COVER STORY

Our Hair — Versatile, Unique and Gorgeous

By Patricia Tatum

Our hair. It can be one of our greatest treasurers or it can be the bane of our existence. As African-American women, our hair has been vilified for decades — by ourselves and others. Only within the past few years has a true appreciation of the versatility and uniqueness of our hair been recognized, expressed and appreciated.

Our hair has been called many things: kinky, wooly, frizzy, good, bad and nappy. Hair has been something we valiantly have fought against. We sometimes win the battle, but the war continues.

Former Essence Magazine editor, Marcia Gillespie, wrote in 1972 about some of her perceptions of hair as a teen:

"When I was seventeen, it was 1961, Black was still not an acceptable title for Negroes, nappy hair was something we fought like the plague . . ."

In an article published in the same magazine 12 years later, journalist Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor related an incident which happened before she was set to appear on a well-known television program.

". . . I was told by the makeup person that my features were big and had to be toned down. He . . . advised me not to wear lip gloss. 'It will make yourlips look larger, and they are large enough,' he said as he picked my hair with an Afro comb. There was 'nothing he could do' with my hair. Afros are okay if they suit your face; my hair, worn in a short Afro, was, he said, 'a problem.' "

Today, African-American women are more accepting of their hair as are others. We recognize it for what it is, "the most versatile hair in the human race - with a unique texture that lends itself to the widest variety of styles," according to Ruth Houston, Ethnic Public Relations Manager for the Clairol Company.

Houston said black women have been pioneers of hair fashion from antiquity to modern times. The recorded history of our hair began with our African foremothers more than 5,000 years ago.

Cornrowing, hair treading, intricate hair sculpting, braids, twists and dreadlocks all are ancient arts originating in different parts of Africa centuries ago. Hair worn in varying manners often denoted the age, marital status, social standing and tribe, or the rank of the wearer, Houston said.

During the brutal slave years, African-American women had little opportunity to engage in "the time consuming hair rituals practiced in motherland," she said. Necessity forced them to resort to using simple plaits and head wraps as a means of keeping their hair well groomed.

Our hair, "African hair," has been a problem for black women as long as we have been in America, Smart-Grosvenor said.



New York fashion photographer Claudette Aimee Yamura has captured the different hair looks of models Kandis Davis, who calls her cut a modified, wavy China Doll and Samanda Brown, who likes to wear her "Bob" straight.

"But not a problem we couldn't solve. Our hair, one of the maligned features in American beauty history, has been called good, bad, halfway good, halfway bad . . . One turn-of-the-century dictionary referred to it as a 'wool-like substance'."

African-American women began straightening their hair out of the need to keep it flat, untangled and in a more manageable state, Houston said.

Early methods of hair straightening involved heating a piece of flannel before an open fire, oiling the hair with lard, and pulling strands of hair through the hot flannel.

Many of us can still recall the Saturday or Sunday afternoons spent in the kitchen. We sat next to the stove as our mothers, aunts, or older sisters got us ready for church or school. The smell of singed hair and frying grease permeating the house are memories always to be retained.

During the World War I era, Madame C. J. Walker was receiving credit for "redesigning" the straightening or "hot comb," an European invention, according to Smart-Grosvenor. She said it also is generally believed that Madame's "aim was for Black women to have straight hair. It was not. Her preparations were meant to deal with common hair problems, like breakage and dry scalp."

The years following World War I, until the 1940's saw African-American women wearing pressed hair and achieving a variety of styles: marcel or finger waves, upsweeps, French rolls, chignons, Dutch bobs, Shirley Temple curls, pompadours and pony tails.

By the 1940s, the use of chemical hair straighteners came into vogue. Black men, especially those in the entertainment industry, were among the first to use these lye-based products which produced a hairstyle popularly referred to as the "conk" or "process."

The Afro, also called "the natural" or the "bush" was the symbol for the 1960s. Not only were African-Amerians making a fashion statement, they were sending a strong political message. Gwen McKinney, a Washington, D.C.-based journalist, remembered the Afro as a "statement of uncompromising Blackness."

Smart-Grosvenor called the Afro "the most liberated and liberating hairstyle in American beauty history. The Afro was revoluntionary, a scandal," she said.

Later, extension braids were the rage. This time, during the 1970s, was an era, as now, of tolerance of other hairstyles. "Cornrows, naturals, dreadlocks, relaxers, press and curls all proved to be viable hair alternatives for Black women," Houston said.

The curly perm was introduced in the late '70s and soon men, women and children were wearing "these new chemically-induced curls."

These days almost anything goes. Hairstyles no longer reflect political statements. Women are wearing their hair in a greater variety of textures, lengths and styles.

The natural has gone geometric. Curly perms are looser and freer. Weaves and extensions add volume and length. Our options also include asymmetrical cuts, buzz cuts, spikes, waves and crimps, Houston said.

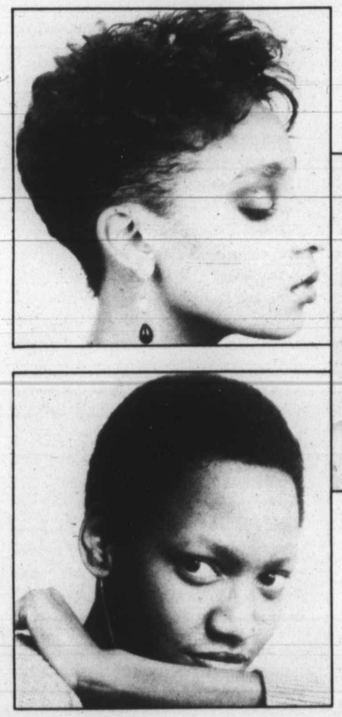
New York based hair stylist Jeffrey Woodley predicts the 1990s will see a widespread trend of wearing our hair in its natural state.

"It's all about texture," Woodley said. "Texture is the key - everybody wants it . . . and Black hair comes in so many different types of texture."

As one woman put it: "our hair versatility has been an advantage - rarely will we keep the same style from season to season. And with the bonus of texture, we will take any popular trend, adapt it to our style and start an entirely new look."

Our hair. It can be the bane of our existence. Based on what we now know about our hair, it really is one of our greatest treasures.

Patricia Tatum is the editor of Dawn.







Some of the versatile looks for our hair

Photos By P.A. Greene