

# Feature



## Researching Historical Hair Styles **Janet Stephens**

*A pioneer in experimental archeology of hairdressing techniques explains the “nuts and bolts” of researching, recreating, and disseminating archaic hairstyles.*

I have always been a historical costume junky. As a child in rural Washington State, I existed for the occasional Saturday afternoon transmission (on either of our two television channels), of MGM “costume” films. The first book I bought with my own money was *The Wonderful World of Ladies Fashion: 1850-1920* (J. J. Schroeder, Ed. 1971) a random selection of facsimile fashion plates and articles from Harper’s Weekly, Peters Magazine, Happy Hours, Sears Roebuck, etc.—I memorized it.

I learned to sew in order to recreate, design (and wear!) such marvelous clothes. My mother, grandmothers and surviving

great-grandmother were all accomplished needlewomen—generous with their time, teaching and supplies.

I eventually became a theater major—the usual consequence of such youthful excess. I designed and sewed in the costume shop, acted and dressed wigs. After graduation however, I realized that I preferred to eat regularly and pay my rent on time, so I joined the traditional economy, met my professor husband and moved to the east coast. I became an academic database administrator, mother and, finally, a professional hairdresser.



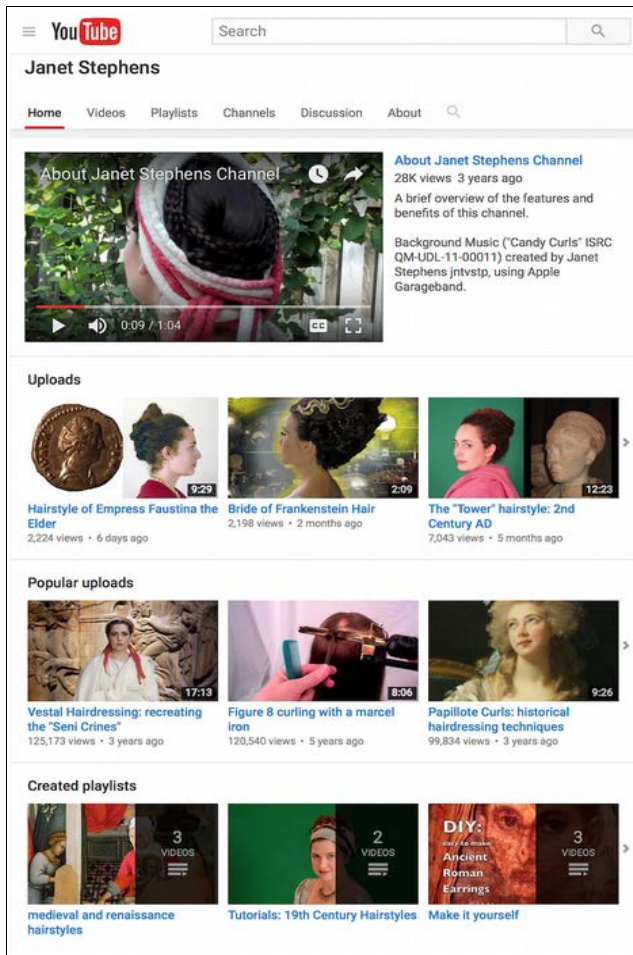
Julia Domna (d. 217 AD), Syrian wife of Emperor Septimius Severus. Photo: [Walters Art Museum](#).



Until 2001, I never paid much attention to ancient hairstyles. But a random visit to the Walters Art Museum in my home town of Baltimore changed that! It was raining and raw and I needed a place to hang out while my daughter was at a long music lesson. I wandered around the galleries and eventually ended up in the ancient Roman portrait room. What I saw there changed my life.

The Romans used marble sculpture to create portraits of themselves. Many museums display these portraits by lining them up on high shelves, so that one can see only the faces. But the Walters did something unusual, they set several of their best portraits out in the middle of the room, at eye level, just like a cocktail party. For the first time I saw entire hairstyles, not just the faces.

I fell in love with the updo on the sculpture I saw there of [Empress Julia Domna](#) (d. 217 AD). She has luscious waves, rope braids on each side of her face, and at the back, an intricate bun the size of a salad plate, that looks just like the braided rugs my grandmothers used to make when I was a child.



Janet Stephen's [YouTube channel](#).

I tried to recreate the style at home and failed—*miserably*. Research in my personal collection of fashion books yielded no convincing answers, so I hiked over to The Milton S. Eisenhower Library of the Johns Hopkins University.

