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Hair in the Classical World Hair and Cultural Exchange Text Panel

Bellarmino Museum of Art

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HAIR AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

This exhibition includes objects from places that were cultural crossroads in the ancient world, including the island of Cyprus, the city of Dura-Europos in Syria, and Syracuse in Sicily. These cultural exchanges, effected through the transmission of portable objects, influenced how hair was styled and decorated. Works in the exhibition also come from the Roman Empire, which at its height reached from the Italian peninsula to Spain, England, North Africa, Asia Minor (Turkey), and the Middle East.

Cyprus, legendary birthplace of Aphrodite, had rich copper deposits (Cyprus comes from the Greek word for copper, *kupros*) and was an important location for trade and military strategy. Its art combines native Cypriot forms and those drawn from the art of immigrants, trade partners, and conquerors. The island's close ties to Greece mean that indigenous styles most often resemble ancient Greek art, although occupation by Egypt and Persia also had an influence.

Dura-Europos was a city on the Euphrates River, today in Syria. It was part of the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire that extended from Asia Minor to modern Afghanistan. It was conquered by the Parthians from Iran and then the Romans, and therefore had an eclectic mix of peoples, cultures, and religious practices.

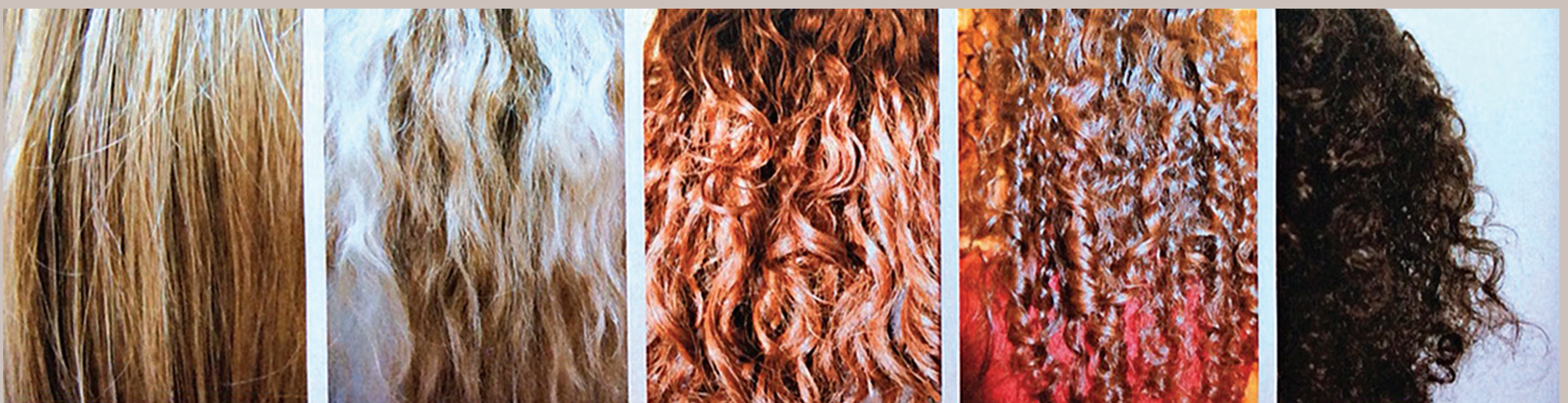
Syracuse, a Greek colony in southeastern Sicily, enjoyed a flourishing harbor and prime location as a crossroads of shipping throughout the Mediterranean and of land routes in the Italic peninsula. The widely circulated coins could carry images, introducing new hairstyles, far beyond their source of origin to a much broader geographic region. Coins in the exhibition show the goddess Arethusa with two different hairstyles, both reflecting prevailing trends in arrangement and adornment.

ARRANGEMENT AND ADORNMENT

Greek maidens most often wore their hair long prior to marriage, and later would gather it in a variety of bands, hairnets, or cloth coverings to organize or cover it. Attention to long unbound tresses can be seen most often in 6th century BCE sculpture of *korai* or maidens. In the 5th century and later, increasingly elaborate hairstyles with cloth coverings or accessories become the prevalent choice for women. In contrast, Greek youths and adult men celebrated their long hair which was worn loose or in braids wrapped around their head until the mid-5th century BCE. Short hair, often tousled, became standard for males for the remainder of the Greek period to the 1st century BCE. In Greek art, hair usually appears textured, with rare examples of straight hair. This curly or wavy hair was worn long, rolled up, braided, or gathered at the back of the head. Bands made of cloth, leather, or metal held the hair in place, as did elaborate hairnets.

