Under any circumstances, hair is a richly “privileged” site from which to survey a society. Hairstyles resemble clothes in that respect; they are both filled with symbolic meaning and rooted in tangible structures of production and consumption. This was truer than ever in the Belle Epoque, as the profession of coiffure began to leave old styles and practices behind. It was especially true of the sector of ladies’ hairdressing, which was to lead coiffure headlong into the consumer society of the twentieth century.

*Coiffure pour dames* was a venerable *métier*, with its roots in the fashion excesses of the Old Regime, whose outsized coiffures have become a convenient cliché of the period. The premier artist-coiffeur of the baroque period, a former shepherd, called himself Champagne. He was followed in the eighteenth century by the renowned court hairdressers, Frédéric, Larseneur, and Legros de Rumigny, author of *L’art de la coiffure des dames françaises* (1768) and founder of the Académie des Coiffures, whose career came to an abrupt end when he was crushed in the Place Louis XV during the marriage celebrations for the Dauphin’s marriage to Marie Antoinette.1

The most famous of the rococo hairdressers was Léonard, who became Marie-Antoinette’s favorite. Indeed, the unfortunate queen so trusted her personal coiffeur that she charged him with a number of crucial political tasks. The most important of these was to prepare the relays of horses and to forward a case of jewelry to Brussels, in anticipation of the royal family’s flight to Varennes in 1791.2

It was not his doubtful talent for intrigue, however, but the audacity of his coiffures that made Léonard a figure of significance in the court of Louis XVI. He had no monopoly on immoderation, however. As historian Fernand Braudel observed, “The coquette easily took five

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or six hours to dress, in the hands of her servants and even more under
the care of her hairdresser, chatting with her priest or lover.” The
result of these efforts was hair “built up so high that the eyes of
the beauties seemed to start out from the middle of their bodies.”
Wendy Cooper related the tale of “a certain Madame de Lauzun [who]
reached perhaps the most absurd extreme by wearing an enormously
high headdress of hair and artificial hair, on top of which were mod-
eled ducks swimming in a stormy sea, scenes of hunting and shooting,
a mill with a miller’s wife flirting with a priest, and a miller leading an
ass by its halter.”

These colossal headdresses often became a sort of discourse, where
creations like the “Spaniel’s Ears,” the “Drowned Chicken,” “Mad
Dog,” and “Sportsman-in-the-Coppice” evoked nature or some his-
torical motif. Currency and excess reached their apex with the leg-
endary hairstyle, the “Belle Poule,” which celebrated the victory of the
British warship Arethusa with “seas of hair, with model ships, fully
rigged and manned with toy sailors.”

More architect than hygienist, the eighteenth-century hairdresser constructed his hairdos largely
from whatever material came to hand. Bill Severn described coiffures
wadded with “bushels of cotton wool, shreds of rope, horsehair, bran,
or straw [and] almost every dressing table was equipped with a
‘scratcher,’ a long-handled stick with a hooked end for stabbing
through the hair to give some relief from itching.”

Surely the destruction of such hairdos was one of the more benign
effects of the Revolution. Yet fashionable women in the 1800s contin-
ued to wear big, complicated coiffures: the intricate knickknacks and
hanging curls of the “1830s” style, or the hairstyles of 1863 recorded
in Godey’s Lady’s Book. The magazine counted “two rats, two mice,
a cat, and a cataract”—terms that referred not to small mammals but
to the kinds of cushions used to create the huge coiffures. Even the
relatively sober Victorian woman à la mode sported a surfeit of curls
and postiches piled high on top of the head and low down the neck—
en poire, it was called.

Despite its antiquity and importance to the expression of fashion, there were surprisingly few practitioners of coiffure pour dames in
turn-of-the-century Paris. René Rambaud, an icon of haute coiffure,
wrote that at the time of the Universal Exposition of 1889 Paris
counted only a dozen salons de coiffure that were solely for women.
Hardly fifty “ladies hands” worked therein. The scarcity of beauty
salons reflected not relative disinterest in the hairdresser’s art but the
social and commercial structures of the consumption of fashion in the