My descent into scholarly addiction began innocently enough—a dictionary entry here, a book there. But soon I was spending all my free time in the sub-

basements of MSEL. I binged on footnotes and bibliography—immersing myself in ancient Roman daily life, history, material culture, numismatics, art and literature. I eventually rediscovered ancient Roman hair sewing techniques that had been misinterpreted by scholars since before the 17<sup>th</sup> century (see Stephens, J. “Ancient Roman hairdressing: on (hair)pins and needles,” [Journal of Roman Archaeology v.21 \[2008\]](#)).

### Putting It Out There

I started my [YouTube channel](#) of historical hairdressing tutorials in conjunction with a 2011 fellowship application to the American Academy in Rome. Although I didn't get the grant, I found that I enjoyed creating videos and photographing my work. Videos allow me to re-indulge my childhood pleasures – making costumes and sets, performing, arranging and composing musical backgrounds—all in the interest of spreading the gospel of period appropriate tools and techniques.

For anyone interested in creating their own channels, I highly recommend taking some “intro” photography and videography classes—I wasted a lot of time and effort trying to figure things out on my own (and my early videos show it). I carved out a small studio in my basement where I use the best quality equipment that I can understand and afford: a Nikon D7100

digital SLR camera, two Flip video cameras (one on a tripod and one on a homemade POV harness) and 3 soft box lights. I use a home made green screen, white sheets, or 60” (150cm) wide paper as back drops. I hire local college students, friends and family as models. I pay my models and I have them sign photographic releases: it is crucial to have full rights to one's photos!

I scrupulously follow YouTube's [content guidelines](#), especially for music: there is no faster way of having your video yanked than to use someone else's copyrighted musical tracks! I've used both GarageBand and LogicPro to compose original background tunes. I take advantage of these programs' copyright-free loops and digital instruments to fill out my compositions. When I create music using loops only, I make the arrangement at least 4 layers deep. I have just enough piano skills to perform period appropriate, out-of-copyright, music directly into LogicPro (e.g., Stephen Foster: see video, “[Authentic Civil War Hairstyle](#).”



I edit and voice my videos using iMovie, but I prefer a table top [Blue Microphones Yeti USB microphone](#) and a “pop filter” to the built-in microphone on my laptop – it just sounds better. I always credit my models and give a bibliography at the end of each video – it's only proper to help others by sharing my sources.

[Yeti USB desktop microphone](#) with pop-filter, preferred by the author for voice recording.

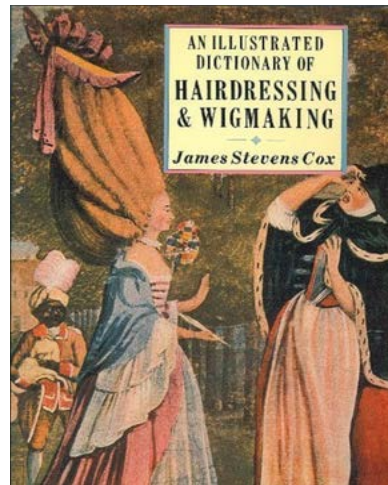
## Getting the Story

None of the above equipment and procedures matter, without material to create stories! I enjoy the research aspect most – although it isn't always easy to find the necessary visual and written sources and artifacts for archaic hairstyles.

Visual sources present predictable challenges – hairdressing happens at the back of the head, but two dimensional depictions (paintings, prints and photographs) usually predilect the face. Three dimensional sculpture reveals much more, but unless one sees the sculpture “live” (and from the rear), published photographic images overwhelmingly do the same. Even so, there are some excellent 4-view photographic resources for ancient Roman portrait sculpture.

I can't live without Claus Fittschen and Paul Zanker's *Katalog der römischen Porträts in den Capitolinischen Museen und den anderen kommunalen Sammlungen der Stadt Rom*. (“Catalog of the Roman portraits in the Capitoline Museums and other collections in the city of Rome.”) [1994], Maria Calza's *Scavi di Ostia: Ritratti* (“Excavations of Ostia: Portraits”) [1955], and Flemming Johansen's “*Catalog: Roman Portraits: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*” [1995]. These big, sadly out of print books can be obtained through interlibrary loan if there is no well stocked research library near you.

Outside of the library, I collect old hairdressing textbooks, books of etiquette, art and fashion history and exhibition catalogs as well as antique fashion plates, *carte de visite* photographs, stereograph cards and ephemera--anything with an interesting hairstyle. I am lucky to live in a long-settled, historically prosperous city of pack rats like Baltimore. I find a lot of interesting material for only a few dollars at antique and second hand book stores.