Roman women showed their respectability by wearing their long hair up. Female slaves and servants wore their hair in simple buns, women of higher classes often wore complicated styles with combinations of braids and twists. These contrasted with men's shorter, more active hairstyles. Many female hairstyles in art were once thought to be too elaborate to have been actually styled and worn. However, ancient artists paid careful attention to hair texture and arrangement, and recent research has shown that these hairstyles are in fact authentic.

Hair has the capacity to twist into tight coils or extend in a straight line. The determining factor is the shape of the cortex inside the hair shaft. A round section defines pin straight hair whereas an oval shape determines textured (curly) hair.



Examples of hair, from pin straight to strongly textured, reflect the nature of the shape of the cortex. Straight hair tends to be stronger and shiny from the natural oils that easily travel the length of the hair shaft. Greatly textured hair, with its many twists and turns, is more difficult to keep moisturized, and its tendency toward dryness makes it delicate. Which texture most closely matches your hair?

Braids are a very old method of organizing hair, and they can be made in a variety of ways. The Caryatids wear the fishtail braid, which is made with two “legs” of hair. The Roman statue of the young girl wears an English braid (made with three “legs”) along her center part. Roman portraits show French braids, a variation on the English braid. Today's trends in braiding connect to the world of Greek and Roman antiquity; the movements of our hands creating these varieties of braids are the same as those made by men and women in the ancient Mediterranean region.

WHAT TOOLS AND PRODUCTS DID ANCIENT HAIRSTYLISTS USE?

Female members of Greek and Roman households attended to hairdressing, whereas the male members went to a barbershop. Servants and slaves would have participated in arranging the hair of the children, girls, and women, especially for important occasions such as a wedding or religious procession. All the women of the household would have helped one another with arranging their hair. Barbershops were places to socialize, as they often are today.

Combs, usually made of wood, were the most common tool. Brushes were not used.

Hairpins were used to hold buns or twists, but more complicated Roman arrangements used blunt **needles and thread**.

Curling rods (*calamistra*) were used to curl hair in ancient Rome, but not in ancient Greece. In Greece, damp hair might have been wrapped around a smooth stick to achieve a corkscrew curl, a technique still used in different parts of the world today. Textured hair was prevalent and would have been easy to shape into corkscrew curls, finger waves, and braids.

Dyes lightened, darkened, and reddened hair. Artificial hair color could include lead compounds, goat fat and ashes, boiled walnut shells, and pulverized leeches soaked in red wine, according to ancient recipes. Some of these ingredients were so harsh they may have caused hair loss.

Wigs made of human hair are discussed in ancient Roman texts, and have been found in graves. Blonde hair taken from Germanic women and black hair traded from the Indian subcontinent were most popular.

Gels have been revealed to have contained a combination of animal and vegetable fats. This discovery came through the chemical analysis of the hair of an Egyptian mummy. Similar ingredients may have been used in ancient Greece and Rome.

Mirrors (usually hand-held) were most often made of polished metals such as bronze, copper, or silver. Many ancient mirrors survive and they appear in works of art.

ROYAL AND DIVINE ICONOGRAPHY

Hairstyles and their accessories could reach a wide population through the circulation of coins, a form of transmission akin to social media today. Evolving trends can be seen in both mythological and historical figures. In the 4th century BCE, for example, Alexander the Great introduced a new portrait type in sculpture and coins with short and tousled hair and a clean-shaven face, which became a new standard for ruler portraits. Augustus, the first Roman emperor, adapted Alexander's hairstyle and clean-shaven face for his imperial portraits. By doing this, Augustus visually and formally linked the Greek past to his own legacy. Coins and sculpted portraits of rulers were official images, commissioned by emperors and empresses to present a certain formal appearance to the public. This could be a (sometimes idealized) physical likeness, but could also include references to character, social status, and associations with family and religion. Hair was an expressive vehicle for making these references.