history, people have always had an **obsession** with hair. From ancient Egyptian culture to modern society, **wigs** have played an important role in this obsession. Wigs have been worn for many reasons, from **fashion** to social standing.

What's a Wig?

Wigs come in many styles, from full wigs to **toupees** and **extensions**. Full wigs cover the entire top and sides of the head down to the neck. Toupees cover part of the head from the forehead to the crown and from ear to ear. The person's own hair shows at the back of the head. Extensions are pieces of hair or fiber that are attached to wigs or natural hair with pins, clips, or glue. Extensions create a thicker or longer look.

Wigs can be made of many different materials: wool, animal hair, straw, and even plastics such as nylon.

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



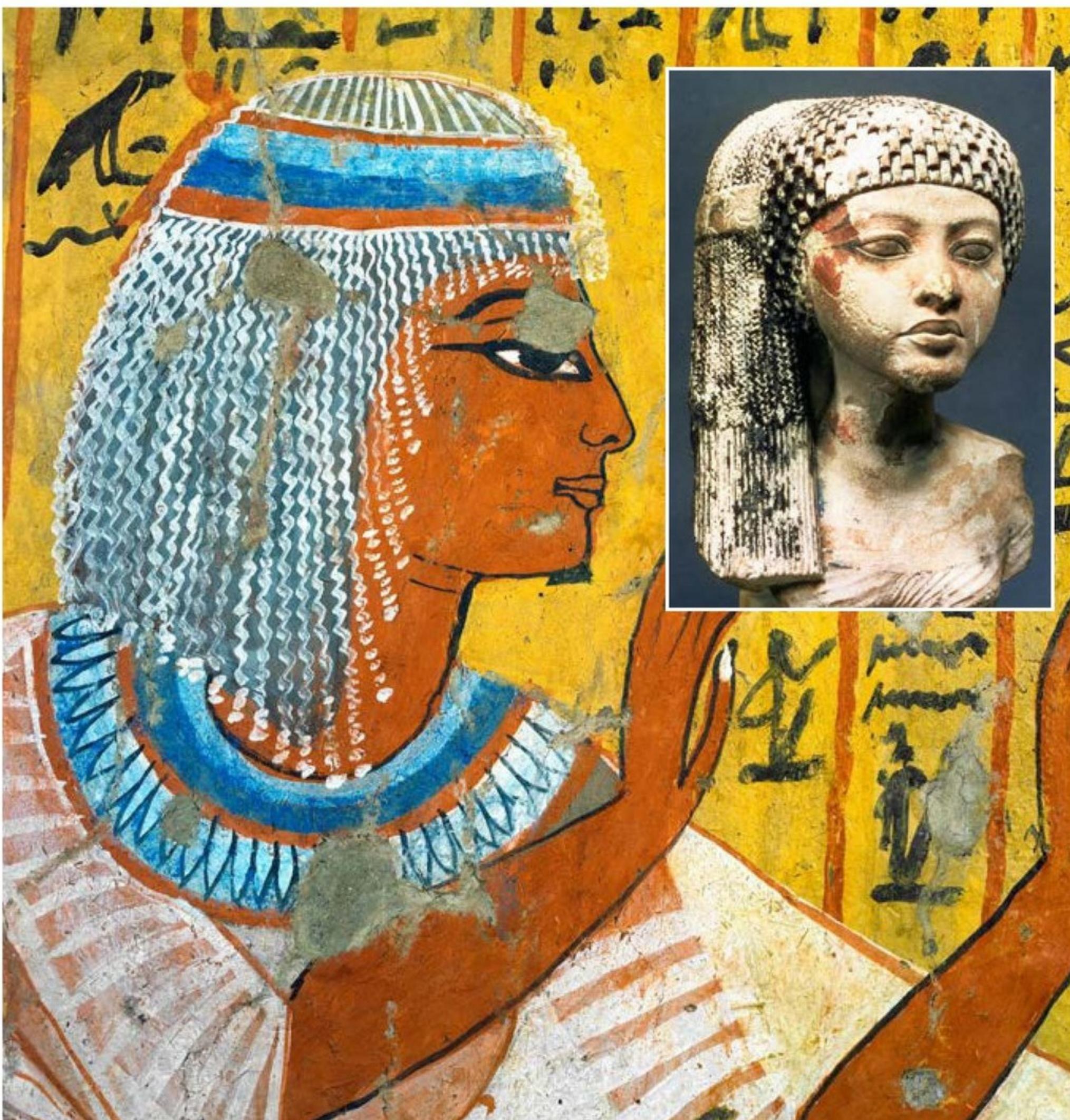
What's in a Wig?