**Left:** James Steven Cox's book is indispensable for 17<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century hairstyles. **Right:** Harper's Bazar from 1867-1900 is now free [online](#).

I always photograph objects in any museum that allows it. This is where having a good camera with low light capabilities is crucial--I am always shocked at how dark museums are. After I've photographed an object, I *always* get a shot of its description tag in order to catalog my photographs accurately. It's a time consuming pain to catalog, but when you have thousands of images, it makes subject searches a snap. I make digital back-ups of *everything*.

For written material I prefer primary sources, i.e., persons discussing the hairstyles of their own time period. This is most difficult before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, since technical writing on the topic of hairdressing is maddeningly rare and difficult to find. I consult the [Loeb Classical Library](#) online for ancient descriptions of hair, styling, tools and materials. From the 7<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> century, religious tracts and commentary, sumptuary law, letters and diaries describe (or decry) new fads and fashion trends. Household accounts, inventories and recipe books tell how hair care money was spent and what hair tools and substances were possessed or manufactured at home.

For the 17<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, James Stevens Cox's *An Illustrated Dictionary Of Hairdressing And Wigmaking* [1985] is my indispensable source of arcane hairdressing terminology and bibliography.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrated women's magazines are a gold mine of hair fashion, although the instructions are often vague and poorly edited. The Cornell University Hearsh Library of Home Economics has the complete 1867-1900 *Harper's Bazar* in searchable, high resolution pdf form. These can be [downloaded](#) with no pay wall and no restrictions. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century forward, technical manuals and textbooks become more common and some are available online or in reprint.

Last but not least, I study hairdressing artifacts in museum collections and I collect archaic hairdressing tools, even making some myself (e.g., hair bodkins). Hairdressing is driven by technology, so it is important to know what tools were (and weren't) in use during any given period of study. This isn't driven by snobbish purism: reliance on modern tools can blind one to more interesting and elegant solutions and a deeper understanding of the personal, social, class and economic implications of maintaining a fashionable lifestyle.

### Following the Process

My cosmetology training and experience have taught me to dissect hairstyles by breaking them down into component details: I look for **long part lines**, **directional movement**, **geometric patterns** and **overlapping**. I now want to demonstrate how I “take apart” an ancient Roman sculpted portrait and an American-neoclassical painted portrait hairstyle.



Four views of Fonseca Bust. Rome, 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Capitoline Museum.

### Ancient Rome

The anonymous portrait of an early 2<sup>nd</sup> century woman commonly known as the Fonseca Bust (Rome, Capitoline Museum, Stanza degli Imperatori, inv. 434) is perhaps the single most published ancient Roman marble portrait: it is my favorite teaching example because of the hairstyle's extreme silhouette yet remarkably straightforward arrangement.

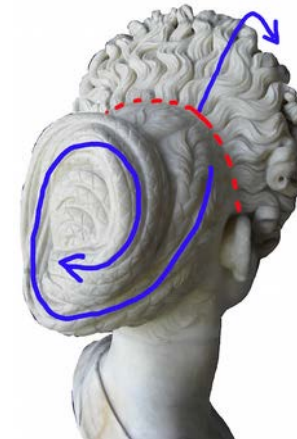
From the front, the face is dwarfed by a tall horseshoe shaped frame, known as an *orbis comarum* (“circle of hair” Martial, *Epigrams* 2.66.1). In profile, there are two concentrations of volume, one at the back of the head and one in front of the ears. In  $\frac{3}{4}$  rear view, one sees the transition between the two volumes, and at the back there is an open centered wreath-shape bun over the occipital. From the back are also visible wavy striations at the rear of the forehead volume.

*Hair dressing starts at the scalp*, so I first search for **long part lines**: the red line

shows a division from ear to ear over the top of the head. The hair must be divided here in order to supply the two volumes.



Next, I follow the hair's **directional movement** as it travels away from this ear to ear parting.



In front, the hair travels “up the mountain”, to then cascade downward toward the forehead. The back hair swirls into a loose spiral. At this stage, I estimate and compare how much length is necessary for each zone—the back hair appears to be considerably longer than the front.

The **geometric patterns** created by means of gouging and drilling indicate whether specific hairdressing techniques are called for.



Parallel lines with “Y” or small zigzag patterns between them, signify 3 strand braids. Sometimes these “braids” are carefully aligned, sometimes they aren’t, I always take note. The sinuous lines ending in hooks imply wavy root hair transitioning to spiral curls at the mid-shaft to ends.

