From the beginning of recorded history, people have placed importance on their appearance. Styling one’s hair seems to be an innate desire of human beings to emphasize their beauty and power. Since hair is a key aspect of one’s appearance, grooming, styling, adorning, and removing hair were common practices in all societies. As reviewed here, hairstyles were influenced by preceding cultures, by religion, by those depicted for gods and emperors, by aspects of lifestyle such as sports, fashion, and the desire to display inner feelings. Further aspects include limiting signs of aging, revealing one’s rank, identifying people by gender, and complying with cultural and religious mores (or, conversely, showing nonconformity). The focus of this overview is on the cultural history and social-historic aspects of hair.

Throughout history, hairstyles have been depicted in the visual arts, such as in sculpture, portraiture, and paintings. Artists of all epochs and painters in particular were especially interested in depicting human hair as a mean of expressing their own individual feelings or those of their time. On the other hand, art itself influenced the various types of hairstyles until modern times, when hairstyles became increasingly reflected in the mass media due to the rise of photography and film in the course of the twentieth century.

27.2 Ancient World

There is evidence to suggest that people of the metal Ages took great care with their appearance. The hairstyles were often sophisticated, with braids, hairnets, and ornaments being used by women, or with the hair cut straight at the shoulder in a bob.¹ Hairdress equipment was common in Late Bronze and Early Iron Age

¹ As for the girl in the grave at Egtved, Denmark.
graves, and the mirror was a favored object among both the Celtic people and Scythian warriors. These objects and evidence from well-preserved graves show people as well-groomed individuals who shaved regularly, and braided or cut their hair. Bronze Age peoples used tweezers for plucking facial hairs, and hair ornaments were made with great craftsmanship.

In early societies the hairstyle worn by the common people was long or cropped usually held in a band. Aristocrats developed more complex styles. Sumerian noblewomen, for example, contained their hair in rolls and plaits around the head. They also powdered it with gold dust and adorned it with golden ornaments. Babylonian and Assyrian men dyed their long hair black, whereas Persian nobles stained theirs red with henna. Slaves and prisoners in ancient cultures had shaved heads.

The ancient Egyptians must have taken considerable effort to maintain their appearance and beauty. In addition to an abundance of informative paintings, we find combs and hairpins in their graves. They used hair extensions and dyed wigs in a variety of colors. Blue, green, blonde, and gold colors were preferred, though black wigs hued by indigo were the favorite. Nearly every adult Egyptian, both man and woman, wore some kind of wig, while children had their own distinctive hairstyle. Women's wigs tended to be longer and larger than men's. They were composed mostly of human or horse hair (Fig. 27.1). Since wigs symbolized a form of monumentalism and conservatism, the Pharaohs never appeared in public without a wig. They also shaved their faces and wore stiff false beards. The process of hairdressing was well-structured and part of a large-scale ritual. Hairdressers were highly esteemed and had their place on the right and left side of the Pharaoh's throne. Egyptian art is the richest source of wigs in history. Astonishingly, the official hairstyle stayed more or less the same over a period of nearly three thousand years. Egyptian styles, including hairstyles, had several revivals in later periods of time.

In the bible we find impressive tales on the topic. Absalom, favorite son of King David, was defeated and killed in “the forest of Ephraim” having caught his long hair in an oak tree (2 Samuel 13-19). Similarly, Samson met his doom because of his hair. In the story of Samson and Delilah, Samson's hair is the core of his strength and vitality (i.e., his long uncut hair because of his vow). Delilah, a Philistine, coaxed him into revealing that the secret of his strength was his long hair. She took advantage of his confidence to betray him to his enemies (Judges 16). Another example is the prophet Ezekiel who cut his hair performing a symbolic act to illustrate the impending fate. We do not know details of the old Hebrew hairstyles because the Hebrew religion did not allow the depiction of god or the human body.

2 Information on hair during Ancient times mostly stems from archeological finds, including tombs.
3 In the 1960s, the film Cleopatra, with Elizabeth Taylor starring in the title role, brought renewed interest in this style.

Greeks regarded hair as a vehicle for personal expression, along with a strong interest in physical fitness and personal appearance. Hair was associated with strength and purity. Greeks let their hair grow. They saw it as a source of life and gave sacrifices of hair to the dead, e.g., Achilles (Iliad XIII, 134).

Minoan women had long black hair that fell to the shoulders and even to the waist. The hair of both sexes was worn looped and braided and dressed with jewels, pearls, and ribbons. Girls and young dancers wore their hair in a style that now is known as the ponytail. People in various cultures have worn this hairstyle ever since. In Aegean art, males are depicted with single or double plaits. Homer’s heroes had such hair, as did the warriors at the battle of Marathon (490 bc). During