

LEVELED BOOK • V

Wild and Wacky World of Wigs

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

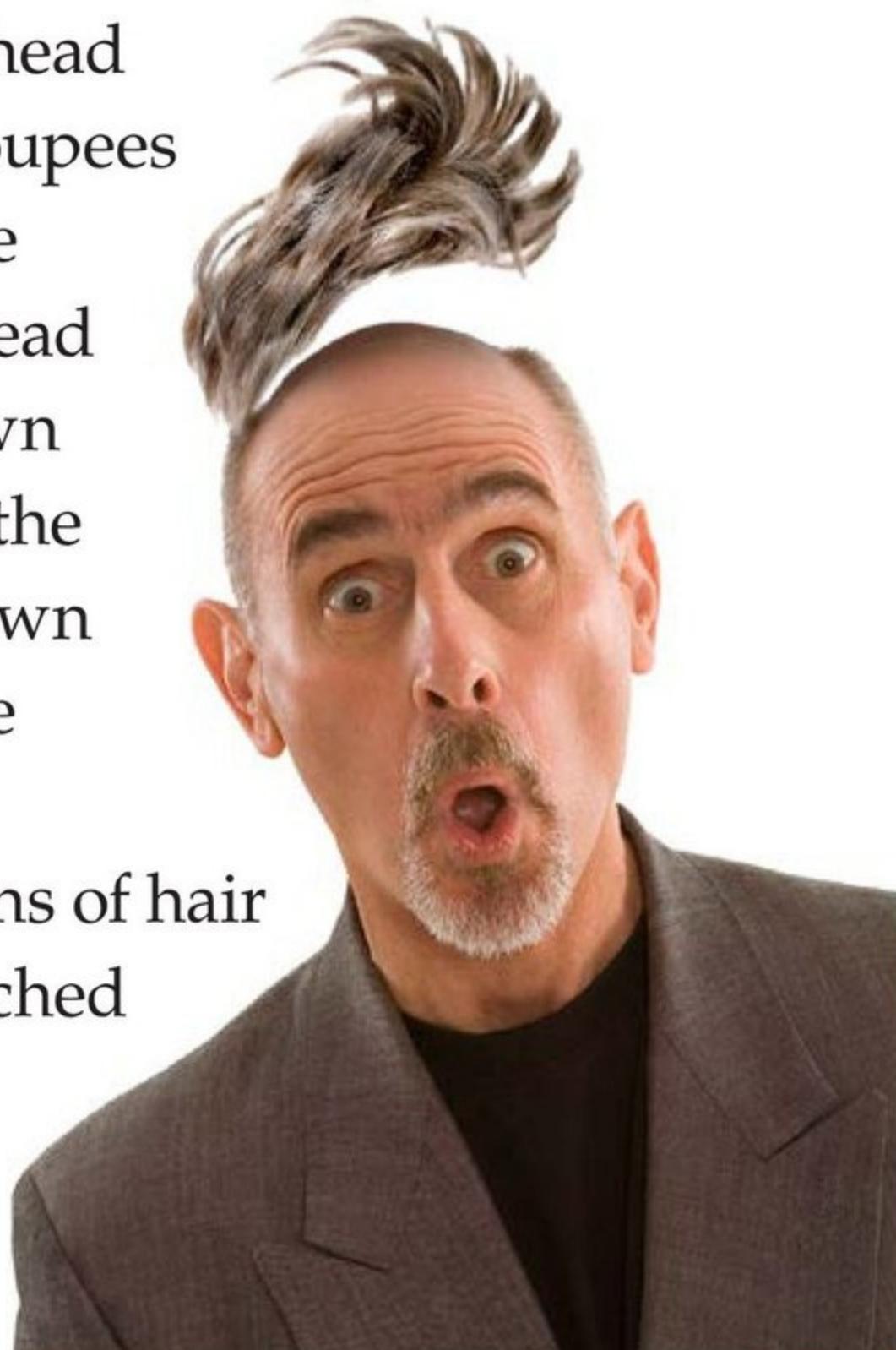
Welcome to the World of Wigs

Throughout 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. 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 only cover part of the head, from the forehead to the top of the crown and from one ear to the other. The person's own hair is exposed at the back of the head.