I look for **repetition**, and note the number of braids (or wave ridges or curls, etc.).



I look for signs of **overlapping**. The undermost component is usually dressed first. By this token, Fonseca’s horseshoe shaped frame of curls is made of 3 tiers of spiral curls, starting at the hairline and working back towards the ears.



In buns, the ends of long braids are often tucked under for more stability.



### False hair or real?

Whether or not the hair depicted on any given ancient sculpture was the sitter’s own natural hair is irrelevant to the practical

costumer—it is unusual for hair length to be the sole criterion for casting an actor or doing one’s own hair. However, incorporating natural hair into one’s designs increases verisimilitude, especially in terms of color blending.

If an actor’s back hair is too short for this style, a false wreath bun can be applied, and the front hair curled and teased. (See my video [“Flavian-Trajanic Hairstyle: Orbis Comarum”](#)). If the actor’s back hair is sufficiently long, the total hairstyle can be created by cutting the front hair appropriately. (See Stephens J. [“Recreating the Fonseca hairstyle”](#) EXARC Digest 2013.)

If the actor is unwilling to cut, one can always create a wiglet using prefabricated wefts, but one should attempt to show the ear-to-ear partline: it is this feature that makes the hairstyle look most realistic.

### Hairstyles from two-dimensional artworks

The hairstyles depicted in illuminated manuscripts, fresco, prints, formal portraits and genre paintings provide far less information than sculpture. In some fashion periods there is no visible hairstyling at all, because it was common practice from late antiquity through the early modern period for married women to conceal their hair – effectively shifting the locus of fashion toward decorative caps, coifs, hats, nets, hair jewelry and veils.

The lighting of a painting is important: dark hair on a dark background is difficult to interpret. The painter's brush strokes may be precise and clear or merely suggestive. The artist may invent hairstyles that can't occur in nature and are difficult to duplicate even with false hair (Botticelli being an extreme offender).

These idiosyncrasies are frustrating when one wishes accurately to recreate the total hairstyle, particularly in the cases of historical individuals with minimal portrait record. Often, informed conjecture is unavoidable: especially when arranging the back hair—this is when one's knowledge of the period's profile head silhouette is most useful.



Portrait of Mrs. Robert Dickey (née Ann Brown) by J.W. Jarvis, 1910. New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.

## Neoclassical portrait recreation

With such hazards in mind, I now will apply the above analytical procedure to the portrait of Mrs. Robert Dickey (née Ann Brown) by J.W. Jarvis painted in 1810 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 69.22.2, detail). This is likely Mrs. Dickey's wedding portrait since the back of the head is draped with a white, figured tulle veil (below, left).

At the face, Mrs. Dickey's auburn hair is asymmetrically arranged with a peak over her proper right eye. Wispy curls fall over the forehead and temples and shoot off the curvature of the skull. There is no weight of hair visible at the nape of the neck, implying that the back hair is dressed high: this is typical of the period.

The arch of a broad golden comb set with white pearls is depicted off-center towards proper right at the top of her head. Many such combs survive in museum collections and are known to have been used to secure hairstyles, so I will assume that this comb is functional rather than simply decorative.

**Partlines** are not clearly depicted, but the curls on the face and the transparency of the auburn brown paint at the edges of the forehead imply a hairline parting (right top, solid red line). The asymmetrical forehead peak *may* imply the presence an off-center front to back parting, although this isn't certain (dotted red line).



The **movement** of the hairline hair is forward, onto the face. The movement of the top hair remains conjectural.



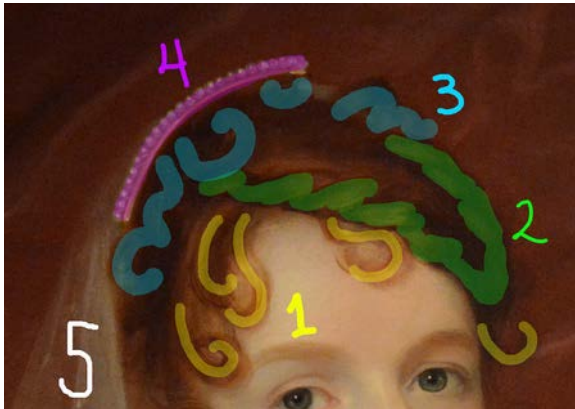
A repeating **sequence** of abutting lentil shapes (solid green lines) form a "V" over the proper left temple, with its lowest point



obscured in shadow (dotted green lines). This pattern is typical of 2 strand rope braiding (see my video "[Ornatrix School: 2 strand rope braiding](#)"). The braid appears to be woven from hair located on the proper left and the rope brought across the forehead toward the proper right, and secured with the pearl comb (although this terminus isn't visible).

