"Oh My, Aren't You Wearing Some Nice Plastic!": The Chemistry and Culture of Black Women's Hair"

Tracy Brown Fox. Ph.D.

Chemistry Professor

Johnson C. Smith University

Department of Natural Sciences and Mathematics

History of African —American Hair

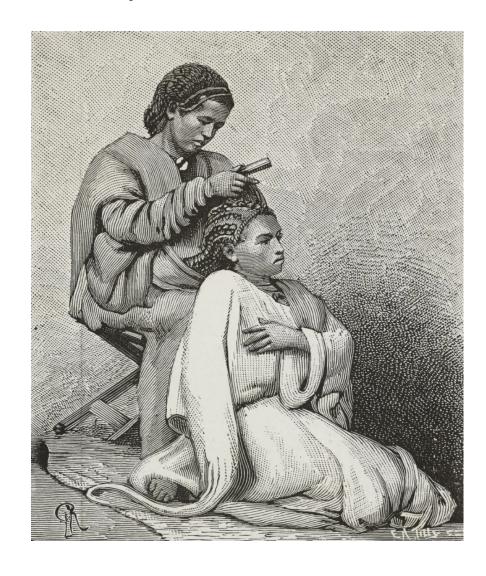
 The Egyptian Queen Nefertiti was rediscovered in 1913, her regal beauty accentuated by a towering hairstyle

 Braids were used to signify marital status, age, religion, wealth, and rank within

West African communities.



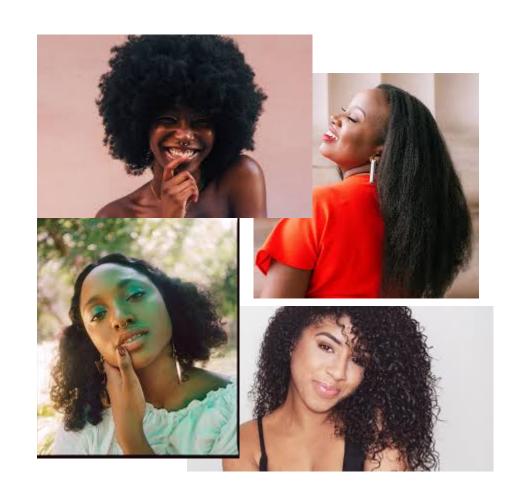
History of African —American Hair



- Cornrows were named for their visual similarity to cornfields, a representation of agriculture, order and a civilized way of life.
- In the age of colonialism, slaves wore cornrows as a practical way to wear one's hair during long labored hours.

History of African —American Hair

- Hair also played a role in the way enslaved workers were treated; if the texture and kink of one's hair more closely resembled European hair, they would receive better treatment.
- After Emancipation, there was a growing notion that European textured hair was "good" and African textured hair was "bad," foreign and unprofessional.
- In the early 1900s, Annie Malone and Madam C.J. Walker started to develop products that targeted this want for straighter hair.

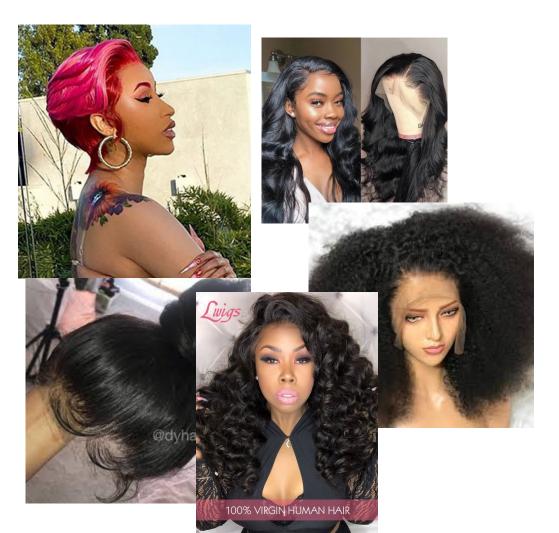


The Evolution of Wigs



- Wigs symbolized one's rank and were essential to royal and wealthy Egyptians, male and female alike.
- To disguise his baldness, King Louis XIII began wearing elaborate wigs; wigs were viewed as aristocratic.
- The aristocracy of wigs begin to fade by the 18th century.
- The start of the 20th century saw the use of more hairpieces being used to enhance hairstyles.

The Evolution of Wigs/Weaves/Whiplash: African American Women's Jackpot



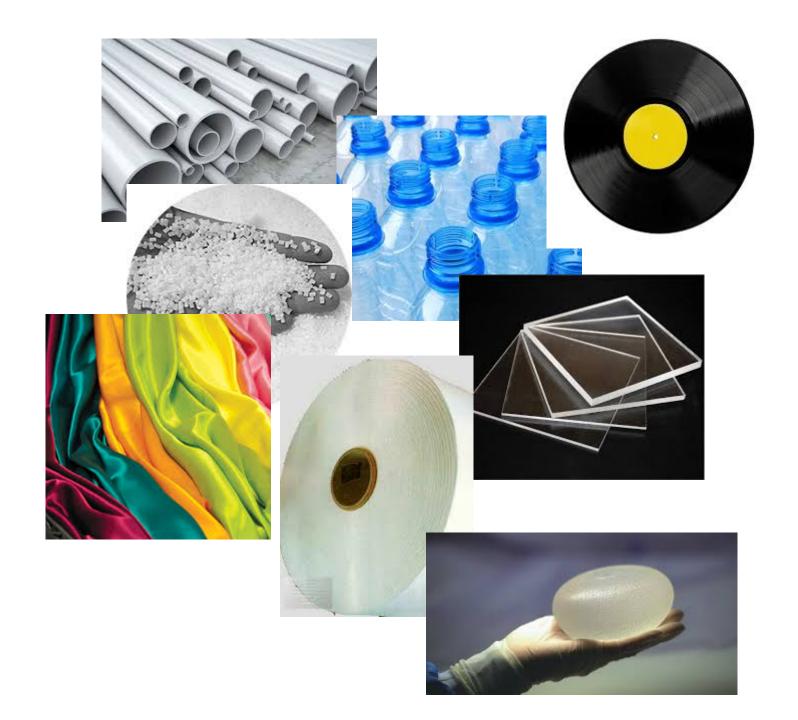
- Modern technology has made wigs stylish, chic synthetic wigs within the reach of everyone.
- Wigs, weaves and chemical treatments became other means to achieve smoother, straighter hair for African American Women.
- Wigs can come in different forms:
 - Straight
 - Curly
 - Wavy
 - Kinky

Synthetic Hair(Plastics)

 Human hair is a protein filament made out of keratin, a natural polymer.

Synthetic hair, on the other hand, consists of man-made fibers.

 Unlike human hair, synthetic hair is not made from keratin. Instead, it is most commonly made from various man-made polymers and plastics Polyethylene-terephthalate
PVC
Vinyl
Acrylonitrile
Acrylic
Single-filament polyester
Silk
Silicone



Socioeconomic Impact/Cultural Appropriation

Socioeconomic Impact

- African Americans spend billions on hair products, with the greatest revenue in the wigs/weaves.
- Many hair products are imported from areas outside of the U.S.
- African American women are ones that targeted for distribution and marketing.

Cultural Appropriation



References

• https://www.history.com/news/black-hairstyles-visual-history-in-photos

 https://www.elegantwigs.com/history-ofwigs.html?gclid=Cj0KCQiAyJOBBhDCARIsAJG2h5cAgtPzZjq7JuVmObP BqCKVx1pTOkjOfO-i rP82UeNgYJIbY4D2oaAioJEALw wcB

https://www.headcovers.com/blog/what-is-synthetic-hair/