Until the 1700s, wigs were often specially made for one person. They were so expensive that most people could not afford them. A tight cap with a fabric base was made to fit the person's head. The hair was then looped over the cap and tied off. It was attached to the fabric base with beeswax, **resin**, or glue. Once attached to the base, the "hair" could then be styled to match 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 fit the 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 attaches hair to the wig by pulling the hair through holes in the base and then tying the strands.



Wigs are shown 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. A full head of hair was a sign of being strong and healthy. The Egyptians believed their gods had fancy, thick, braided hair, so they made wigs in the same style.



In the film *Cleopatra*, Elizabeth Taylor had three different wigs for every hairstyle.

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. **Wealthy** people 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 wigs of Greek women of the times (right).

Banishing Baldness in Greece and Rome

Wealthy people in later times also wore false hair. The noblewomen of ancient Greece and Rome wore wigs with braids and curls on top of their heads. The more braids and the more **ornate** the style, the higher their social standing.

Blond and red hair were the most popular. Some Romans kept blond and red-haired slaves so they would have hair available for their wigs whenever they needed it.

The wealthy men and women of Rome wore wigs to hide their bald spots. Some emperors wore wigs as disguises so they could go outside the palace without being recognized. They wanted to find out what everyday people really thought of them.

The Bald and Mighty Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar, emperor of Rome (100–44 BC) was losing 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 ground-up mice, horse teeth, and bear grease. This potion didn't work, either. Caesar decided that wearing a laurel wreath was easier. The wreath stood for victory in battle. It was also a pretty good cover-up for his baldness.



Fashionable French Hair

From the end of the Roman Empire through the next several centuries, wigs lost popularity.



Then, in the early seventeenth century, King Louis XIII, ruler of France, brought wigs back into fashion. At the age of twenty-three, he began to lose his hair. He was worried that people would have less respect for him if they thought he was going

bald. To hide his hair loss, he wore wigs that looked like his natural hairstyle. Many noblemen wanted to look like their king, so they began to wear the same style of wig.



Hair Donation

Certain illnesses cause hair loss in some people. Doctors may suggest wigs for these patients. Wigs may help sick people feel more positive and get more benefits from treatment. Today, some people give their long hair to organizations like Locks of Love, which makes wigs for children who have lost their hair.

Wigs Go Over-the-Top

As clothing fashions at the royal courts became fancier, the need for fancier hairstyles also grew. This 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 to keep the hair in place.



Certain styles were three feet (0.91 m) tall! Some women had model ships built into their hairstyles. These styles were so hard to create that women would leave them in for months without combing or washing their hair.

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

The lard used to set these hairstyles would spoil over time. Cockroaches, mice, and even rats would build nests in the hair. Women carried a long stick with a claw on the end. The stick allowed them to scratch inside their hair without ruining their wig.