Extensions are sections of hair or **fiber** that are attached to existing wigs or natural hair with pins, clips, or glue. Extensions create a fuller or longer look.



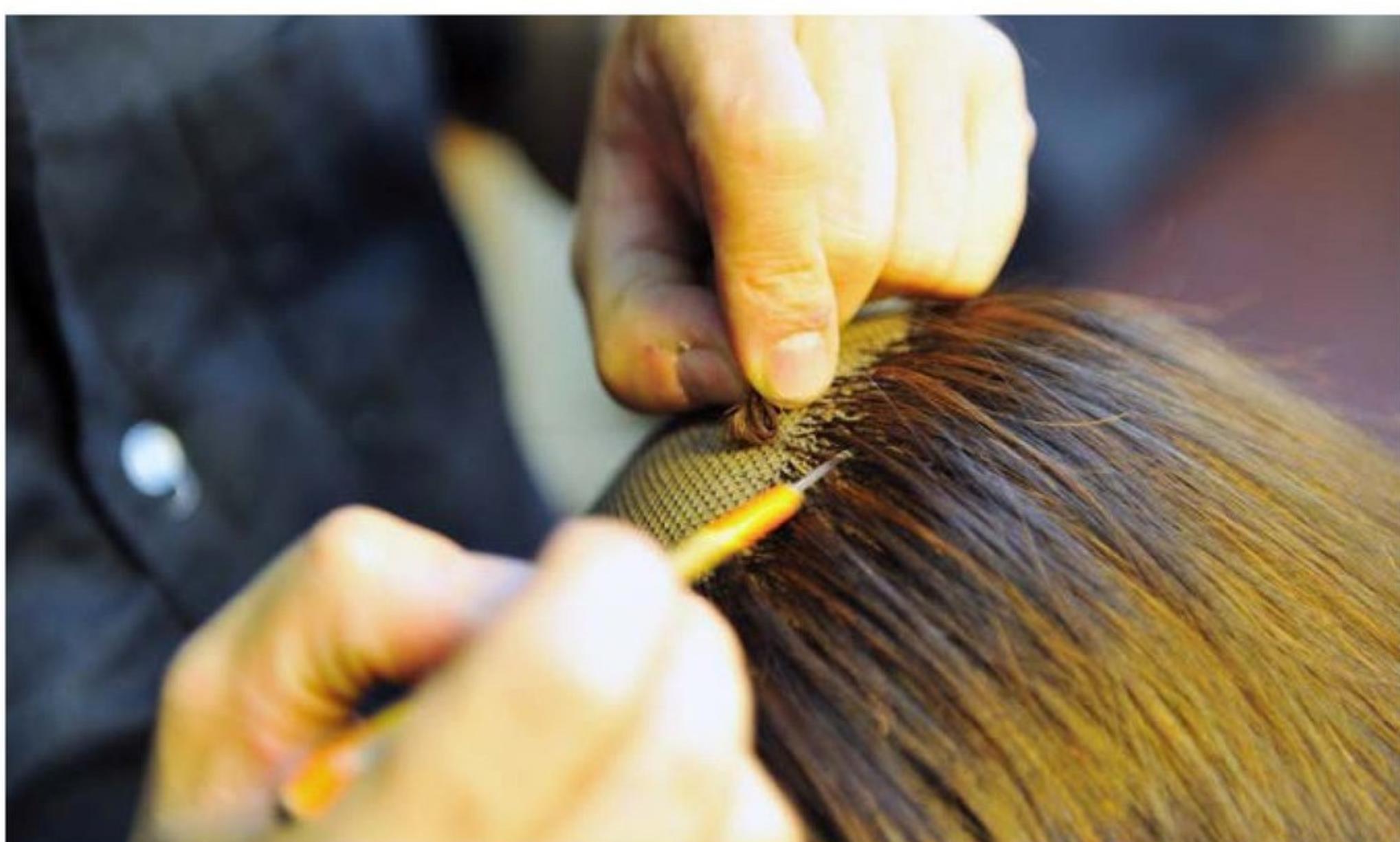
Double-sided tape is used to attach a toupee to the scalp.

