

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



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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 began 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

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