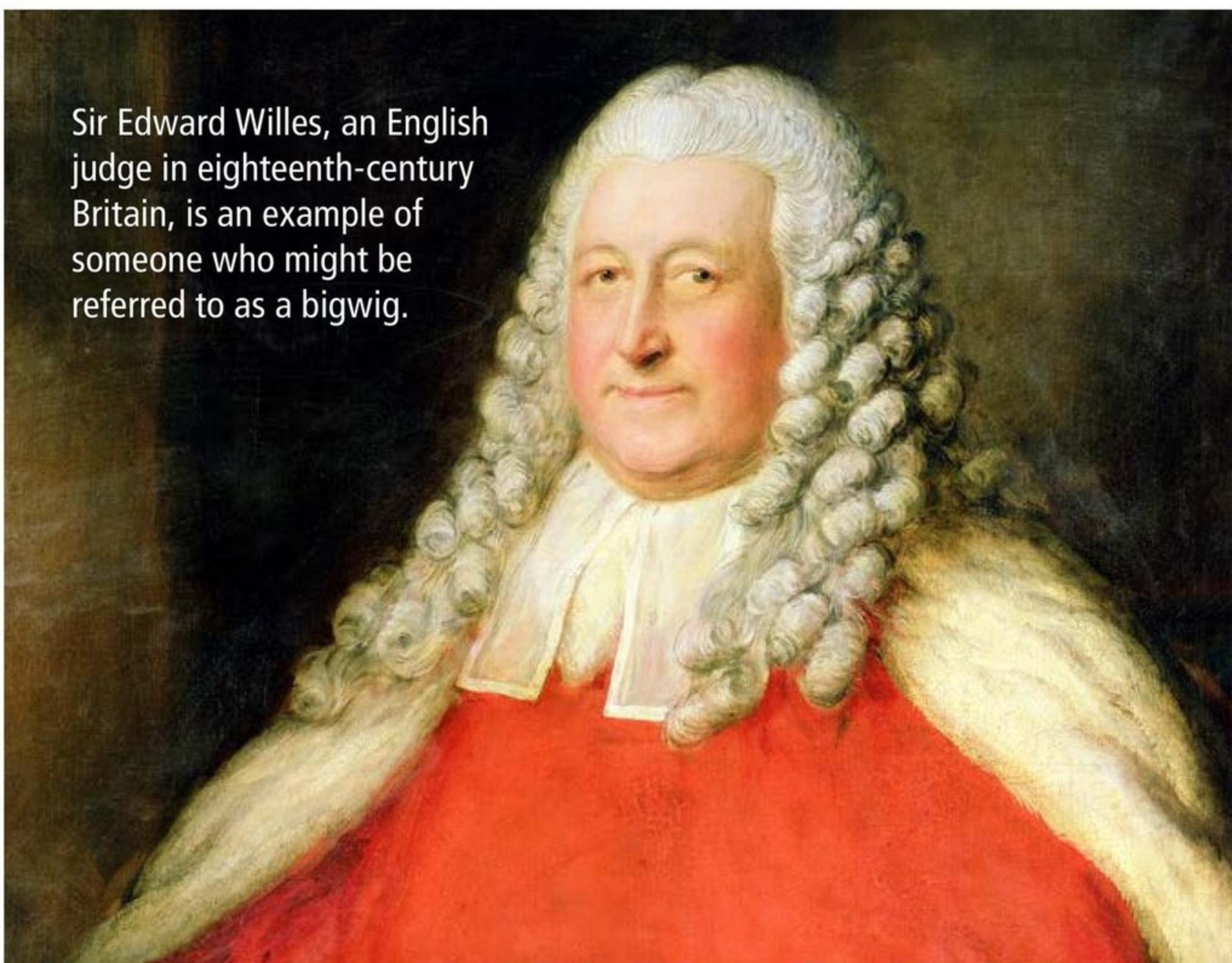
By the eighteenth century, wigs in Western Europe were used by doctors, lawyers, judges and members of the church. Today, judges and lawyers in the United Kingdom courts still wear wigs as part of their uniforms.



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

Toupees came into fashion then, too. While still ornate and powdered, they had major advantages—they were much cooler and lighter than full wigs.

By the 1850s in Europe, many people had stopped wearing wigs. Many of the common people saw them as a luxury only the rich could afford.



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

Bigwig

The word *bigwig* means an important person. It was used in a 1703 English journal called *English Spy*. The richest and most powerful people at that time wore the biggest and fanciest wigs.

Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow?

As technology improved in the twentieth century, people began to create wigs out of nylon threads. Nylon looked like human hair but cost a lot less. It also allowed for more colors, giving people more choices for looks and locks.

Today, people continue to wear wigs for many different reasons. They wear them to appear fashionable and stylish or simply to change their appearance. People who are bald or losing their hair may wear wigs to feel better about themselves. Clowns or actors might wear wigs as part of their costumes. Styles have changed, depending on the fashion of the time. Even so, 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?



Over 200,000 people wearing clown wigs and costumes take part in a Carnival Parade.

Glossary

Empire (<i>n.</i>)	a collection of nations or people ruled by one person or government (p. 11)
extensions (<i>n.</i>)	lengths of hair or fiber that are attached to wigs or natural hair with pins, clips, or glue (p. 5)
fashion (<i>n.</i>)	popular or current styles or customs of appearance or behavior (p. 4)
obsession (<i>n.</i>)	an extreme interest that results in thinking about someone or something far more often than usual (p. 4)
ornate (<i>adj.</i>)	decorated with great detail (p. 9)
resin (<i>n.</i>)	a fragrant, sticky substance made from tree sap (p. 6)
toupees (<i>n.</i>)	fake pieces of hair that cover parts of the head, generally to hide hair loss (p. 5)
wealthy (<i>adj.</i>)	having a large amount of money or possessions (p. 8)
wigs (<i>n.</i>)	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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