Wigs can be made from many different things: wool, goat or horsehair, straw or grasses, and even certain kinds of plastic, such as nylon. 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, so only very wealthy people wore them.

What's in a Wig?

Until the 1700s, wigs were often specially made for each individual, which made them too expensive for most. A tight-fitting **mesh** cap with a fabric base was made to fit the head. The hair or other material was then looped over the mesh, tied off, and attached to the base fabric with beeswax, **resin**, or glue. Once attached, the “hair” could be styled to match the fashion of the times.

In the 1700s, wigs that could fit anyone became popular. A ribbon at the edge of the cap could be tightened for a good fit. Because these wigs could fit many different sizes of heads, the prices dropped and wigs became more affordable.



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 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. A full head of hair was a sign of strength and health. The Egyptians believed their gods had fancy, thick, braided hair, so they made wigs in the same style.

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



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. They had hairstylists who maintained their wigs. 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 two later world empires also wore false hair. The noblewomen of ancient Greece and Rome wore wigs with many braids and curls pinned up. The more braids and the more **ornate** the style, the higher their social status.

The wealthy men and women of Rome wore wigs to hide their bald spots. They favored blond and red hair. Some Romans kept blond and red-haired slaves so they would have hair available for their wigs. Some Roman emperors wore wigs as disguises so they could go outside the palace without being recognized. Their goal was to 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. This potion didn't work, either. Caesar decided that wearing a laurel wreath was easier. The wreath stood for victory in battle. It also proved to be a pretty good cover-up for his baldness.



Fashionable French Hair

From the end of the Roman Empire through the next several centuries, wig use 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 worried that people in the royal court would have less respect for him if they thought



King Louis XIII of France

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.

During this time period, it was mainly men who wore full wigs. Some 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 added extensions to their hairstyles.

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 style in place.



Certain styles were three feet (0.91 m) tall! Some women had model ships placed into their hairstyles.

These styles were so complicated 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 disturbing their hairstyle.

By the eighteenth century, wigs were used by almost everyone in Western Europe who was involved with the royal courts and certain **professions**. The wigs were part of a uniform for doctors, lawyers, judges, and members of the church. These wigs were often made from horsehair, which was stiff and thick but was also cheaper than human hair. Even when the large, curled, powdered wigs fell out of fashion, these professionals continued to wear them in public. To this day, judges and lawyers in the United Kingdom court system wear wigs as part of their uniforms.