At this point I feel confident that there is a proper-right side part (see above): such a parting would assure there is plenty of hair on the left to supply the rope braid.

The **overlapping** of hairstyle details indicates the order in which to dress the hair.



The following procedure assumes the hair is naturally curly, if the hair is straight it must be curled first (right, top). Part the hair on the proper right side of the head (right, bottom).

1. Bring the curls along the hairline forward. This hair may be cut or it may be naturally short, wispy transitional hairs along the hairline.



**Above:** Curl hair first if it is straight. **Below:** Part hair on proper right side of head.



2. Weave a rope braid beginning high on the proper left side of the head.



3. Twist the back hair upward to the top of the head with the curly ends loose.



4. Draw the free end of the rope braid across the forehead to the right.



5. Lay the curly ends of the back hair on top of the rope braid, allowing them to spill forward.



6. Push the Comb through the curly ends, the rope braid and the scalp hair to secure all (right, top). The style is complete (right).



Completed hairstyle.



If desired, set the veil over the back of the head and secure it with U-pins (not bobby pins) or straight pins (not shown).

### Testing one's hypothesis

As the figures show, once a draft procedure is worked out, it's time to test it—either on one's own head or on a hairdressing mannequin. Mannequins are essential tools for the professional hairdresser, but quality is expensive. I use [Pivot Point](#) mannequins implanted with human hair at least 20 in (50 cm) long. They can cost \$250, but with care, they will last 10 years or more. Synthetic hair mannequins





are affordable (under \$30 at [Wimex Beauty Supply](#)), but they tangle easily and one can't use direct heat to style them (i.e., blowdryers or curling irons). However, the hair can be wrapped on perm rods, then dipped in very hot water (150-200°F, 66-93°C) to permanently set the curl.

To work with mannequins, they must be mounted on purpose built universal swivel tripods, or C-clamp block holders. These are sold by both websites mentioned earlier, and by well stocked consumer beauty stores, such as [Sally Beauty Supply](#).



With my mannequins, I work out procedural kinks and practice many times before filming with a live model. Live hair has different texture, density and length than a mannequin's, but it is always easier to dress: a live person can follow directions and hand me tools—plus, her head doesn't fly off her neck when I pull too hard!

## What I learned

I learned several things from my mannequin test:

1. For my interpretation of Mrs. Dickey's hairstyle to work, the front hair length needs to reach the apex of the bust – otherwise the rope braid is too short to secure under the top comb.
2. My conjectural proper-right part is suitable, and can be obscured by the braid as it travels to the top of the head.

3. Keep the picture handy while you practice. I made a Z-twist asymmetrically augmenting rope braid, when it should have been an S-twist (compare the portrait to the finished front view).
4. My modern, short toothed back comb is too narrow, and its teeth aren't long enough to hold the hair of a live model.
5. I will need to use period appropriate U-shaped pins and an anchor braid at the crown to make the style wearable on silky hair.

I made a conscious decision not to cut my mannequin's hair to duplicate the soft curls on Mrs. Dickey's face. This detail makes the style look quite different from hers. This choice, my mistakes and the differences in hair color, texture, density and curl between the mannequin and the portrait show how important and personal an impact these variables have upon the finished result – this is what brings historical hairstyles to life, and is what I find most inspiring.

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Janet Stephens. “[Authentic Civil War Hairstyle](#)” to the Stephen Foster 1863 tune “There Was a Time.” (video).

Janet Stephens. “[Flavian-Trajanic Hairstyle: Orbis Comarum](#)” (video)

Janet Stephens. “[Ornatrix School: 2 strand rope braiding](#)” (video).

Janet Stephens. “[Recreating the Fonseca hairstyle](#)” EXARC Digest, 2013.

*Janet Stephens is a salon professional in her day job and an autodidact experimental archaeologist on the side. Her scholarly work on ancient Roman hairdressing has been published in the Journal of Roman Archaeology [2008] and EXARC the Journal of Experimental Archaeology [2013]. She is regularly asked to give lectures and workshops on ancient Roman hairdressing at conferences, universities and museums throughout the USA and abroad. Her popular [YouTube channel](#) is devoted to historical hairdressing from antiquity to the 19th century.*