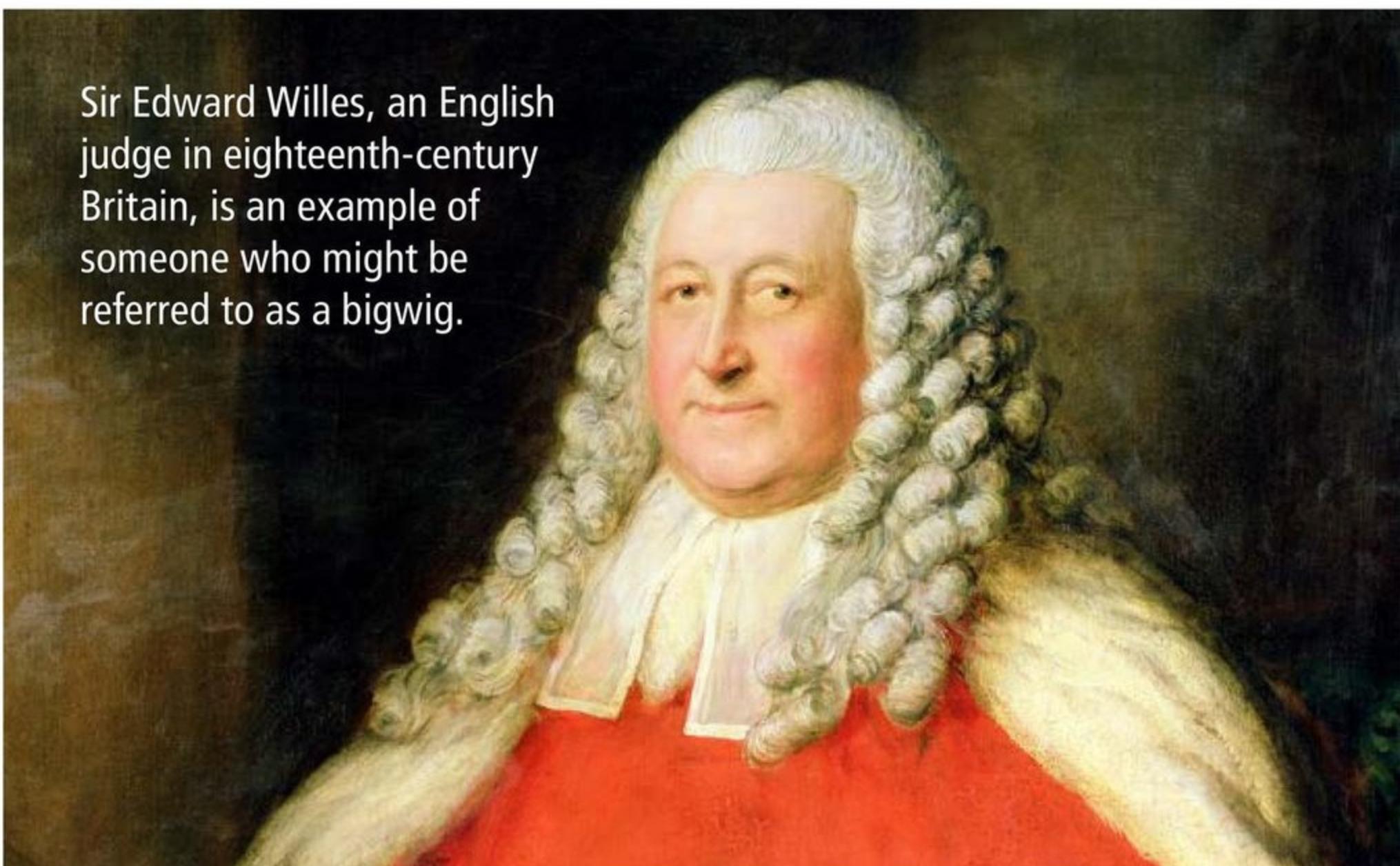


Then and now: (left) a depiction of the English court in the eighteenth century; (right) judges attending a meeting at Westminster Abbey

Toupees came into fashion during the eighteenth century, too. While still curled and powdered, they were much cooler and lighter to wear. Full wigs were extremely hot and also quite heavy.

By the 1850s, many people in Europe had stopped wearing wigs. Common people often saw them as a luxury only the rich could afford. Some 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.

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 earliest known use of the word *bigwig*, meaning an important person, was 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 resembled human hair but cost much less. It also allowed for a larger choice of colors, which gave people 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 their 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

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



Glossary

court (<i>n.</i>)	the inner social circle of a monarch (p. 11)
empires (<i>n.</i>)	collections of nations or people ruled by one person or government (p. 9)
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)
fiber (<i>n.</i>)	a thin strand of natural or synthetic material used to make fabric, paper, or other goods (p. 5)
mesh (<i>n.</i>)	any material made of threads or wires loosely woven together (p. 6)
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)
professions (<i>n.</i>)	paid occupations, especially ones that require training and/or a specialized education (p. 13)
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)
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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